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**Can't Fail, Won't Fail - Why Practice Assessors Find it  
Difficult to Fail Social Work Students. A Qualitative  
Study of Practice Assessors' Experiences of Assessing  
Marginal or Failing Social Work Students**

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**Professional Doctorate in Social Work**

**University of Sussex**

**October 2009**

## **WORK NOT SUBMITTED ELSEWHERE FOR EXAMINATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Name:\_\_\_\_\_

Signed:\_\_\_\_\_

Date:\_\_\_\_\_

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# Summary

University of Sussex

Johanna Louise Finch

## ***“Can’t Fail, Won’t Fail - Why Practice Assessors Find it Difficult to Fail Social Work Students. A Qualitative Study of Practice Assessors’ Experiences of Assessing Marginal or Failing Social Work Students”***

The thesis focuses on the issue of the assessment of social work students in practice learning settings and draws on multi-disciplinary and international literature. The dissertation considers why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students and what might get in the way of failing a student. The rationale for such an exploration concerns the relatively limited literature from both social work and other disciplines where there is a practice-learning element and what limited literature there is often appears under-theorised. A further rationale to explore this area of professional practice concerns the author’s own experiences as a social work practitioner, practice assessor and social work educator.

Located within a qualitative framework, the methodological influences on the research include: ethnography, life story and narrative approaches as well as practitioner-research paradigms; although it is clear that as the research progressed, practitioner-research paradigms became more influential. Based on twenty in-depth interviews with both new and experienced practice assessors, the research utilises the voice centred relational method to analyse the data. From this narrative process a number of stories emerge, including; “The Angry Story”, “The Dramatic Event Story”, “The Guilty Story”, “The Idealised Learner Story”, “The Internalising Failure So I Couldn’t Always Failure Them Story”, “The Lack of Reflection Story” and the “What is my Role/Assessment Story”. Psychodynamic frameworks have been employed to theorise and make sense of these various stories as well as transactional analytical perspectives. Differences in approach to practice assessing are also considered, most notably around how practice assessors’ conceptualise, make use of and understand the assessment process. It is also clear that disability, gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality also impact on the assessment process. For some practice assessors, ultimately the evidence of students’ competence appears to rest on hope. It appears that some practice assessors are still giving students “the benefit of the doubt” a phrase coined thirty years ago by Brandon and Davies (1979) in a wide ranging but still very relevant study of the assessment of social work students in practice settings. Practice assessors thus find it difficult to fail students because of:

- Their lack of reflection about the intense emotions raised.

- The internalisation of these intense feelings.
- Lack of support from colleagues, the Higher Education Institute (HEI) and tutors.
- Lack of understanding about the process of assessment.
- Difficulties in managing the multifaceted role of the practice educator including the lack of acknowledgment of the gate keeping function.

The dissertation concludes that although practice assessors have a very clear understanding of what behaviours might hypothetically cause a student to fail the practice learning opportunity, the reality is that not all practice assessors go on to fail the student. The high emotionality often associated with the process of managing a potentially failing student on placement often obscures the process. The thesis argues the need for practitioners to consider the intense feelings that arise in difficult practice learning opportunity situations in a more reflective, contained and considered manner. A number of ways forward have been suggested in light of these findings, including the need to pilot a reflective toolkit for practice assessors and students alike.

# **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

## **Introduction**

This introductory chapter begins with an account of my doctoral journey. I will then discuss my rationale for exploring the assessment of practice in practice learning settings with a particular focus on the assessment of failing and marginal students. The evolution of the research questions will also be discussed including the relationship between this thesis and previous work submitted as part of the Professional Doctorate in Social Work, namely the Critical Analytical Study (CAS). The chapter also provides an overview of the structure of the dissertation.

## **My Research Journey**

After completing a degree in Politics when I was 21 and starting my career in social care, I had intended to undertake doctoral study, largely because I felt that I under performed in my first degree. I applied to undertake a PhD at the University of Teeside when I was 23 but withdrew my application and began postgraduate social work training instead at The London School of Economics. It felt more important at that time to concentrate on developing my career in social work and continue living in the South of England. After qualifying as a social worker in 1997, I worked in a variety of London Boroughs, in both statutory and voluntary settings in the field of Children and Families. In 1999, I had the opportunity to undertake the Practice Teaching Award, which introduced me to adult learning theories, issues around the assessment of professional practice and the dynamics that are created between a teacher and a student. It also forced me to confront my own fears and insecurities at that time, i.e. I was relatively young, was new in the organisation and was not sure I had enough practice experience or was competent enough to offer a placement to a student. During this time (1999-2001) I was also enrolled on a Post Graduate Diploma in Play Therapy at the Roehampton Institute and became interested in the nature of therapeutic relationships and psychodynamic theory.

In July 2001, now a qualified practice teacher and play therapist, I resigned from my post at South London Family Service Unit as I was moving to Essex and was about to have a baby. I then spent a year at home, although I began part-time work as a freelance practice teacher and associate lecturer at Havering College of Further and Higher Education (HCFHE) during this year.

In September 2002, I secured a permanent post as a part-time lecturer in Social Work at HCFHE as well as continuing with freelance practice teaching. As part of my contractual obligations as a lecturer, I was required to complete the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)<sup>1</sup>, although I still wanted to undertake doctoral study but did not know how I might achieve this given I needed to work, had to complete the PGCE and had a young child.

I was therefore very fortunate to see an advert in The Guardian for an EdD programme<sup>2</sup> at the University of Sussex in the summer of 2003. The taught, modular structure enabled me to attend the course, given it ran on some Friday evenings and Saturdays and so issues around childcare and the need to continue working could be managed. I also felt being in a cohort of students from a range of professional backgrounds would also be a useful learning experience. I made an application and being accepted onto the course was daunting but incredibly exciting.

The first time we met as a cohort of students in October 2003<sup>3</sup> we were asked to talk about our research interests. Feeling rather put on the spot, I made some comments about failing social work students on placement. From those comments my research questions began to formulate as well as my continued interest in the area although a number of events prior to enrolling on the programme were also significant in confirming my interest in this area. Whilst practising as a social worker for example, I frequently came across social

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<sup>1</sup> I had to complete this within a specified timescale as a contractual obligation. I completed the course in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, the Doctorate in Social Work Programme was validated and I transferred onto this course, although the EdD and DSW programmes run together.

<sup>3</sup> I intermitted from the programme from Jan 07 to Jan 08 due to the birth of my second son, and again from Sept 08 to Jan 09 due to work pressures.

workers whose practice gave cause for concern. I wondered how they had passed their courses and who had passed them when they were on placement.

In my first year as a lecturer, I found that there was little guidance on how to manage placement difficulties. When one of my tutees was experiencing difficulty on placement, I struggled to understand what role I should take in the process and how to manage the two very different stories I was hearing. The practice teacher<sup>4</sup> subsequently failed the student with little in the way of evidence to support his recommendation. Additionally, the second opinion report documented serious concerns about the practice teacher's conduct. The student undertook another placement, which she passed, and the practice teacher got a job in another borough. This event made me consider what should be the tutor's role in this situation and gave me a chance to reflect on why the situation had made me feel angry. It also raised the issue of poor practice teaching.

Another incident that added to my interest, concerned a student that I had misgivings about in my role of tutor. In the student's final placement, it was clear that she was not managing the work. Whilst the off-site practice teacher was sensitive to these concerns, the management of the placement was poor and difficult dynamics emerged between the student, the on-site supervisor and the practice teacher, making the assessment of practice even more complicated. The student also had a disability, which added a further dimension. The fail recommendation could subsequently not be upheld due to the inadequacies of the practice teaching and the student was given the opportunity to re-do the placement.

Placement difficulties appeared stressful for all concerned and this led me to consider a number of questions, i.e. why were so few students failing on placement? Why did practice teachers seem to find it so hard to manage

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<sup>4</sup> In 2003, when I began this doctoral journey, the term practice teacher was used to describe the person who undertook the assessment of a social work student. This gradually became replaced with the term practice assessor and now has shifted to practice educator and practice supporter. This introductory chapter uses the term practice teacher but in subsequent chapters the term practice assessor is used.

placement difficulties? Why did practice teachers often seem to give students the benefit of the doubt and pass them despite great misgivings and professional concern? I also considered what was the role of the tutor in these situations? A further critical experience emerged in my role as a freelance practice teacher in that I failed a social work student although I recommended that she be given another attempt. I realised I had made a number of errors in my management of the student, not least my inability to identify the causes of concern in a timely fashion. It was clear I over-identified with the student, i.e. she was a mother of young children like myself and a dynamic emerged whereby I was rescuing her. This proved a useful learning experience however and it gave me an opportunity to consider the potential for collusive practice between students and practice assessors, less than satisfactory placement settings and powerful and complex dynamics that emerge between educators and students. This experience was painful, stressful and induced feelings of guilt and anger whilst at the same time I felt they demonstrated my understanding of my role as gatekeeper to the profession. These incidents all demonstrate why the assessment of professional practice is so important, why it has to be done well and with integrity, despite the inherent complexities and possible uncomfortable feelings it will raise.

All these experiences offer a convincing personal rationale that the exploration of such a phenomenon is interesting, complex and challenging but necessary. All of us in our professional and personal lives are confronted with professionals who have had to go through a process of practice learning that we perceive as poor, inadequate and even dangerous. Often, one wonders, “who let that one through”? This research grew out of these critical incidents, concerns and professional experiences. I will now consider the academic rationale for exploring the issue.

## **Rationale for Study**

The consideration of the placement or the practice learning opportunity<sup>5</sup> as it is currently known in the UK at the time of writing, is an area that has long interested academics and professionals involved in practice assessment. Indeed there is a relatively small, but internationally consistent interest in the many issues and concerns that are raised by the assessment of would be professionals in practice settings. Brandon and Davies' (1979) UK study found that social work students were often given the benefit of the doubt when assessed on placement and they concluded that placement failure was a rarity. Royse (2000) and Raymond (2000) writing from an American perspective also found that placement failure was rare, as did Hughes and Heycox (1996) writing from an Australian perspective. Coulshed (1980) argued that UK practice educators were unclear about what to assess and how to assess students and, again, considered why placement failure was rare, drawing on both her own experiences as a fieldwork teacher and research from the 1970s to support her findings. Her opening remarks concerning her unease about passing a student astutely sums up some of the issues that respondents in my own research discuss, namely: being unsure about what standards are required, feeling pressure from the tutor to give the student "the benefit of the doubt" (1980:17), hope that "competence and effectiveness would blossom sometime in the future" (ibid); and a feeling that she was to blame.

It appears that the issue of how one should assess social work students, what standards should be met, what tools offer a more objective measure of the student's performance and how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) might develop more robust procedures for managing placement issues have not been resolved or gone away. Indeed, almost 30 years later my doctoral journey began with the same question raised by Brandon and Davies (1979): why is placement failure so rare? Given the issue of the assessment of social work students as well as students of other disciplines in practice learning settings has been explored at the very least for almost forty years, can my doctoral thesis add new knowledge to the debate? My aim is to confirm existing research

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<sup>5</sup> I have mostly used the term placement within this thesis.



findings at the very least as well as offer new insights into the assessment process.

My doctoral research journey to date has included an account of one practice assessor's experience of failing a student (Finch, 2004a), a small scale evaluation of how tutors' support practice assessors when there are concerns about failing or marginal students (Finch, 2004b), and a Critical Analytical Study (CAS) (Finch, 2005). In those essays, I have offered a rationale as to why there is a need to explore the issue of failing students. My argument is that the topic is generally under explored, researched and theorised, although, as I document in the next chapter, there is in fact a larger international and inter-professional literature in the subject than I had originally documented in the CAS. That said, I can argue that research that focuses on how practice assessors make assessment decisions is underdeveloped, both in the UK and internationally, with even less attention devoted to the issue of marginal or failing students.

Evans (1999) argued that there was little guidance for practice teachers when confronted with a potentially failing student. Some ten years later, the situation remains the same and there is still only one text devoted to the management of failing and marginal social work students, Sharp and Danbury (1999)<sup>6</sup>. Evans (1999) argues that in the area of marginal and failing social work students, there are three key areas for exploration. Firstly, "the main areas for failure" (1999:199) which I understand as the behaviours, attitudes or conduct that may predispose a student to fail. Secondly, another key area concerns the consideration of why it appears so difficult for practice teachers to fail a student and how they reach their ultimate recommendation, although I would argue that there is more emphasis on the former and very little on the latter. The third area concerns strategies to develop practice teachers' confidence and skills in this area. Evans (1999) argues that one of the biggest issues concerns the conflict between a practice teacher's role of both enabling and assessing. This issue was explored in the CAS, will be further considered in Chapter 2 in a discussion on role strain and emerges in the findings of the empirical work.

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<sup>6</sup> This was written in the context of Diploma in Social Work students.

I would also argue that existing research tends to be under theorised, focusing on what actually happens, how to improve the assessment process and a consideration of the limitations of assessment models rather than offer a more coherent explanation of why assessment systems cause so much difficulty in the real world. For example, much research documents how stressful such experiences are but I want to consider why it is such a stressful experience. Why do practice assessors find the different roles, i.e. the enabling/supporting and assessor/managerial functions so difficult to manage? What theories can be utilised to help make sense of the phenomenon? This doctorate focuses around the area of why it appears difficult for a practice teacher to fail a student, what can “get in the way” and why field education is such a complex and difficult phenomenon.

The changes to the post-qualifying frameworks that came into operation from 2007 in England provide a further rationale for the continued exploration of a subject matter probably debated since formalised social work training began in the early part of the nineteenth century. These changes will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. However, it can be argued that these changes provide an excellent opportunity to develop practice education and raise its status<sup>7</sup>. The practice education award now operates at Post Graduate Diploma level. Conversely, the changes may be seen as watering down the former Practice Teaching Award, as the changes have meant that practitioners can do less in the way of training, i.e. they can get away with doing only one module (at graduate diploma level), to be able to practice assess. There is a very real possibility that the changes may make the limitations of the former system more severe.

Given this doctoral journey has taken six years, there have been significant changes in practice teaching (now termed practice education and learning), i.e. there has been de-emphasis on practice teaching with an emphasis on practice assessing. There have also been significant changes to social work training, i.e. the move to a degree, as well as the changes in the post qualifying awards.

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<sup>7</sup> The types of training historically on offer to practice teachers/assessors were discussed in the CAS.

There has been a move from competencies to key roles based on The National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work as well as the need to establish “Fitness for Practice” and a strengthening of the suitability and termination of training procedures (GSCC, 2002a; GSCC, 2007). Significantly, the term social worker has become a protected title and social workers and students must adhere to codes of practice. All these developments will be explored in detail in Chapter Two. These developments however, make how social work students are assessed in practice learning settings of increased importance.

Lastly, during the writing up of this thesis, the Baby Peter case hit the headlines in 2008 and there was much media, public and political interest in the so called failings of social workers and by implication social work training. As a result Lord Laming was instructed to report on the issues (Laming, 2009). Additionally a Select Committee Inquiry into the training of children and families social workers was established in March 2009 (unknown, 2009). A Social Work Taskforce was also established in 2009 to undertake a review of front line social work and reported back in the summer (DCSF, 2009a). This makes such an exploration all the more timely and necessary. The research questions that guided this doctorate will now be discussed.

### **Research Questions**

As in all research endeavours, my research questions have changed quite significantly since I began the DSW programme. Additionally, as this is a professional doctorate rather than a traditional PhD, the requirement to submit four assignments before submission of this thesis, and in particular the CAS, has meant an inevitable refocusing and refinement of the research questions. The relationship between the CAS and the thesis needs to be explored alongside an account of how I arrived at my final research question. This thesis does not neatly follow on from the CAS; rather it is a distinct piece of work in its own right. After submission of a draft thesis to my supervisors in April 2009 (and in light of their comments), I was required to re-think the relationship between the CAS and the thesis. This gave me the opportunity to think critically about what aspects of the CAS were influential in the thesis. The CAS was a very

useful starting point in the exploration of the literature around practice assessing, in particular the literature around assessing failing social work students. The research questions that guided the CAS were as follows:

- 1) How does the existing research into the assessment of professional practice deal with and problematise the issue of the assessment of failing students?
- 2) How are low failure rates perceived and what are they evidence of, on professional training programmes?
- 3) What are (if any) the range of issues that emerge from the literature about the assessment of failing students?
- 4) What is the extent of failure on social work placements and what does it mean?
- 5) Does the research literature indicate that there is a failure to fail?
- 6) What does future research into this area need to address and how should future research be conducted?

An attempt was made to consider the above questions in the concluding sections of the CAS and I now realise that tying all these questions together was a focus on whether there was a “failure to fail” in practice learning settings. The CAS also covered a wide range of other issues, all of which could have formed the basis for a thesis. The main findings from the CAS will be explored in Chapter Two however in planning this thesis, I was still interested in the notion of failure to fail but the focus is not on whether there was or is a failure to fail but on why there is sometimes this failure to fail. Initially however, when I planned the empirical work to be undertaken for the thesis, the research questions included;

***“What are practice teachers’/assessors’ experience of and understanding of the process/issues in the assessment of marginal or failing social work students?”***

With subsidiary questions as follows:

- *How do practice teachers/assessors effect their final recommendations?*
- *What might impact on the practice teachers/assessors' decision-making process?*
- *On what basis do practice teachers/assessors choose to pass/refer or fail a student.*
- *Do practice teachers/assessors give marginal students "the benefit of the doubt"?*
- *Does the system of the assessment of social work students make fail recommendations rare/impossible/difficult?*

However, during the writing up part of the research process, these questions have become clearer and evolved into the following;

***"Why do practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students?"***

The evolution of the research questions in this thesis represented a number of things. Firstly the professional doctorate structure, namely the requirement to complete the CAS as a work in its own right, although it is designed to enable doctoral candidates to plan and prepare for the eventual thesis. Secondly the time taken to complete this professional doctorate, due to its part time nature and the fact that I intermitted twice during the programme; and thirdly, as the research progressed, the more I realised the questions that framed the thesis initially did not adequately express what I wanted to find out. Finally as the research process drew into its final stages, (i.e. the writing up), the clarity of the research question became much clearer and so the central research question focused on why some practice teachers found it so hard to fail students which the thesis explores in detail. I will now go on to document the structure and contents of this thesis.

## **Structure of Thesis**

**Chapter 2** – This chapter draws out the pertinent points in the CAS that were influential for this thesis. I have drawn on further international, multidisciplinary and more recent perspectives in the field of practice learning to consider why practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students. Within this chapter, recent policy developments within social work training generally, i.e. the establishment of the General Social Care Council (GSCC), protection of title, the registration requirements and the new post qualifying frameworks are discussed. Particular developments with regard to practice learning and education are also discussed, as are the changes in terminology that have occurred during the research process.

**Chapter 3** – This chapter focuses on methodological issues generally and as they specifically pertain to the research that was undertaken for this doctorate. What is methodology is discussed in a broad sense. The methodological paradigms that influenced this research are also explored, as is the research design and the methods used for gathering the data. It is clear that the design was flexible, and takes account of research in the professional world. The research methodology employed was firmly within qualitative paradigms and the design heavily influenced by ethnographic, narrative/biographical approaches, life story approaches and practitioner-research models. The method of data analysis employed for the research, voice centred relational method, will also be explored.

**Chapter 4** – This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the empirical work. These are critically explored, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks to make sense of the findings; notably psychodynamic and transactional analytical theories are utilised. The findings are presented as stories. How these stories impact on the assessment process are subsequently considered. This chapter offers some further critical analysis and consideration of the findings, in particular, the impact of gender, disability, ethnicity, class and sexuality on the assessment process.

**Chapter 5** – The chapter returns to the research question and offers some final concluding comments on the issues raised throughout this thesis, not least why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students. The chapter then goes on to critically appraise and evaluate the research that was undertaken and considers issues of validity, reliability, rigour and generalisability. Issues of quality will also be explored. The chapter considers possible ways forward in light of the research findings and makes a number of suggestions to improve practice assessing. The chapter discusses areas for further research in the field of practice education and possible dissemination strategies. Lastly, I discuss what I learnt from the research process, both personally and professionally.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses in more detail the relationship between the Critical Analytical Study (CAS) and this thesis. A brief overview of the CAS is provided, concentrating on those findings that were more influential for this thesis although it is clear that my ideas have moved on considerably since undertaking the CAS. A critical consideration of more recent research in the area of practice learning will also be explored and it is hoped that a more international and multi-disciplinary approach to the issue of the assessment of failing students in practice learning settings will emerge however it is also important to consider developments particular to British social work education<sup>8</sup>. The chapter overall aims to critically consider the research question of why do practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students?

### **The Relationship between the CAS and the Thesis**

The aim of the CAS was to explore existing literature in the field and lay the foundations for the empirical work to be undertaken. As stated in the introduction, this thesis, whilst influenced by the CAS, is a distinct piece of work in its own right, however it is clear that the CAS influences this work significantly – these influences will be summarised here, although will be explored in more detail later on in the chapter. In brief, the CAS began the process of exploring the literature and existing research in the field. It also critically considered the types of studies that had been carried out in the field of practice education and considered the methodological underpinnings. The scope of the CAS was wide and covered a number of areas (as discussed below). The CAS argued that placement failure was rare and attempted to offer evidence of this view, firstly by reviewing the literature and secondly I conducted a small, exploratory quantitative study across London HEIs. This continues to be influential in this

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<sup>8</sup> As will be discussed on page 24, social work education in the UK, is devolved to four regional care councils in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The focus of this thesis is on the English context.



thesis, although as I will later argue, my views on this have now changed. This thesis gives me an opportunity to return to the areas of literature explored in the CAS and those that were missed to see how they might aid in answering the research question posed in this work, i.e. why do practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students? It is therefore useful, to provide a brief overview of the main findings in the CAS, particularly the ones that have been more influential in this thesis.

### **The CAS – A Brief Overview**

The CAS considered the history of social work training in Britain, the various qualifications offered, the history of practice assessing and documented research in the field of practice learning and the assessment of social work students. There was a particular focus on the issue of failing and marginal students. It was argued that whilst practice assessing in general appeared a relatively under-developed area of research, the focus on assessing failure or the experience of failing a social work student on the placement was even more under-developed (Knowles et al, 1995; Burgess et al, 1998b, Sharp and Danbury, 1999; Duffy, 2004; Furness and Gilligan, 2004). This has been commented upon in more recent international and multi-disciplinary research, for example from a US psychology perspective (Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Elman and Forest, 2007; Kaslow et al, 2007), from a North American social work perspective (Younes, 1998; Bogo et al, 2007), from an Australian social work perspective (Heycox et al, 1994; Gibbons et al, 2007) and from an international nursing perspective (Redfern et al, 2002). It is important to note that the CAS was focused around British research, although it did draw on a limited number of international perspectives, for example, US social work literature around unsuitability (Peterman and Blake, 1996), gatekeeping (Royse, 2000) and the fear of litigation (Raymond, 2000) as well as one Australian perspective on what may be considered failing traits (Hughes and Heycox, 1996). It is important not to assume that research from other countries and other disciplines can be generalised for British social work although it can be helpful in offering further insights to what may be similar issues albeit it in different cultural and professional contexts.

In terms of the literature surveyed for the CAS, the following themes emerged:

### *Failure to Fail*

Literature from a range of international and multi-disciplinary contexts suggested that there was a failure to fail in practice learning settings. This implied that assessors often gave students the benefit of the doubt and passed them when the evidence suggested the student should fail. Some of the literature also considered reasons for this alleged failure to fail which included; lack of understanding of the assessment framework, procedures not being followed properly, role confusion or strain and fear of litigation (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Williamson et al, 1985; Lankshear, 1990; Proctor, 1993; Knowles et al, 1995; Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Ilott and Murphy, 1997, 1999; Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006)<sup>9</sup>.

### *Obligation to Fail*

Another theme to emerge stressed the gatekeeping role of a placement assessor and advocated a stronger line in relation to failing students when required. Gatekeeping in this view was seen as a moral, professional and ethical duty (Hayward, 1979; Ilott and Murphy, 1997, 1999; Raymond, 2002; Royse, 2000; Juliusdottir et al, 2002; Furness and Gilligan, 2004).

### *Typographies of Failure*

A range of studies attempted to identify failure traits, attitudes and behaviours which may both alert a practice assessor to the need to develop support for a student or alert them to the fact that a student may be failing and indeed provide a rationale for failing the student (Syson with Baginsky, 1981; Williamson et al, 1985; Fisher, 1990; Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Gibbs et al, 2007).

### *The Competency Model for the Assessment of Professional Practice*

Another theme to emerge from the literature review undertaken in the CAS, considered the assessment system itself. There were criticisms of competency

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<sup>9</sup> And in other related professions where practice learning is required.

models of assessment as well as accounts of their limitations (O'Hagan, 1996; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). Additionally there was concerns that the assessment system itself was (is) fundamentally flawed and/or can be discriminatory (Williamson et al, 1985; Jayaratne et al, 1992; Conn, 1993; Humphries et al, 1993; Owens, 1995; Brown and Bourne, 1996; Birtwhistle, 1997; Brummer, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Cowburn et al, 2000) and as mentioned earlier, there was concern that practice assessors were not using the competency model for assessment of professional practice appropriately, expertly or confidently (Kemshall, 1993, Eraut, 1994; Walker et al, 1995; Owens, 1995; Shardlow and Doel, 1996; O'Hagan, 1996; Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Shapton, 2006).

### *Low Failure Rate*

There appeared to be a low failure rate on social work programmes and particularly in placements (Brandon and Davis, 1979; Williamson et al, 1985; Walker et al, 1995; Hughes and Heycox, 1996; Raymond, 2000). This was seen in other professions; nursing (Redfern et al, 2002, Duffy, 2004), occupational therapy (Illot and Murphy, 1997, 1999) and teaching (Knowles et al, 1995). This phenomenon was confirmed with exploratory research across London HEI's social work departments<sup>10</sup>. This low failure rate in practice learning settings has been commented upon in an Australian social work context (Ryan et al, 1998) and in a US social work context (Gibbs, 1994; Raymond, 2000). I will now go on to explore the above themes that have been influential in this thesis.

### **Influential Themes**

I was interested in two themes, namely that of the alleged failure to fail in practice learning settings and linked to that, the view that placement failure across disciplines and internationally was rare. I therefore needed to explore the literature around these themes further as well as drawing on the literature in

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<sup>10</sup> Details of the process of the exploratory research and results are found in the CAS (Finch 2005)

the CAS. In terms of the contention that there was a widespread culture or practice of a failure to fail amongst the practice assessing community both in social work and other professions, various reasons were given for this failure to fail. These included role confusion or strain (Fisher, 1990; Proctor, 1993; Owens, 1995; Knowles et al, 1995; Cowburn et al, 2000; Duffy, 2004) and poor assessment procedures that lacked reliability and validity, were poorly applied, were misunderstood or were discriminatory<sup>11</sup>. Further, procedures for dealing with placement issues were not followed properly, making it difficult to fail a student and resulted in the student being given the benefit of the doubt (Ilott and Murphey 1997, 1999; Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Duffy, 2004; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Kaslow et al, 2007). Practice assessors at the same time, were not given the necessary support and guidance, by the HEI and/or their agency to fail a student (Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Sharp and Danbury, 1999; Finch, 2004b; Vacha-Haase et al, 2004).

These themes emerged in more recent multi-disciplinary and international research contexts. For example, the notion of role-strain or role-confusion, asserts that there are a range of roles within the overall role of practice assessor, some of which may conflict, i.e. that of mentor with the assessor function. Vacha-Haase et al (2004) for example, writing from a US psychology perspective, documents this as a reason why practice mentors found it stressful and often avoided giving difficult feedback to trainees. A similar phenomena was found by other writers from this perspective (Hoffman et al, 2005; Bhat, 2005; Johnson, 2007). In terms of what role should take primacy, or where politically the emphasis lies, is revealed in the various names that have been given to those responsible for the assessment of social work students in the field, i.e. from student supervisors to practice teachers to practice assessors and more recently, practice educators and practice supporters (GSCC, 2007b; NLRN, 2007).

I also realised that role strain or confusion may also occur within the academy. For example, in literature concerning the issue of suitability procedures, this

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<sup>11</sup> See references in section above detailing themes that emerged from the CAS.

may reveal itself in the role of social work educators being both teachers and nurturers of academic and professional development yet at the same time, being required to act as gatekeepers to the profession (Curer and Atherton, 2007). This issue had been noted by US social work educators in the last decade (Koerin and Miller, 1995; Miller and Koerin, 1998) and recently raised by Holmstrom and Taylor (2007a; 2007b) in an English context. The literature on supervision practice in general also focuses on the issue of occupying multiple roles when supervising staff and the dilemmas and tensions this raises has been well documented (Gardiner, 1989; Ash, 1995; Sawdon and Sawdon, 1995; Pritchard, 1995; Feasey, 2002). This issue also emerged in the empirical work that will be explored in Chapter Four.

A fear of litigation was also cited as a reason why practice assessors may be reluctant to fail, particularly in the US context (Royse, 2000; Raymond, 2000; Barron, 2004). This reason was cited in two earlier studies (Cole, 1991; Cole and Lewis, 1993) where the legal issues were explored with the aim of producing suitability guidelines. The fear of litigation was further raised in the context of professional psychology programmes in the US (Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Hoffman et al, 2005) as well as the nursing literature (Johnston, 1995; Duffy, 2004) in both a US and a UK context. The fear of litigation appeared to be a significant factor in why practice assessors and programmes were reluctant to terminate or effectively deal with problematic students. Vacha-Haase et al (2004) argue that on US professional psychology programmes, a “significant barrier to the process [of termination of a student] was fear of litigation” (2004:p118) and found from their study of programmes across the US, that 20% of students dismissed from their training programmes sought legal redress. However, Raymond (2000) and Vacha-Haase et al (2004) argue that often the courts rule in favour of faculty, providing due process has occurred.

Raymond (2000) argues further that whilst courts have traditionally stayed away from academic assessment, it has become established in US case law that students’ behaviour or conduct can be considered an academic matter. This principle became established in Board of Curators of the University of Missouri

V. Horowitz (1978) (Raymond, 2000; Urwin et al, 2006). The case clarified the principle of inappropriate or unacceptable clinical performance in a practicum situation which constitutes a violation of academic standards (Raymond, 2000; Vacha-Haase, et al, 2004; Kaslow et al, 2007). Urwin et al (2006) provide a useful summary of various legal precedents in the US and they argue that there is little in the way of litigation unless there has been:

“...deprivation of due process, invidious discrimination, denial of federal constitutional or statutory rights, or clearly unreasonable, arbitrary or capricious actions.”...

(2006:167)

This may be of little comfort to programme directors or practice assessors who have to engage in litigation procedures. There is also another area of litigation emerging in a US context, namely, vicarious litigation (Gelman et al, 1996; Raymond, 2000). This is the practice of a service user suing the practice assessor and/or HEI because of the student's alleged harmful practice whilst on placement or later when qualified. It would be interesting to explore the extent of litigation in a UK context as from my own experience it is not unusual for students who have failed to threaten legal action.

I briefly postulated in the CAS that there might be a “rule of optimism” (Dingwall et al, 1983; Blom-Cooper, 1985) that impacted on the assessment of marginal students in placement and indeed this is discussed further in the findings chapter. I also put forward the idea that once practice assessors form an initial impression of the student, evidence that may conflict with those initial impressions is often ignored (Alzonzo, 1996; Milner and O'Bryne, 2002). It was interesting to note research by Vacha-Haase et al (2004) that commented on a study of qualified psychologists who would only address colleagues failings informally and would prefer not to do this at all (Good et al, 1995). A similar study found a marked reluctance on the part of the same group of professionals to address failings they perceive in their colleagues (Floyd et al, 1998) and supervisors of counsellors have also been shown to be reluctant in giving negative feedback (Hoffman et al, 2004). It may be that what underpins this

reluctance to address concerns is based on assessors' hopes that the situation will improve on its own. Vacha-Haasse et al (2004) hypothesise that similar dynamic processes may also occur in trainee-supervisor relationships. There may also be cultural reasons why negative feedback is not given. An interesting account of social work education in Botswana (Bar-On, 2001) revealed that there is a "cultural legacy that impedes persons in authority from assessing their subordinates negatively" (2001:128). My research attempts to understand what dynamic forces might be at play in the practice assessor-student relationship that may impede failing a student. In other words, why are practice assessors reluctant, or find it difficult to fail social work students? The above accounts offer some useful insights into this.

### *Placement Failure Rates*

The CAS drew on research that suggested that placement failure was rare and as part of that assignment, I undertook some exploratory empirical work across seven London HEIs<sup>12</sup> that examined placement failure rates. I concluded in the CAS that placement failure was indeed rare and I raised two questions that on reflection, were not sufficiently addressed.

- 1) What is the extent of failure on social work placements and what does it mean?
- 2) How are low failure rates perceived and what are they evidence of?

It is important for this thesis to consider these further, firstly because my ideas have changed and developed since the writing of the CAS and, secondly, because it relates to the research question posed in this thesis. I would argue now that it is difficult to state the exact extent of failure within practice learning settings, as the only measure one can use is to consider what percentage of a cohort was referred<sup>13</sup> or failed the placement. This is difficult in practice to

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<sup>12</sup> Havering College of F & HE, UEL, London Met, Royal Holloway, Greenwich, LSBU and Middlesex University. UEL and London Met declined to submit information under the FOI Act

<sup>13</sup> At HCFHE, the term "refer" is one of the recommendations a practice assessor can make. This recommendation effectively means that the student is "not yet" competent and a further placement is recommended. There must be evidence that the student has made some development and that further assessed practice is indicated. A fail recommendation implies that

ascertain, as it may be that students defer from one cohort to another, making very precise statistical analysis difficult. It may also be the case that students who are failing, may withdraw from a programme, so we can only approximate.

More recent analysis of practice learning opportunity outcomes (GSCC, 2007b) revealed that in 2003-2004, a total of 2,207 students had experienced a placement<sup>14</sup>. The outcomes were as follows:

**Table 1 – Practice Learning Opportunity Outcomes (PLO) 2003-2004:**

Outcome of PLO	Number of Students	Percentage
Pass	1471	66.7%
Fail	58	2.6%
Withdraw	337	15.2%
Refer	94	4.3%
Defer	247	11.2%

(Adapted from GSCC, 2007b:17)

In terms of the failure rate, the GSCC figure of 2.6% tallies with the exploratory empirical work documented in the CAS. The findings in the CAS demonstrated that whilst failure rates over a 5-year period (1999-2005), across five London HEIs<sup>15</sup> ranged from 0% to 13%, the average failure rates was around 2% which is similar to the GSCC analysis above. Overall, it can be argued that a very small percentage of students fail the placement, it could be equally argued that some students who withdraw may have been failing in the placement.

As stated in the CAS, it would be interesting to note any differences in failure rates from the DipSW compared to the degree, to see whether increased placement days impacts on the overall pass rate. To that end, in the first cohort of degree students who graduated in 2006, out of a total of 2976 students, just 59 failed (2%) and there was an overall pass rate of 69% (GSCC, 2007b:10).

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the student is “not competent” and should not have the opportunity to do another placement. This means they have effectively failed the course.

<sup>14</sup> These pertain to DipSW students

<sup>15</sup> Not all HEIs in London were included due to differing ways of responding to the request for information and other issues – full details are in the CAS



The failure rate therefore is consistent between the DipSW and the degree although more students passed the placement in the degree and less students withdrew from the programme (12%) compared with the Diploma students (15%). In terms of placements undertaken in the period 2006-2007, GSCC (2007b) report that there was approximately 3% of placement breakdown, although this doesn't necessarily imply that students have failed, rather the placement has ceased for a range of reasons that may or may not be attributable to a student failing.

How placement failure rates are perceived remains a contentious area as they can be seen in a number of ways; either they are evidence of confident, practice assessing or can be seen as poor practice assessing and poor recruitment onto social work training courses. Although somewhat dated, research from a US social work perspective indicated that because of declining applications for MSW programs, students were accepted onto programmes where previously they might have been rejected (Helper and Noble, 1990; Moore and Urwin, 1990). Helper and Noble (1990) argue further that "once accepted, few [students] were ever dismissed from the [MSW] program" (1990:128) suggesting that there is a concern about low failure rates. These issues were also raised in an Australian context with suggestions that there is a correlation between the numbers of applicants to social work programmes and the standards achieved by students as well as a perception of a low failure rate (Heycox et al, 1994; Ryan et al, 1997; Ryan et al, 1998). Recent English social work research (Holmstrom and Taylor, 2007a, 2007b) explored the issue of admissions further and highlighted what a difficult and contentious task this is.

Low failure rates might also be evidence of larger, structural issues. For example, it may be evidence of the limits of a competency model for assessing professional practice. There may also be a correlation between low failure rates and inadequate practice learning opportunities as well as poor practice assessing. There is also the question of how much failure is acceptable or not acceptable and what should be an appropriate level of failure? Indeed when writing the CAS, this was put to a GSCC regional inspector and the response was somewhat unclear although it did draw out the debates about what failure

rates mean<sup>16</sup>. At this stage in the research process, I can now confidently argue that whilst statistical analysis of failure rates is useful and indicates there is a low failure rate, on its own this is not indicative of a systemic failure to fail. Within the literature there is, at best, a sense or a feeling that there may be a failure to fail. This has been influential in this thesis and it is this phenomenon that I wish to explore. Further, to simply state there is a failure to fail in practice learning settings is bold and simplistic – what is more interesting is to consider why practice assessors find it difficult to fail students. This implies that my position since writing the CAS has developed.

### **Gaps in the CAS**

I have the benefit of being able to critically appraise the CAS and consider areas of literature that were too briefly explored but has continued relevance for this thesis. It is also clear that given the CAS was written in 2005, the field has moved on substantially and recent developments also need consideration to ensure my thesis is up to date and appropriately contextualised. This section of the chapter explores further research that focuses on the assessment of social work students and other professionals in practice settings. A brief overview of the literature around the dynamics and processes within the supervisory/assessing relationship and, associated with this, the complicating factor of the involvement of the HEI in field education will also be explored. The involvement of the tutor in the placement ensures triadic dynamics are created (and becomes even more complicated if there is both an on-site and off-site assessor) and this issue is important as it emerges in the analysis of the empirical research undertaken. Another area that requires discussion concerns gatekeeping generally and how it relates specifically to the placement. Lastly the discussion is brought up to date with recent British developments in the field of practice education. All these areas of critical exploration will aid in answering the research question, namely why do practice assessors find it difficult to fail students in practice leaning settings?

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<sup>16</sup> See CAS (Finch, 2005) for further clarification

### *Assessing Professional Competence and Performance*

The issue of how practice assessors undertake assessment, what counts as evidence, what is competent practice, what is being measured and how it is being measured were rather inexpertly explored in the CAS. Some of the arguments raised in the CAS concerned:

- The disputed nature of what constitutes good social work practice (Shardlow and Doel, 1996).
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- What is or should be evidence of competence, non-competence or not yet competent (Eraut, 1994; Shardlow and Doel, 1996).
- What is the most effective model of assessing professional competency (Shardlow and Doel, 1996; Sharp and Danbury, 1999)?
- The limits of competency models for the assessment of professional practice (Jones and Joss, 1995; O'Hagan, 1996; Humphries, 1998; Furness and Gilligan, 2004).

It can be seen that these questions link back to the theme of the assessment system being fundamentally flawed and/or misunderstood or misused by practice assessors. As stated in the CAS, the emergence of competency models as a basis for assessing professional practice developed in the 1980s. Multi-disciplinary and international literature also documents the rise of competency models in the same period and the limitations of such models (Helper and Noble, 1990; Moore and Urwin, 1990). In the UK, the dominance of technical-rationalist competency models has been seen in the development of National Occupational Standards for a range of professions as well as competency requirements to be met when training. The argument against competency models is that they reduce complex professional skills, knowledge, decision making, tasks and processes into simplistic units of discrete activity and encourage a tick-box approach to the task of assessment (Eraut, 1994; Owens, 1995; O'Hagan, 1996; Parrott, 1999). A concern was also raised that

such models are incongruent with anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice (Jayaratne et al, 1992; Kemshall, 1993; Conn, 1993; Brummer, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Burgess et al, 1998b). Another concern is that the focus on outcomes and behaviourally defined competences ensures the learning process itself is rendered unimportant thus negating the focus on reflective practice (Cowburn et al, 2000; Humphrey, 2007). More recent concerns have centred on the positivist assumptions inherent in competency models of assessment. Cowburn et al (2000) argue that the assessor is seen as neutral, in their words;

“....the assessor is effectively an intellect, divorced from identity, gender, race, class and culture, who can provide a “value free” assessment of the student’s performance.” (2000:631)

They argue further that a tension exists between the values of social work and positivistic competency models. Interestingly, they note a tendency that when assessors are confronted with a marginal or failing student, positivistic models and assumptions tend to “assert themselves” (ibid). The issue of the epistemological assumptions inherent in competency models leads to the question of how evidence of competency is gathered or what constitutes evidence of competency? Some of the UK and international literature on practice assessing seems to present the task and process of assessment in quite concrete terms (Shardlow, 1987; Evans, 1990; Evans, 1999; Sharp and Danbury, 1999; Bogo and Vayda, 2000) and whilst nonetheless useful for new and experienced practice assessors alike, in my view, it fails to adequately address the complexities of such a task, not least the impact of human irrationality and feelings that get in the way of the assessment task, as my research will demonstrate.

The issue of what is competency was touched on in the CAS and linked to this was what I termed the trait approach, used to signify behaviours or attitudes that may indicate a student is likely to fail or is failing the placement. This is clearly a contentious and complex debate. One of the criticisms of the trait approach and one I failed to draw out in the CAS strongly enough, is that it locates the problem within the student. It is therefore pathologising and does

not take the context of the situation into account or the dynamic relationship between practice assessor and student and other macro systems (Gardiner, 1989; Cowburn et al, 2000). How we describe such students is also interesting and the terms marginal and failing, coined by Brandon and Davies (1979) seems to have stuck in a British context. In contrast the North American social work literature uses a variety of terms from unsuitable (Cole and Lewis, 1993; Bogo et al, 2007) students with inappropriate behaviours (Peterman and Blaker, 1996; Younes, 1998) problem students (Urwin et al, 2006) or at risk students (Coleman et al, 1995), whereas the US psychology literature appears to have adopted the term impairment, to describe a trainee or student whose professional performance is sub-standard (Lamb et al, 1997; Gizara and Forest, 2004; Russell et al, 2007; Elman and Forrest, 2007); or problematic (Vacha-Haase et al, 2004; Kaslow et al, 2007).

Within this literature, attempts are made to define the terms and attribute various behaviours, personal characteristics, or perceived deficiencies or attitudes that may be incongruent with the agreed norms, ethical codes or established competency requirements. Such themes and debates did indeed emerge from the empirical work undertaken and so will be explored in more depth in Chapter 4 as it was clear that whilst practice assessors could identify what behaviours could be potentially problematic in practice learning settings, they then failed to notice or effectively manage those very same behaviours in the student they worked with.

### *Dynamics of Supervision*

There is a wide range of literature on supervision across different professions and whilst supervision may be considered different from the process of assessing a student in a placement, it may nevertheless show some insights into the substantive issue at the heart of this thesis. In brief, the literature examines various models of supervision and within this, the purpose of supervision becomes key. Gardiner (1989) charts the various models of supervision that have been implemented historically in a social work context, for example, the apprentice model and the classical, hierarchical model which he

felt was very much in existence at the time of conducting his research. Other models have been described as quasi-therapeutic, i.e. focusing on the student's inner feelings and the practice teacher taking on an expert role (Lefevre, 2005). This model has gradually been replaced with a move towards a more egalitarian model. It has been argued that the approach inherent in the supervision and practice teaching of DipSW students was based on a one to one strategy (Lefevre, 2005). Lefevre (2005) argues further that there are four roles inherent in a practice assessing role, those of: managing the overall placement, supervision and casework management, education and developing the student's personal and professional development and making an assessment of the student's competence. Such models construct the student as an adult learner and the relationship between assessor and student viewed as reciprocal and dynamic. The notions of adult learner and practice assessors' expectations about learners are discussed in Chapter 4.

One of the most well known and oft referred to authors on the issue of social work supervision is Kadushin (Kadushin, 1968a, 1976, 1985, 1992; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Kadushin's contention was that people played games in supervision (Kadushin, 1968b) which could equally be applicable to practice assessing situations and contexts. In his rather pessimistic view, supervision involves gamesmanship and "recurrent incidents between supervisor and supervisee that have a payoff for one of the parties in the transaction" (1968b:23). The important point is that Kadushin's work makes explicit the anxiety or the feelings of "threat" (1968b:24), that can be created in a supervisor-supervisee relationship and the shifting, ever changing, dynamic nature of that relationship (Bennett, 2008). The learning-teaching relationship is thus complex and dynamic and the emotions raised by this relationship can be difficult (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983). On the other hand, the importance of a good relationship between student and practice assessor is clearly important for learning and development to occur (Bogo, 1993; Knight, 1996; Lefevre, 2005)

The issue of roles played or occupied within the supervisory/teaching relationship closely relates to the earlier discussion about what is or should be

the role of a practice assessor and the danger of role strain and confusion. Students may also play or adopt various roles in this relationship. The dynamics that were apparent in practice assessors' accounts of their experiences with a marginal or failing student, as well as the dynamics involved in relationships with the HEI staff, will be explored in Chapter 4 in the stories that emerged.

### *Triadic Dynamics?*

There is little in the way of research, both UK and international, that explores the practice learning opportunity in terms of how the practice assessor, student and tutor manage the placement. There is also little research on the role of an HEI in supporting practice assessors in making their final recommendations. In a British context and as reported in the CAS, research carried out in 1979 looked at the role of the HEI in terms of how marginal or failing students were assessed on placement (Brandon and Davis, 1979). They concluded that tutors were more likely to focus on the enabling part of the assessment process and therefore encouraged practice assessors to adopt this role.

Burgess et al (1998a and 1998b) undertook a small-scale qualitative research project in Scotland that explored the relationship between placement agencies and HEIs in the context of how to manage issues that arose on placement. The findings resulted in very specific and helpful recommendations, not least a clear process to follow when concerns emerge in placements (from the perspective of student or practice assessor) and the involvement of the HEI in this process. They also noted the difficulties of the tutor supporting both practice assessor and student. I also looked at the issue of how HEI tutors support practice teachers in the context of one practice teachers experience of failing a student (Finch, 2004a) and a small-scale evaluation of tutor support given to practice teachers where there are concerns about failing or marginal students (Finch, 2004b). A few, rather dated, North American studies explored the difficulties involved in the provision of field placements and made general recommendations about good practice protocols between agencies and the academy (Holtzman and Raskin, 1988; Smith and Baker, 1988; Homonoff and Maltz, 1995). Several North American studies have explored the relationship

between practice assessors and HEI support and liaison in the placement (Bogo and Power, 1992; Bennett and Coe, 1998, Barlow et al, 2006).

That there exist triadic dynamics is clear, not least in the process of the assessment of students in placements, for example, whilst a practice assessor makes a recommendation, this recommendation may be upheld (or not) by the Practice Assessment Panel and later the assessment board<sup>17</sup>. The implications of such triadic dynamics are that if there is a culture of failure to fail, this may be both within the placement and the HEI. The influence of the HEI tutor in supporting the practice assessor to fail a student, or not, emerged strongly in the empirical work and will be explored in Chapter 4. It was interesting to note however the paucity of literature in this area.

### *Gate-Keeping*

Whilst the CAS identified a number of mainly British, small-scale studies focusing on students', academic staff and practice assessors' experiences of difficulties on placement, the UK seems not to have considered the issue of gate-keeping in the depth that other countries have. It is important to note that the general issue of gate-keeping has become more prevalent in recent years in an English context, due perhaps to the GSCC requirement to have suitability procedures in place (GSCC 2002a, 2007b). This provides an opportunity for British social work educators to consider the dilemmas, issues and tensions that are raised by this in more detail. My research, although not specifically on the issue of suitability, can contribute to the gate-keeping debate. That said, it can be seen that the UK has been behind North America and to a lesser extent Australia, in regard to published research around gate-keeping. The North American literature was confronting and debating these issues in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s (Cobb and Jordan, 1989; Moore and Urwin, 1990; Cole and Lewis, 1993; Koerin and Miller, 1995; Younes, 1998; Gibbs and Blakely, 2000).

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<sup>17</sup> This is an English requirement



It is important to consider reasons why Britain might be behind North America in terms of the gate-keeping debate. It may be that the US and Canada, as societies, are more litigious culturally and so more attention has been paid to this area, not least in clarifying due process procedures to ensure costly litigation is limited. The international research examines a number of issues in the general field of gate-keeping, for example comparative research that tries to ascertain the correlation between failure in fieldwork and initial entry personality traits and the issue of gate keeping across all assessment processes, by which I mean at initial entry point on programmes and assessment of academic work, in field settings and at exit point. The notion of gate-keeping is important to this thesis, as my findings reveal that few practice assessors explicitly acknowledged their gate-keeping role – this may be one reason why practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students.

As discussed above, an interesting area of literature concerns gate keeping in terms of entry onto qualifying social work programmes, indeed, Cole et al (1993) argue that gate-keeping “at the door” (1993:2) has been the focus of much of the gate-keeping literature whereas the issue of the termination of unsuitable social work students is “more difficult” (ibid) and has received less attention. Whilst a very limited range of studies was explored for the CAS (Royse, 2000; Raymond, 2000; Lafrance et al, 2004), I realised that this was an area that I had not given enough attention to and it is clear that the literature on this particular issue is significant and has been explored internationally. One area of research explored the correlation between initial entry interview and/or previous academic attainment and later outcomes (Barlow and Coleman, 2003; Miller and Koerin, 1998). Another area within this general field of gate-keeping at entry point, was to explore what exactly a social work training provider should assess, look for, examine or focus on in an initial interview and much of this has come from a US perspective as well as Australian (Moore and Urwin, 1990, 1991; Cole, 1991; Ryan et al, 1997, 1998; Gibbons et al, 2007). As discussed earlier there has been some recent English interest in this area (Homlstrom and Taylor, 2007a, 2007b). Overall the research reveals that it is very difficult to accurately predict, on a range of measures at initial entry stage, who will pass the programme or which students might become problematic.

Some of the literature documented above also appears quite controversial and highlights the fundamental tensions between pathologising, rigid definitions inherent in initial gate-keeping policies and the values of social work, namely a belief in the capacity of people to change (Lafrance et al, 2004; Curer and Atherton, 2007). It is my view that this tension continues into practice settings and makes the assessment of students so complex, not least when there are concerns about a student's competence. This tension emerges in the practice assessors' stories, documented in chapter four.

#### *The Placement as the Primary Site of Gate Keeping?*

It has been argued that historically, social work educators are charged with the task of gate-keeping (Barlow and Coleman, 2003) by the practice community as well as by various accreditation bodies. This would seem to imply that the primary responsibility for gate-keeping lies with HEI staff. Conversely, it has also been argued that the task of gate-keeping has been handed over by academics to practice assessors (Younes, 1998; Crisp and Green Lister, 2002). It is clear from the gate-keeping literature that all stakeholders involved in the training of social workers have an ethical and professional obligation to gate-keep, at all stages, (i.e. entry, during training and at exit point) and so gate-keeping should be a continuous process throughout the programme. The debate appears to be that sites of gate-keeping are either underdeveloped or pose particular complex issues. This again emerges in the analysis of the empirical work, i.e. whose responsibility is gate-keeping, and, in particular, practice assessors often perceive the HEI to have failed in their initial gate-keeping role in allowing marginal students onto the course in the first place. The discussion now moves into the area of policy developments since the writing of the CAS and more recent developments in the field as they relate to practice assessing and the provision of placements.

## **Developments Since the Writing of the CAS**

At the time the CAS was written in 2005, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) had been superseded by a Bachelors degree in Social Work<sup>18</sup> that was first offered by some English training providers in 2003. The main changes from the DipSW to the degree included the requirement to undertake two hundred days of assessed practice<sup>19</sup>, the practice teacher became a practice assessor (Humphrey, 2007)<sup>20</sup>, the competencies were replaced with key roles, service users were to become more involved in both social work training programmes and the assessment of students on placement; and the placement became a practice learning opportunity<sup>21</sup> (DH, 2002; DH, 2004; Parker, 2004; Harris and Gill, 2007).

All social work programmes in England were required to follow a curriculum that was informed by Department of Health (DH) requirements (DH, 2002), The National Occupational Standards for Social Workers (TOPSS, 2002), The GSCC Codes of Practice (GSCC, 2002a), the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA, 2000) and The QAA Code of Practice in relation to work place learning (QAA 2001). The QAA have now produced a revised subject benchmark statement that shapes new or revalidated programmes (QAA, 2008) as well as a revised code of practice in relation to work place learning (QAA, 2007, revised 2008).

Another major change concerned the age of students. Formerly students had to be age twenty-two to be awarded the DipSW (CCETSW, 1995) but can now begin a degree at age eighteen and so can be awarded the degree at age twenty-one. This appears to have caused some consternation to HEI's, practice assessors and older students (Holmstrom et al, 2007; Holmstrom, 2008; Mercer and Holmstrom, 2008)<sup>22</sup>. In terms of what was formerly known as the

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<sup>18</sup> There is also a Masters route available, although previously, some training providers were offering the Masters alongside the DipSW – indeed, this is the route I took into social work.

<sup>19</sup> In the DipSW, there was a requirement to do 130 days of assessed practice.

<sup>20</sup> For clarity, this thesis uses the term practice assessor.

<sup>21</sup> This thesis will mostly employ the term placement but will also use the term, practice learning opportunity or practice setting.

<sup>22</sup> The issue of younger students does not arise at the college where I work, as there are very few, if any, young students. Practice assessors raised the issue whilst I was doing a training session at the University of Sussex in 2006 and 2007. They felt the students had little life

placement, the notion of practice education and practice learning has become established to describe the process of a student entering an agency to undertake a period of assessed practice (National Learning Resource Network, 2007; Humphrey, 2007). There is also a requirement that students have the equivalent of Level Two<sup>23</sup> numeracy and literacy (DH 2002; GSCC, 2003). There is also a requirement that students achieve IT skills, (usually an European Computer Driving Licence or equivalent); failure to achieve this will result in a student being unable to graduate, even if they have achieved all the academic components of a degree (GSCC, 2003)<sup>24</sup>. There is also a move towards more inter-professional working and learning (DH 2002; GSCC 2003; GSCC 2005; GSCC; 2006a; Parker, 2004; Harris and Gill, 2007). During the writing of this thesis, the social work degree was evaluated (Social Care Workforce Research Unit, 2008) and whilst a number of recommendations were made, the degree was largely viewed as fit for purpose (although this may change in light of the findings from the Social Work Taskforce).

At the time of writing the CAS, another development was the planned changes to the post-qualifying frameworks that came into operation from 2007. The Practice Teaching Award (PTA) has now been replaced with two awards, the higher specialist and advanced award which equate to a post graduate diploma and a Masters degree in academic terms (GSCC, 2005; GSCC, 2006c)<sup>25</sup>. The other areas of post qualifying awards are in Childcare, Adults, Adults with Mental Health and Leadership and Management each of which operate at three levels, the specialist award, the higher specialist award and the advanced award<sup>26</sup> (GSCC, 2005). It has been left to HEIs to decide which post qualifying awards they will offer. In terms of Practice Education in England, at the time of

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experience, were not mature enough to manage the demands of social work and lacked basic skills in being able to talk to people. However a teaching session in 2009 with experienced practice assessors did not reveal such concerns. It may be that practice assessors have got used to younger students although this requires more research.

<sup>23</sup> Level Two refers to the equivalent of GSCE grade C or above.

<sup>24</sup> This requirement has delayed the graduation of some students at HCFHE.

<sup>25</sup> HCFHE are currently validated to run a postgraduate diploma in Practice Education and graduate diplomas in Adults and Adults with Mental Health.

<sup>26</sup> These awards are equivalent to a graduate diploma, post graduate diploma and Master degrees.

writing, there are twenty-three programmes that are validated in fourteen HEIs (Watson, 2009)<sup>27</sup>.

All the post qualifying awards have a focus on enabling the learning of others (GSCC, 2005; HCFHE, 2008). The academic awards will also be offered to practitioners from other disciplines. Whilst there have been significant policy changes since the writing of the CAS, my research continues to have implications for practice assessors and mentors within the revised post qualifying frameworks and for the continued assessment of social work students in practice learning settings. I would argue that the research also has implications for other professions where there are assessed practice learning requirements.

An issue not discussed in the CAS but of clear relevance to this thesis, concerns the impact of the Care Standards Act (2000) on the regulation of social work training. The former body responsible for regulation, The Central Council for The Education and Training Of Social Workers (CCETSW) was abolished and replaced by four regional care councils<sup>28</sup>. A requirement contained within the Care Standards Act (2000) (part iV), was that the term “social worker” became a protected title and a register was set up. As part of the registration requirements, social workers and social work students are expected to adhere to the Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers (GSCC, 2002a; GSCC, 2003) as well as engage in continuous professional development (CPD) (Peach and Horner, 2007). The issue of suitability thus became further reinforced in the statutory regulatory bodies, although it has always been a feature of social work training requirements (CCETSW, 1995).

Failure to adhere to the code of conduct by qualified social workers and student social workers could result in a tribunal hearing by the Conduct Committee of

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<sup>27</sup> 14 awards are validated at the Higher Specialist Level, i.e. post graduate diploma and 9 awards validated at the Advanced Level, i.e. Masters Level

<sup>28</sup> The Care Council for Wales, The Scottish Social Services Council, The Northern Ireland Social Care Council with the new degrees accredited from 2004 and for England, The General Social Care Council with degrees accredited from 2003.

the Council. The sanctions include being denied continued registration, (in effect, ending one's social work career), suspension from the register or admonishment. This committee first began hearing complaints against registered social workers in 2006 (Curer and Atherton, 2007) and the first hearing took place in April 2006. This concerned a social worker who also worked for an escort agency and the outcome was suspension from the register for a period of two years (GSCC, 2006b).

Whilst it is not the purpose of this doctoral research to consider the issue of registration in length, it is interesting to note the diversity of opinion with regard to this. Some writers argue it will strengthen and professionalise social work (Harris and Gill, 2007) with the need for a minimum qualification of an honours degree, the requirement for CPD and the protection of title (Lymbery and Postle, 2007). Conversely, there is criticism that such moves, in particular registration, have little impact on protecting the public (Malherbe, 1982; Smith, 2005) and are not supported by registrants (Beresford, 2004). Further criticisms of these developments are that they are evidence of continued managerialist ideology prevalent in social work (White and Harris, 2007) rather than a sign of a strengthening profession and, in relation to CPD, will tend to encourage prescriptive and quantitative outcome measures (Eadie, 2007).

Another important issue, again, omitted from the CAS but of relevance to this thesis, concerns GSCC accreditation requirements for HEIs, namely establishing fitness to practice procedures (DH, 2002; GSCC, 2003). Students must satisfy the HEI that they are "fit for practice", i.e. fit to go out on a placement. This has been managed in different ways by HEIs, with some requiring evidence from the student's previous work experience that they are fit for practice and others developing Fitness for Practice modules<sup>29</sup>. Another accreditation requirement is the need for suitability and termination of training procedures (GSCC, 2002a; GSCC, 2007). If a social work student is deemed to

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<sup>29</sup> AT HCFHE, "fitness for practice" is assessed via students completing the preparation for practice module. They are required to complete 75 hours of voluntary work in an appropriate agency, as well as shadow a qualified social worker, complete a portfolio and reflect on their experiences.

be unsuitable for social work training she/he will not be permitted to train as a social worker in any UK HEI.

What is relevant to this thesis is that these developments bring into sharp relief the issue of gate-keeping mechanisms, policies and procedures within HEIs and, by implication, gate-keeping within practice learning settings. Practice assessors who are registered social workers must adhere to these codes of conduct, as must students. What is suitable becomes a matter for debate, not least if students display behaviours or conduct themselves in ways that may be considered unsuitable whilst on placement. More recent developments in the field of practice education will now be explored.

### **Recent Developments in Practice Education**

In 2003, The Practice Learning Taskforce was established by the Department of Health (Skills for Care, 2006; Harris and Gill, 2007). This was established amidst concern that there were not enough placements for social work students undertaking the degree in social work in both statutory and voluntary settings, that placements were of variable quality and HEIs were accepting less than appropriate standards of assessment and/or placements (Fairtlough, 2006) although this concern is not new in the history of social work education (Lyons, 1999; Sharp and Danbury, 1999).

Returning to the Practice Learning Taskforce, their remit was also to encourage the development of placements in non-traditional settings. Around the same time, the Social Care Institute for Excellence also produced guidance which looked at a range of ways of delivering and assessing practice learning opportunities (Kearney, 2003). The Practice Learning Taskforce was abolished in March 2006 and superseded by the Learning Resource Networks (LRNs), operating in close association with Skills for Care (SFC) and the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). The LRNs are split into regions and are involved ostensibly in local developments. The National Learning Resource Network (NLRN) has been involved in developing benchmarking statements and quality assurance mechanisms that will be explored later.

In terms of other developments in practice learning and education, in 2006 the GSCC reported that there was a need for a national quality improvement framework in respect of practice learning (GSCC, 2006a). Concerns were raised about placement shortages but overall found that:

“There has been no major failure and overall the GSCC rules, requirements and criteria, and the DOH requirements regarding practice learning opportunity variation and sufficiently have been broadly met.”

(2006a:41)

In 2007, the GSCC made the following comments in relation to practice learning, namely that there appeared to be a gap between placement need and availability of placements, there was a continued need to provide inter-professional practice learning opportunities and there was a widespread difference in interpretation amongst HEIs as to what constituted inter-professional practice learning . Additionally it was noted that there needed to be clear minimum training requirements for “practice supporters, educators and assessors” (GSCC, 2007b:50). It appears that new words for the practice assessor emerged, i.e. practice supporter and educator although there was little guidance to suggest what the nature of these roles meant and what the differences in titles meant in practice.

Of interest within this same report was reference to the need for systemic quality assurance mechanisms in respect of practice learning. To that end, the “Quality Assurance Benchmark Statement and Guidance on the Monitoring of Practice Learning Opportunities” report was published in 2007, which was jointly produced by a number of organisations representing HEIs, practitioners and employers although led by the NLRN. This was initially piloted in the North of England. Interestingly, the role and remit of a practice educator compared with a practice assessor was explained (National Learning Resource Network, 2007:6). The report re-states the regulatory framework currently guiding practice learning and offers a definition of what might be considered quality within practice learning opportunities. This includes the need for:



- An agreed, complied with timetable, for the commencement and completion of the PLO with sign posted milestones that track progression through to completion;
- The expertise, availability and performance of personnel who manage the placement, the student's performance, learning and the assessment;
- A set of workable practical arrangements that lay down mutual obligations and expectations between all participants, including support systems and the management of difficulties.

(National Learning Resource Network, 2007:11)

I would argue that these requirements about what is quality in practice learning settings is not particularly new per se, for example, a whole range of policies and reports have been produced by CCETSW and GSCC that concern the issue of quality within PLOs (CCETSW, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d; GSCC, 2002c), as well as a few empirical studies and practice guidance (Gardiner, 1989; Nixon et al, 1995; Walker et al, 1995; Rogers, 1996). There does seem a contradiction within GSCC policies in that whilst there is the emphasis on developing quality assurance mechanisms within practice learning settings and the associated PQ awards in practice education, at the same time it has become established that practice assessors need only attend one module, "enabling and supporting others" to undertake practice assessing. Indeed, my conversations with several local authority training officers suggest that employers may be reluctant to support employees to attend longer training courses and this seems increasingly apparent in these fiscally challenged times. At Havering College, on the first intake of the new practice education programme in 2008/2009, it was notable that local authorities were only

prepared to sponsor employees to attend the post graduate certificate in practice education rather than the diploma<sup>30</sup>; this seems a great shame.

The implications of this last discussion for my thesis is that the findings aim to contribute to improvements in practice assessing and at its starting point, suggests that practice assessing is not as robust as it might be, i.e. students are passed when perhaps the evidence suggests they should be failed. Considering critically why it is that practice assessors do not fail students or find it so difficult to fail students in practice learning settings seems important. It also seems a good time to be producing new insights into the field of practice education, given the changes to the post qualifying frameworks as well as the current political climate in the wake of Baby Peter, not least when government ministers very publicly condemn social work training (BBC, 2008). As discussed in Chapter One, a Social Work Taskforce has been established to critically examine the profession of social work and has already made some interim recommendations (DCSF, 2009b).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered a number of policy developments in the English social work training context; these include, the GSCC (2002) Codes of Practice, the requirements for registration and the very significant changes to the post qualifying frameworks. The main themes of the CAS that were influential in this thesis have been discussed further as well as literature pertinent to the research question. From the literature surveyed, it seems that practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students because of role strain or confusion, lack of understanding of the assessment system, difficult dynamics between students and practice assessors, fear of litigation and lack of explicit acknowledgment of their gatekeeping function practice. The chapter lastly considered recent policy developments in respect of practice learning and education. The thesis will now go on to consider issues of methodology and outlines the research design and the methods used in the gathering of the empirical data.

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<sup>30</sup> This means that whilst practice assessors have achieved an academic award, i.e. a postgraduate certificate, they have not achieved the Higher Specialist award, i.e. the professional award.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the methodological issues pertinent to the research undertaken and includes a discussion about what is methodology. The discussion moves from general accounts of methodology to the specific methodological issues that arose in the context of this research. The influences on the research, ethnographic, narrative, life story approaches and practitioner research paradigms as well as the method of data analysis will be explored. The chapter considers the ethical frameworks that guided and informed the research process and considers the ethical issues that arose.

### **What is Methodology?**

The consideration of methodology is inherent in any research process but what exactly is methodology? My view is that methodology refers to more than the methods by which the research was designed and conducted. Rather, it embraces wider philosophical questions concerning the nature of reality, ontology, and the process of knowledge creation, epistemology (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Clough and Nutbrown (2002) argue that whilst a particular method or approach can be best described as an “ingredient” (2002:22) of the research process, methodology concerns the “reasons for using a particular research ingredient” (ibid). Methodology in this view can be seen to encompass the rationale for choosing one approach over another as well as critical reflection on the values and assumptions that underpin that rationale. Sarantokos (2005) argues that methodology concerns the process by which epistemological and ontological paradigms provide “guidelines that show how the research is to be conducted” (2005:30). It would also seem that methodological discussions need to embrace the political context in which knowledge is created as well as critical self exploration, namely, axiological concerns (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2008) .

Seale et al (2007) argue one needs to be aware of the distinction between what they term the political, external role of methodology, and the procedural, internal role of methodology. External methodological considerations “help[s] legitimate and elevate a discipline or practice among other enterprises and social practices” (2007:7); and internal methodology “helps to frame a research topic and to guide researchers in concrete terms” (Ibid). My interpretation of the distinction that Seale et al (2007) are claiming is that the internal role of methodology is a more instrumental approach, offering a researcher concrete justifications for utilising one approach over another, whereas the political, external role of methodological considerations aim at legitimising a particular approach within a normative discourse. Dunne et al (2005) argue that methodology should be viewed as the “theory of the way that methods are used” (2005:163). Dunne et al (2005) encourage researchers to view methodology as an ever-shifting, ever-changing phenomenon that is influenced by “practical, ethical, micro-political, ontological and epistemological issues” (2007:167).

It would seem essential that all researchers try to reach an understanding of the term methodology despite the difficulties. To that end, the following discussion is a synthesis of some of the views mentioned previously. The synthesis also aids me in considering further what is methodology and how my own research is located. In my view, methodological considerations involve the rationale and justification for why a particular research approach has been adopted over another, these include wider philosophical questions, including the general approach adopted as well as the method or methods of data collection and analysis. Methodological considerations also provide a space in which to critically reflect on one’s own values. What is methodology also appears to be the product of the inter-play between our understandings of epistemological, ontological and axiological concerns as well as encompassing the consideration of external and internal factors that shape research practice and processes. Methodology also serves as a legitimising ideology to the research process and clearly is an ever changing, dynamic and somewhat nebulous phenomenon. The discussion now moves on to consider qualitative research paradigms.

## **Qualitative Research Paradigms**

My research was based within qualitative research paradigms. Qualitative research practice follows on from phenomenological, interpretative or social constructionist ontological assumptions. This rejects positivistic notions that there is an objective, external world and that truth and facts can be plucked from this world using scientific methods (Alasuutari, 1998). Rather, there exists "multiple, subjective realities" (Gilbert, 2001:33) and multiple voices, that qualitative research practice aims to represent. Reality is continually socially constructed and so claims of generalisable truths are rendered meaningless. In terms of epistemological assumptions, that is how knowledge about the world can be gained and accessed (David and Sutton, 2004) and the relationship between the researcher and those being researched (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), qualitative research practice maintains that the researcher is part of the construction of that reality and so cannot be neutral. Lastly, axiological concerns, i.e. the values a researcher brings to the research process are also made explicit. This contrasts with positivist research traditions that aim at eliminating the researcher from the process. The researcher in this view is a tool for the gathering of data that can then be analysed in a bias and value free way (Finch, 1986). Qualitative paradigms instead stress the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Flick (2002) argues that reflexivity on the part of a researcher is a reflection of their:

"...actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become data in their own right." (2002:6)

Similarly, Cresswell (1998) argues that in qualitative research, the researcher's "presence" (1998:76) is evident within the text. Quantitative approaches in contrast, are influenced by positivistic claims to an objective, external world whereby by employing scientific research techniques, truth and facts can be extrapolated (Kolakowski, 1993). Quantitative approaches tend to be informed by objectivist ontology and an empiricist epistemology. Quantitative research designs are often based around measuring and exploring causality between set variables (Sarantakos, 2005; Punch, 2005). Cresswell (1998) argues that another defining feature of quantitative research paradigms is that they tend to

operate with a “few variables and many cases” (1998:15). The converse is the case with qualitative research practice in that it tends to work with a few cases but with many variables.

The alleged polarisation between quantitative and qualitative research processes has been commented upon by a number of authors as no longer relevant in a post-modern era (Bryman, 1988; Giarelli, 1988; Bryman, 1989; Cohen et al, 2000; Clough and Nutbrown, 2002; Flick, 2002; David and Sutton, 2004). The alleged dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research approaches has also been argued as false (Silverman, 1992; Flick, 2002; Darlington and Scott, 2002). Bryman (1988) argues that the paradigm wars that characterised academia in the 1970s are over, although it can still feel that quantitative research methodologies are privileged. In this so-called period of *détente* (Bryman, 1988) or *rapprochement* (Darlington and Scott, 2002), Bryman (1988) conceptualises quantitative and qualitative approaches not as divergent but on a spectrum. Sherman and Reid (1994) add that even within quantitative approaches, deciding what is a unit for analysis or a variable is still based on qualitative and interpretive judgments. In their view, the differences between paradigms are over stated.

Qualitative research practice, if it can be argued to be a distinct phenomenon, can also be said to be continually developing and evolving. Several authors argue that there have been distinct historical phases in terms of the theory and practice of qualitative research (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a; Flick, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research practice has developed from models attempting to emulate positivistic research paradigms, by employing the term social science and using positivistic terminology, such as validity, reliability and generalisability, to post-modern interpretations, not least in the rejection of grand narratives in favour of the representation of multiple local realities, voices, texts and lived experience (Fawcett et al, 2000; Alvesson and Skoldburg, 2000). Darlington and Scott (2002) however, argue that the rise of evidence-based practice provides a positivistic counterweight against the rise of post-modern research practice. So what then are the characteristics of qualitative research approaches?

As previously mentioned, qualitative research paradigms are informed by phenomenological, interpretative and social constructionist ontology. The researcher is essentially part of the research journey and claims of generalisability are not relevant. Qualitative research is often inductive in nature. This implies starting any research process with a degree of openness and aims at theory building rather than theory testing, a feature of positivistic approaches (Wengraf, 2001). Induction is seen as a way of generating theories and contrasts with deductive techniques that aim at testing theories or hypotheses. This view of such a polarised position is again contested; Silverman (1992) for example, argues that qualitative approaches do not necessarily rule out the use of hypotheses. It is also argued that in practice the distinctions are less pronounced and a process of both induction and deduction take place throughout the research process (Gilbert, 2001). Qualitative research has been defined as:

“...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.”

(Cresswell, 1998:15)

A simpler definition of its inherent characteristics is that it is a research process that produces descriptive data which is based upon spoken or written words and observable behaviour (Sherman and Reid, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (2000b; 2003) invoke vivid imagery to define the essence of qualitative research philosophy, methodology and practice. They argue that the qualitative researcher is akin to a “bricoleur and quilt maker”, (2000b:5) collecting and studying a range of “empirical materials” (ibid) to “describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (ibid). The various pieces of cloth collected by the bricoleur are made into a multi-coloured, multi-voiced quilt, a “pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b: ibid).

Creswell (1998) argues further that the loom that holds this intricate fabric together is invocative of the varied theoretical frameworks that underpin qualitative research. So whilst it can be argued that qualitative research practice has been criticised as being soft science (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b), solipsistic and narcissistic (David and Sutton, 2004), ethically fraught journalism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a), insubstantial and trivial (Woods, 1988), non-academic (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), non generalisable (Sarantakos, 2005), non replicable (Glesne, 1999a), navel gazing (White, 2001), imposing artificial boundaries (Cohen et al, 2000), lacking in validity (Sarantakos, 2005), self-indulgent (Brooker and Macpherson, 1999) and ideographic (Shaw and Gould, 2001a), it would seem that the business of undertaking qualitative research is creative, skilful and requires patience and time (Cresswell, 1998). Cresswell (1998) argues the need for a commitment to engage in a research process that is forever evolving.

This was seen in my own research, in which the design changed considerably because of both methodological issues and practical realities. As a novice researcher this posed some dilemmas in terms of the need to employ some clear methodological parameters to the study without it descending into an anything goes scenario. There was a need for some rigour whilst acknowledging the logical paradoxical consequences of interpretative and post-modern qualitative paradigms (Noble, 2004). Qualitative research practice therefore, “crosscuts disciplines, fields and subject matters” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:3). It has also been argued that qualitative research raises questions, challenges assumptions, embraces complexity (Edson, 1988) and that such research endeavors should aim at raising fundamental questions about the nature and assumptions of knowledge, consider what knowledge is being produced and who is it being produced for (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). In order to attempt to achieve these aims, qualitative research methods may consist of one or a mixture of case studies, interviews, life story approaches, narratives, biography, autobiography, participant observation, visual texts, action-research and artefacts (Bryman, 1988; Campbell, 1988; Cresswell, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; David and Sutton, 2004; Sarantakos, 2005).



Whilst I have chosen a particular approach, this does not imply that I am privileging that method over another and the dangers of methodolatry (Cooper, 2001) or the one and only approach (Flick, 2002) at the critical expense of all others has been considered. I adopted a qualitative approach as this best fits my research questions. The aim of the study was to understand the experiences of practice assessors who have worked with a student on placement where there were difficulties or who had failed a student. A quantitative approach would not have realised these aims. I am also part of the research journey as both an insider and outsider within the research process<sup>31</sup>. A further rationale for pursuing a qualitative approach concerns the resonance between social work practice and qualitative methodologies.

### *Social Work and Qualitative Research*

Sherman and Reid (1994) argue that qualitative research practice has had a shorter use in social work research, as historically the approach used was quantitative. This situation changed in that quantitative methods began to be seen as simplistic and reductionist, hence missing significant themes or issues (Dunlap, 1991; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1995; Gibbs, 2001; Powell, 2002). There was also concern that quantitative research methods focused on outcomes of social work interventions rather than examining the process of social work interventions and practice (Everitt et al, 1991; MacDonald and MacDonald, 1995) and indeed, my research explores the process of assessing a social work student. Sherman and Reid (1994) comment that there was also a need to engage in service user led research, to capture their subjective experience of social work practice – again qualitative research paradigms, seemed better placed to achieve this.

A number of authors have discussed the resonance between qualitative research philosophy and practice and social work (Everitt and Hardiker, 1995; Shaw and Gould, 2001d; Powell, 2002). It is argued that good practice is closely akin to good research and vice versa (Shaw and Gould, 2001b). This suggests

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<sup>31</sup> This will be explored later on in the chapter

that both good research and good social work practice are characterised through a similar process of inquiry, analysis and the application of theoretical frameworks in order to achieve an informed understanding of the issue being explored (Everitt et al, 1992; Fuller and Petch, 1995; Scourfield, 2001). The methods of qualitative research may also be similar to social work activity; i.e. interviewing and observing. The resonance between the political nature of social work and qualitative research practice has also been noted (Dominelli, 2002), i.e. of giving voice to powerless groups in society and challenging oppressive and dominant discourses (Martinez-Brawley, 2001).

Whilst it can be seen that there may be some resonance or shared values between social work practice and qualitative research practice, to state that qualitative social work practice and social work itself are the same is simplistic, not least in that they have different immediate purposes. In my own experience, interviewing service users in practice settings is very different to interviewing research participants, notably around issues of consent and power<sup>32</sup>. There is not space within this dissertation to explore this issue in depth but the important point to note is that the resonance between qualitative research paradigms and social work activity adds a further rationale for employing a qualitative strategy.

### **The Research Questions**

My research questions accord with a qualitative approach and with the flexible nature of qualitative paradigms (Robson, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005). As discussed in the introductory chapter, the research process began with a concern that social work students seemed to be rarely failed in practice, despite great concerns about their performance. Practice assessors seemed to find the process of failing a student very difficult and social work tutors found navigating their roles in these situations equally difficult. The research questions were initially loose and broad in scope and concerned something about why and how practice teachers fail or do not fail social work students. The research

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<sup>32</sup> This is usefully explored by:  
SCOURFIELD, J. (2001) Interviewing Interviewers and Knowing about Knowledge. IN SHAW, I. & GOULD, N. (Eds.) *Qualitative Research in Social Work*. London, Sage.

questions became more focused for the CAS and developed further in the eventual thesis although as stated in the introduction, the thesis stands alone.

The process of refining my research questions was evidenced in the numerous research update reports I completed, ostensibly for my supervisors but which were in fact useful in documenting the research journey I undertook and now provide me with an opportunity to reflect on the shifts, twists and turns in the research process. It was also interesting to note that I felt the research questions that initially framed the thesis always felt unsatisfactory and did not seem able to effectively capture the heart of what I was trying to explore. I will now go on to discuss the design of the research, ostensibly informed by the research question, namely, why do practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students?

### **The Research Design – Methodological Influences**

The research was designed within a qualitative framework and as Dunne et al (2005) remind us, a researcher must justify their chosen methodology for two distinct reasons. Firstly, the rules of a particular chosen method and its philosophical underpinnings provide some clear parameters and legitimacy to the research endeavour, which in turn provides some guidance on how a researcher is to proceed. This also provides a normative framework for communicating the process and outcomes of research. Secondly, methodological discussions provide a forum for the researcher to discuss the philosophical, epistemological, ontological and axiological issues as they pertain to the particular research project itself (Dunne et al, 2005).

The research design was influenced not only by a number of distinct methods found within the umbrella of qualitative approaches but also by their philosophical and axiological underpinnings. I wanted to capture something of their essence although I recognised I was not following the rules in an instrumental way. It is also important to note that the research design changed considerably from its initial conception to its completion, a matter I will return to later. My research was influenced by ethnographic, narrative and life

story approaches and practitioner-research methodology. The research is essentially in the realm of applied research in that the aims were not only to achieve a doctorate in social work but also to use the findings to develop practice assessing further, both within my own HEI and hopefully to contribute to national debates. I will now discuss these approaches.

### *Ethnography*

Ethnographic research largely stems from an anthropological tradition. Shimahara (1988) argues that the influence of anthropology and its main contribution is that it sees human behaviour as being shaped in the context of a socio-cultural milieu and that every human event is culture bound. Other movements, in particular The Chicago School of Sociology, phenomenological, ethnomethodological and critical/emancipatory perspectives, have also influenced ethnography as a research discipline (David and Sutton, 2004). Defining ethnography appears difficult in that authors often use terms interchangeably, i.e. ethnology, auto-ethnography, anthropology and ethnography, whilst others see distinctions between these terms (Sarantakos, 2005). Cohen et al (2000), for example, tie up ethnographic enquiry with naturalistic research design methods and methodology, whereas Maykut and Morehouse (1994) see ethnography as being inextricably linked to participant observation.

In terms of methodological assumptions, ethnography as a research technique would appear most relevant to qualitative methodological paradigms (Tedlock, 2000; Brewer 2000, Etherington, 2004; Sarantakos, 2005) although several writers link ethnography with grounded theory approaches (Walsh, 1998; David and Sutton, 2004; Punch 2005) which have been criticised for inherent positivistic assumptions (Charmaz, 2000). Hammersley (1998) argues that the main tenets of ethnography include, studying people in their everyday contexts and environments and in utilising methods of informal observation and conversation. To that end, the research process is generally unstructured, uses small numbers of cases and offers more in the way of description than causation.

A further definition of ethnography is offered by Brewer (2000) who argues that ethnographic research involves the study of people in their natural settings and that the methods of data collection aim at capturing social meanings that are contained within people's ordinary everyday activities. For Brewer (2000), the researcher must participate directly in both the setting and the activities in order to soak up meaning. The term, "anthropologically strange" is used to describe the activities of ethnographers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) and such research aims to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This is explored by Tedlock (2000) who argues that ethnographers are:

"cross-dressers, outsiders wearing insiders clothes while gradually acquiring the language and behaviours that go along with them."

(2000:455)

The term auto-ethnography has also been used and this has been described as an autobiographical style of writing. Etherington (2004) refers to auto-ethnography as a form of "self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (2004:139). This is further discussed by Ellis and Bochner (2000) who argue that auto-ethnographic accounts aim at connecting the personal and the cultural. It seems to me that this has resonance with reflexive research practice as well as reflective social work practice.

The question is then posed as to what extent my own research can be said to be ethnographic? As the research progressed I felt the original aim and desire to use ethnographic approaches ebbed away. To some extent my research is ethnographic in that I am using my experience as a practice assessor and mentor to gain insight into the research process. I am attempting to turn the lens inwards and outwards and make the familiar strange. I am exploring professional practice, which could be argued as akin to studying people in their everyday contexts.

It can equally be argued that the research is not ethnographic in that the data collection methods employed do not necessarily imply such an approach is used. I have also questioned whether I am too familiar with the field and so

cannot make it strange. Practitioner research also does not necessarily imply an ethnographic stance. Reflexivity on my part does not also imply an ethnographic account; the research process does not have the feel of an anthropological investigation and I have not used participant observation. This poses the question as to how far practitioner research can be said to be ethnographic and how far reflexive research practice can be said to be solely the domain of ethnography. If I were to consider my research in light of Hammersley's (1998) definition this would give weight to the argument that my research is not ethnographic. Overall, the best I can argue is that whilst there is some essence or spirit of ethnography within the research design, it proved difficult to implement in practice.

#### *Narrative, Biographical and Life Story approaches*

Narrative approaches aim at eliciting stories from an individual, usually a research respondent. Such approaches can help researchers understand how people contextualise their experiences, remember and recount their stories (Andrews et al, 2004). For Andrews et al (2004), they enable the complexities and ambiguities of human experience to be revealed as well as providing "a very rich source of theory building" (2004:103). Shaw and Gould (2001a) argue that such narrative approaches have their origins in what they loosely term life history approaches, which may include oral history traditions, biography, autobiography and family stories, all of which have their intellectual roots in The Chicago School of Sociology although they note further influences. Shaw and Gould (2001a) argue that at its heart, narrative research paradigms assume that people want to tell their story and through this process they find meaning. Within social work practice, the aim of supporting people to tell their stories and validating such stories is often taken for granted. Shaw and Gould (2001a) argue that narrative approaches are used in four distinct ways in social work research: firstly giving voice to those who are disempowered or marginalized, secondly in considering the impact of interventions on service users, thirdly in considering issues of identity; and finally the reconstruction of identity.

A narrative approach has clear resonance with the research I undertook. Qualitative research methodology aims at capturing people's stories through their spoken words. Most obviously, the method of obtaining data for my research, in-depth interviews, aimed at eliciting respondents' stories about a range of experiences. The method of data analysis also recognises that stories are being told and the process of analysis is to elicit these stories (Maunther and Doucet, 1998). The task of the researcher then becomes that of the biographer (Roberts, 2002). In Roberts' (2002) view this means that the researcher is making sense of and representing the different voices that emerged within the data. He argues that the process is "imaginative...creative, image-laden, open, exploratory, reflexive and humanistic" (2002:172/173). He also comments on the politically laden nature of such research endeavors. Any research process within this paradigm will also become autobiographical to some extent. How far such research paradigms can be said to be a distinct research process is debatable, as one can see the blurring with auto-ethnography and case study approaches. On a final note, the values that seem to be inherent in narrative approaches, of giving voice to usually passive research participants, was important to me both personally and professionally and certainly seems to accord with social work values.

### *Practitioner-Research Paradigms*

I would consider myself a practitioner-researcher and, as such, an insider. There is also an element of being outsider in the research process in that I am trying to explore this issue from a distance, within the normative frameworks of academic discourse. In its simplest form, practitioner-research means research carried out by practitioners in a particular field. It is argued that practitioner-research as a distinct practice emerged in the 1970s and has continued to be developed in a range of professions, including social work, education, nursing and health (Humphreys and Metcalf, 2000). Sherman and Reid (1994) argue that social work has had a long history of practitioners undertaking research. They draw on the research carried out in the 1950s in the USA that explored the efficacy of the casework method. It could be argued that in Britain, the history of social work practitioner research goes back to the

very inception of the profession, i.e. the philanthropists and social reformers who discovered Britain's social ills such as Henry Mayhew, Joseph Rowntree, Seebohn Rowntree and Charles Booth (Parry and Parry, 1978; Harrison, 1990; Thorne, 1996; Theodore-Hoppen, 1998; Blakemore, 1998).

Robson (2002) argues that practitioner-research often has the aim of promoting or facilitating change in practice or policies and so one can see the influences of critical perspectives and action-research methodologies. Robson (2002) calls such researchers insiders rather than outsiders. Robson (2002) argues that practitioner-researchers face distinct advantages and disadvantages compared to professional researchers. The advantages include insider opportunities such as specialised insider knowledge, contacts, networks and experience of the issue being researched. There may also be the advantage of being able to implement the research, gaining access and what Robson (2002) terms "practitioner-researcher synergy" (2002:535), that is the insights that practitioners have at their disposal, which will aid the research process. Another advantage is that practitioner research may be more meaningful to other practitioners. For example, it has been argued that research in the education field is not seen as relevant to teachers themselves (Middlewood et al, 1999; Bassey, 1999; Hammersley, 2002) and is not led by, read or assimilated by practitioners in the field. As such, teacher-researchers should engage in research as they have a better sense of what needs exploration and will produce research that is more critical in design. (Middlewood, et al, 1999). In social work, similar arguments have been promulgated (Everitt, et al, 1992; Fuller and Petch, 1995; Everitt, 1998; Shaw and Gould, 2001d; Shaw, 2003). Fuller and Petch (1995) argue that social workers should engage in research for the following reasons:

- 1) To enhance their basic professional skills
- 2) To produce more informed ways of being accountable
- 3) To increase the standing of the profession
- 4) To ensure a research base that is sympathetic to social work values.

(Adapted from, Fuller and Petch, 1995:8)



Everitt (1998) argues for the need for research mindedness amongst practitioners, to ensure that the gap between research and practice closes. Research practice must aim at making a difference “for people in trouble” (1998:107). That is not to say that practitioner research is without criticism and one author even refers to practitioner-research paradigms as an “unholy marriage” (Fryer, 2004:174) due to the particular ethical issues that will inevitably arise<sup>33</sup>.

Robson (2002) argues that there may be disadvantages for practitioners undertaking research, not least in terms of “time, lack of expertise, lack of confidence and insider problems” (2002:535). Robson (2002) argues that the position of insider may create difficulties for the practitioner-researcher in terms of not being sufficiently open or having pre-conceptions about the issues, problems or solutions. Robson (2002) also raises the potential of hierarchy issues, i.e. that practitioner researchers may be perceived as having low status and because of these perceived limitations, practitioner-research features less prominently in the social work literature (Corby, 2006). Robson (2002) also comments on the issue of the perceived high status of research-practitioners by participants. Scourfield (2001) in his reflections of research carried out in a child protection team recounts how he “downplayed” (2001:62) his expert status as a doctoral candidate and university lecturer, whilst recognising that recounting his experiences of being a social worker, albeit in a different field, helped create a “rapport” (ibid) with research respondents. I was aware of this in my own research, in that I did not want the interviewees to feel I was somehow expert by virtue of being engaged in doctoral study and so I explicitly acknowledged the fact that they worked in fields I have little experience and knowledge of. Conversely, for some of the interviewees I was aware that my understanding of the issues involved in the assessment of failing/marginal students, by undertaking doctoral research, having had experience of failing students as a practice assessor and mentoring and supporting students and practice assessors as a college tutor, gave me some expert knowledge and status. This was revealed by respondent comments such as “...am I giving you

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed, ethical issues inherent in the practitioner-researcher role emerged in my own research and will be explored later on.

what you want?” (Terry) or “...is this any good?” (Louise). This raises the issue of power differentials in research interviews and how the power can shift, depending on perceptions of expertise and other factors.

The highly politicised nature of practitioner research is also raised by a number of authors (Humphreys and Metcalf, 2000; Fook, 2001; Fryer, 2004), which may be viewed as both an advantage and disadvantage. White (2001) discusses some of the criticisms levelled at practitioner-research, that include the research product being under theorised, problem-driven and solution focused in nature and so not adequately critical. Corby (2006) argues that this particular criticism is representative of the “schism” (2006:168) between practice and the academy and may be “intellectual snobbery” (ibid). White (2001) argues that practitioner researchers can develop the necessary critical engagement with the issue at hand and that in any case the insider-outsider dichotomy is false. This is explored by Achebe (2002) who argued that in her historical research in Nigeria there was a constant dynamic shifting between insider and outsider, in terms of her as a researcher but all the other roles she occupied, i.e. daughter, wife and mother. The shifts in how researchers are viewed by research participants is further explored in a study of South Asian women’s lives in London (Ramji, 2008). The author provides a compelling account of when and at what points she felt an insider and outsider in her research.

As alluded to in the introduction and other works (Finch, 2004a; Finch, 2004b; Finch, 2005), I occupy not one practitioner role but four, in terms of being a freelance assessor, practice mentor, curriculum manager as well as a novice researcher. The advantages that I felt were afforded to me as a practitioner-researcher were that I did have some insights into the issue from the different perspective of each role, the research arose from a professional concern that did not seem adequately explored in the existing literature and finding people willing to participate in the research process was reasonably straightforward. Another advantage was that I aimed at trying to operate within professional normative frameworks as well as academic.

The disadvantage of my position was that in the initial stages of the research process, I felt there was some concern that any research produced may be seen as potentially critical of my employers, although this diminished significantly as the research progressed. At the end of the research process I am pleased to report that my employers made no demands on what was produced and left me well alone. The political implications of the research were also apparent, not least in my dealings with the GSCC and freedom of information requests to HEIs<sup>34</sup>. That the research process caused discomfort was oddly reassuring. Another disadvantage was around maintaining boundaries, separating my different roles and there were times when I was distinctly aware of the impossibility of separating these roles. For example, the research design involved me mentoring practice teaching award candidates who were also research respondents. There was a further layer of complexity in that whilst the practice-mentoring role was freelance, the research part of me was directly linked to the college, as they were part funding my fees. Yet another layer of complexity was that in the second stage of the research, I returned back to my research-practitioner role, but the research respondents were essentially my colleagues and a few of them I would consider my friends. This raises many issues, not least consent and assent, the potential ethical issues that could arise and the impact on my colleagues when reporting the findings of the research<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, it was only when I attended a student doctoral conference at Sussex University (June 2009) and presented a paper on the theme of undertaking respectful research did this issue really hit home. I think it is clear on reflection that not all these issues and layers of complexities were considered at the start of the research process<sup>36</sup>. The realities of being a practitioner-researcher make it impossible to separate my respective roles and maintain boundaries around them although perhaps that is the point of practitioner-research. I felt during the research process I moved very firmly towards the role of practitioner-researcher and insider and away from an ethnographer and outsider. I will now go on to discuss the research design.

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<sup>34</sup> As discussed in the CAS

<sup>35</sup> This is explored well by:

COSTLEY, C. & GIBBS, P. (2006) Researching Others: Care as an Ethic for Practitioner Researchers. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31 (1), pp.89-98.

<sup>36</sup> I will detail what I could have done better in the concluding part of this doctoral thesis.

## **The Evolution of the Research Design**

My initial plans for the research centred on the possible use of reflective diaries to be kept by the research participants that would have given an ideal insight into the practice assessors' thought processes and feelings during the period they assessed a social work student. This would also have a much more clearly defined ethnographic feel, but I felt that this was too time intensive for practice assessors and would be asking too much. I considered that if I were that position, it would feel too revealing, intrusive and why should I trust the researcher?

The CAS revealed that most practice education research is carried out retrospectively. Originally I wanted to address this by undertaking interviews in real time and so I envisaged a process of interviewing practice assessors three times during the course of a student placement. I realised however, that this would be too time consuming for practice assessors and myself. I therefore interviewed practice assessors once, after completion of the placement. This had the advantage in that the practice assessors were able to reflect on the placement, their role and their understanding of assessment although had the disadvantage that some of the thought processes, feelings and events may have been forgotten.

The original plan was to act as both researcher and practice mentor to six candidates on the practice teaching award (PTA), which would afford me the opportunity to reflect on my own assessment practice, thoughts and feelings although this clearly posed ethical issues<sup>37</sup>. I had planned to repeat this process with another cohort of practice teaching award candidates the following academic year but my timescales and the college's timescales were divergent. I therefore made a pragmatic decision to interview other practice assessors (14) who had failed a student on placement or where there had been difficulties on placement<sup>38</sup> and of this fourteen, four were attending a practice teaching award

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<sup>37</sup> This will be discussed further in this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> How participants were sought will be discussed later on in this chapter.

programme at the time they had the student under discussion<sup>39</sup>. I interviewed these practice teachers once. The initial interviews with the six PTA candidates almost became by default a pilot and so there appeared to be two distinct phases in the research process, although the results from both phases of the research were analysed.

Including the PTA candidates, twenty practice assessors were interviewed. The interviews took place between March 2006 and July 2007. It felt disappointing that changes in the research design largely concerned practical issues rather than any great methodological insights although as Robson (2002) argues, flexible research design is a defining feature of most qualitative approaches and argues that research in the “real world” (2002:4) is “...complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally [is a] messy situation” (ibid). Sarantakos (2005) comments on flexible research designs and states that the process should be dynamic and allow for “fine-tune[ing]” (2005:113), “a dynamic process that builds itself as it grows” (2005:117). It is clear that research in the real world will inevitably pose challenges to a researcher that may mean the research design will have to adapt<sup>40</sup>.

I felt in hindsight that there were some advantages to the design changing, in that the second round of interviews were more interesting and the additional time enabled me to develop the research questions. The initial research design of also being a practice mentor at the same time also felt less relevant and important. This coincided with the move away from an ethnographic stance to a more clearly defined practitioner-researcher positioning. I will now go on to discuss the research instrument utilised.

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<sup>39</sup> Appendix 6 include a table of the initial 6 research participants and Appendix 7 includes tables of the participants in the second round of interviews

<sup>40</sup> A useful account of research designs and the need to change plans is discussed on page 33, in:  
DARLINGTON, Y. & SCOTT, D. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Practice - Stories from the Field*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.

## **The Research Instrument**

The research instrument employed was a semi-structured, in-depth interview. The interview, as a method of data collection, is a taken for granted way of gathering data and as such has been argued as under-theorised (Kvale, 1996). It is contended further that the interview in its generic form “is not closely identified with any specific research paradigm, disciplinary perspective or substantive field” (Dunne et al, 2005:27). The interview is therefore employed in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and as such it is claimed that it is the most widely used method for data collection (Fielding and Thomas, 2001). In a similar vein, it has also been argued that in-depth, semi-structured interviewing is one of the most widely used methods within qualitative research (Darlington and Scott, 2002; Rapley, 2004). Due to the popularity of this method of data collection, Rapley (2004) argues that there exists an “industrial complex of academic work on interviewing” (2004:15), which appears to contradict Kvale’s (1996) earlier point.

The research methodology literature guidance on interviews, often takes the forms of identifying types of interviews (Cresswell, 1998; Alasuutari, 1998; Fielding and Thomas, 2001; Robson, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005, Punch, 2005). Sarantakos (2005) for example, in addition to structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews identifies twenty further types of interviews. There is also an abundance of guidance on how to interview, from the very prescriptive (Mishler, 1986; Cohen et al, 2000; Robson, 2002;) to more pragmatic approaches (Kvale, 1996; Glesne, 1999b; Alvesson, 2002; Rapley, 2004). I chose to use what is broadly termed a semi-structured or in-depth interview i.e. I devised an interview schedule that was flexible, with the aim of ensuring the process was more of a conversation than an interview. This felt more in line with the qualitative research design influenced by narrative approaches, as well as the epistemological paradigms that guided the research process as will be explored below.

The in-depth interview as a method of data collection fits with a qualitative approach that views reality as being continually reconstructed. Alvesson (2002) terms this technique romantic, i.e. at variance with neo-positivistic concerns of

minimising researcher influence and bias with the sole aim of eliciting facts from a respondent. The romantic position aims at establishing a trusting and empathic relationship and challenging the norms of an interview. Alvesson (2002) terms this as having a “real conversation” (20002:109) and Darlington and Scott (2002) argue that this “meaning construction” (2002:7) in a research interview is also “at the heart of much of the work in the human services field” (ibid). How far I had a conversation remains debateable, as at times, I felt the unease of the person I was having the conversation with. This was felt in comments such as “...is this what you want to hear?” (Terry). This position is also criticised as being at best an ideal and at worst a Machiavellian method of interviewing ultimately aimed at simply extracting more information (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2003).

Kvale (1996) argues that there can be two metaphors for considering the process of an interview, that of a traveller or a miner. The miner metaphor shares some resonance with positivistic approaches, although this can also equally apply to qualitative approaches. The aim of the interview is to extract nuggets of truth from the respondent and bring them to the surface, untarnished by the interviewer. The traveller metaphor on the other hand concerns wandering in strange lands “...that leads to a tale being told upon returning home” (1996:4). In this view, there is the possibility of transformation, for the researcher/traveller as well as for the inhabitants of the lands that have been traversed. Again, this position may well be equally romanticised although it appears a nice ideal. One can also see the resonance of ethnography, narrative and life story approaches with practitioner-research paradigms. It is clear that within social work itself, interviewing and/or interacting with service users is the primary tool utilised. In my former work as a play therapist<sup>41</sup>, I employed story-telling techniques in work with children and so I felt confident using this method. I also feel it fits well with my multiple professional identities as well as with the research question.

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<sup>41</sup> When I was a social worker at South London Family Service Units (1999-2001), part of my role was to also undertake therapeutic work with children.

I am now critically reflecting on my position in the interview processes and considering the question as to what the interview/conversation was, for example was it the “joint production of accounts or versions of experiences, emotions, identities, knowledges, opinion, truth...”. (Rapley, 2004:16)? Was it travelling or was it merely mining for nuggets of meaning? Arguing from a post modern perspective, Alvesson (2002) argues that interviews may be nothing more than accounts of how people behave in the interview scenario and such stories cannot offer valid knowledge of other settings. There is also the concern that what people say they do in practice is not what they might actually do in practice, i.e. espoused theory and theories-in-action (Argyris and Schon, 1974). Clearly the issue of what is an interview is more complex than I had originally anticipated. It is clear that I did not consider some of these deeper philosophical questions at the outset of the research process – indeed, how I would analyse the data was not considered in any depth at the initial stages of the research process. I will now go on to address this issue.

### **Data Analysis**

Just as the question of what is methodology and what is qualitative research, the moot issue of data analysis also raises a number of issues, tensions and dilemmas, not least the question of how far data analysis needs to be rigorous and follow a particular model. This is explored by Dunne et al (2005) who argue that adherence to prescriptive models of qualitative data analysis may be emulating a “realist position that imitates research in the natural sciences” (2005:79) although they do not discuss in detail what they consider to be prescriptive models of data analysis. Dunne et al (2005) are raising an important point concerning the paradox inherent within qualitative research methodology, that despite its claim of the social constructivist, interpretivist and phenomenological nature of truth and knowledge production, there seems an unquestioning acceptance of the use of models of data analysis. Instead they propose that the process of moving from the “field to text” (2005:76) concerns a process of “recontextualisation” (ibid), of moving from the data, i.e. the “research texts” (2005:78) to theoretical texts. This position is in contrast to that proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who argue that the process of data



analysis concerns, “data reduction...data display...[and]..conclusion drawing and verification (1998:10/11). A more helpful understanding of the process is offered by David and Sutton (2004) who argue that all methods of qualitative data analysis aim at:

“...the attempt to identify the presence or absence of meaningful themes, common and/or divergent ideas, beliefs and practices.”

(2004:191)

Dunne et al (2005) argue that the method of data analysis is influenced by the initial research design, the substantive issue and the theoretical preferences of the researcher. I will now go on to discuss the method of data analysis I employed.

### **Voice Centred Relational Method**

I chose to use the voice centred relational (VCR) method. This is an approach found within the umbrella of qualitative data analysis, most notably a system for coding data. This method is largely associated with Gilligan (1982); Brown and Gilligan (1992); Gilligan et al, (2003) and also Mauthner, (1994 and 2002) and Mauthner and Doucet (1998). This method has been used in a wide range of international research contexts: nursing (Levtak, 2003; Paliadelis, 2005), an American study of female coaches (Cruz, 2003), a project on early school leaving in Northern Ireland (Bryne et al, 2004), an Australian study of volunteer breastfeeding counsellors (Smith, 2005), a Canadian study of women in work place transition (Balan, 2005) a Canadian doctoral study looking at compassion fatigue (MacEwan, 2006) and a UK evaluation of training programmes (Fairtlough, 2007).

I would argue that VCR seems to fit well with social work values, not least in that the method is largely associated with a feminist standpoint paradigm, recognises the centrality of relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Brown and Gilligan, 1992); relies on listening (Gilligan et al, 2003) takes for granted a social

constructivist epistemological position and recognises that human beings' experiences and stories are intricately bound up in larger relational social dynamics, including those of the researcher (Gilligan, 1982). The method aims at ensuring that the voices' of the narrators, those of the research participants, are not overridden by the researcher (Cruz, 2003; Gilligan et al, 2003). The advantages and disadvantages of utilising this approach and my response to it will be discussed in Chapter 5. Cruz (2003) argues that the VCR method utilises several theories to understand the process and outcome of such methodological practice, namely relational psychological theories, psychoanalytic theory, literary theory and music theory although she argues that the method is sufficiently adaptable to be able to bring in additional theoretical frameworks. It was interesting to note that in an very early draft of this chapter I had included the comments above about the range of theory that could be utilised in the data analysis process without then being conscious of the frameworks I would employ. It is now apparent that I have indeed drawn on psychological relational theories.

The main tenets of the VCR approach<sup>42</sup> concern four distinct readings of the texts<sup>43</sup>. The first reading of the text aims at identifying the story or plot (Gilligan, 1982) and draws out the metaphors, images, contradictions, protagonists, subplots and recurrent imagery (Gilligan et al, 2003). There is also a need at this stage to consider our own responses to the narrative and to be consciously aware of our emotional, intellectual and academic responses (Maunther and Doucet, 1998; Gilligan et al, 2003). I chose to consider this as a distinct reading in its own right.

The next reading explores the use of "I" to consider further how the respondent thinks, speaks, feels, and the changes in this conceptualisation of "I". It is suggested that "I poems" are produced at this stage. The third reading looks at relationships and considers who is being spoken about and how relationships are conceptualised. The last reading considers how the respondents interact

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<sup>42</sup> It is clear that some of the studies discussed above who have used VCR, have employed additional methods or adapted the method.

<sup>43</sup> The "texts" refers to the transcribed interviews.

with and are affected by their particular social contexts and constructs (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998; Giligan et al, 2003).

Relating this method to my own research in practical terms meant carrying out five readings of every transcript so I could concentrate on the different nuances of each reading. I made notes on the transcript, using different coloured pens to represent each reading and so began the process of identifying themes, both within each reading and across readings. This depth of analysis was time consuming, given there were approximately five hundred pages of text to both read and analyse. The VCR method did, however, appear to offer a clear framework for the analysis of the data and can be methodologically justified <sup>44</sup>.

### **The Research Participants <sup>45</sup>**

In total, twenty practice assessors were interviewed, six in the first round of interviews and fourteen in the second round of interviews. As discussed earlier, the first six participants were on the PTA programme. Of the fourteen practice assessors who took part in the second round of interviews, four were on a PTA programme when they worked with the student where there had been difficulties. All the practice assessors between them had experience of working with students on a range of programmes<sup>46</sup>. The research respondents were from a diverse range of social work, allied social care and health backgrounds, carrying out a range of roles and had a variety of qualifications. The practice assessors had varying lengths of experience both pre-qualifying and post-qualifying experience, for example one practice teacher/assessor had been working as a social worker since the mid 1960s, whereas others were more recently qualified.

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<sup>44</sup> The potential drawbacks of this method as compared with other data analysis methods will be discussed in the concluding section of the thesis

<sup>45</sup> Issues of confidentiality and anonymity will be discussed in the Ethics section. A table of the details of the individual practice assessors can be found in appendices, this provides a fuller picture of the practice assessors' backgrounds, number of students worked with and current professional role.

<sup>46</sup> The practice assessors between them had worked with students on the following courses, CSS, CQSW, DipSW (under graduate and post graduate level) the new Social Work Degree and Masters.

The majority of practice assessors interviewed were women (sixteen), which reflects the over-representation of women in the social care field generally. The respondents were not asked specifically about sexuality but four respondents described themselves as married and heterosexual and one described herself as a lesbian. The age range of the respondents was approximately thirty-five to sixty-five years. None of the practice assessors reported having a disability. In terms of ethnicity, three quarters of the sample considered themselves white<sup>47</sup>. A quarter came from BME backgrounds<sup>48</sup>.

The majority of the interviewees (seventeen) worked in various parts of London but some of these practitioners (two) also worked in Essex and the surrounding unitary authorities. One interviewee worked in Wales and a further interviewee had previously worked as a social worker in the North of England. One interviewee worked in the South of England. The practice assessors between them worked HEIs in and around London, Wales, North and South of England - a total of ten HEIs. This ensures the scope of the research goes beyond issues that may be pertinent to only one HEI.

### **How Participants Were Sought <sup>49</sup>**

During the first phase of the research, which began September 2005, research participants were sought from a cohort of PTA candidates, embarking on their programme at an HEI in London. I went into the class and provided details of the proposed research. I also invited questions from the group about any aspect of the research. Anyone then interested in participating in the research was invited to contact me directly, via the phone or email after they had had time to consider the proposal. Approximately twelve (out of twenty-five) members of the group expressed an initial interest.

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<sup>47</sup> Most of the white practice assessors described themselves as White British, the remaining identified themselves, Welsh (2), Irish, (2) and American (1).

<sup>48</sup> The BME practice assessors described themselves as African (2), African-Caribbean (2) and Asian (1).

<sup>49</sup> Issues of consent will be discussed in the ethics section below.

After further discussions with those interested I was left with a group of six research participants, although in the end interviewed four of this group as one candidate withdrew early from the programme and another candidate, who had failed a student, eventually withdrew from the practice teaching award course and the research due to difficult personal circumstances. I was disappointed about this as some of the issues raised, namely ethnicity and disability, would have been very pertinent to the research. I was mindful that she had the right to withdraw from the research and I was also aware that she had done so very reluctantly.

Because of losing two potential research candidates I decided to consider two practice teaching award candidates I was currently mentoring. I had originally discounted approaching these two candidates as the work had already commenced. This involved some careful consideration of the ethical issues, not least power dynamics; for example, they may have felt obliged to take part due to my position as their mentor.

The remaining twelve research participants recruited for the second phase of the research were sought from September 2006 onwards and I used purposive sampling. I approached practice assessors who I knew had worked with social work students where there had been difficulties or had failed students. I also used my own contacts and friends in social work to find other participants. I approached the practice assessors mostly through email, as I felt this would enable me to provide details of the research and give practice assessors time to consider whether they wanted to participate. For those assessors I telephoned, I advised them not to make a decision at that point but to think about it first, although all the practice assessors agreed immediately. I was relieved to hear that several practice assessors said they were pleased to be able to discuss the experience.

### **Ethical Issues**

Consideration of ethical issues is a vital part of any research activity and this is because research ultimately involves collecting data from people and is about

people (Punch, 2005). Cohen et al (2000) caution the need for balance between an institutional need for the pursuit of knowledge and the research participants' rights. Flick, (2002) argues that ethical considerations concern three areas, how to protect the trust and interests of the people researched, data protection and of how researchers deal with their own aims. I would argue that ethical considerations are perhaps more complex, with the areas often overlapping.

Ethical considerations in the literature often seem to take the form of lists of "do's and don'ts". For example, Robson (2000) produces a list of what he terms "10 questionable practices in social research" (2002:69), including "involving people without their knowledge or consent", "exposing participants to physical or mental stress" and "not treating participants fairly, or with consideration, or with respect" (ibid). Similarly, David and Sutton (2004) advise for the need to implement:

- Informed consent
- To maintain anonymity of research participants
- Confidentiality
- Participants rights to withdraw from research
- Sensitivity
- Adherence to appropriate ethical codes of research conduct.

In some ways these texts presents ethical issues in a rather simplistic way and in contrast to these rather prescriptive lists, some authors refer to ethics with very little discussion of what ethical research practice entails or should entail in social research (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Kelly, 1998; Clough and Nutbrown, 2002). Consideration of ethical issues in any research seems a complex area, not least in the socially constructed nature of what can be considered ethical research practice.

David and Sutton (2004) for example, argue that different methodological traditions raise different ethical considerations. They raise the question of how

far "...values inevitably undermine factual research or should our choice of research reflect our moral concerns?" (2004:17) It is clear that "in the realm of social research, such an assumption that what we wish to study is devoid of ethical content is untenable" (2004:17). David and Sutton (2004) also raise important distinctions between a consequentialist ethical position and a deontological ethical position. The former might suggest that the outcome of research is the more important consideration than how far individuals are fully aware of the research process and intended outcomes. The good created by the research outweighs individuals needs, concerns and rights. This approach would apply to both positivistic research traditions, such as double blind medical trials and qualitative approaches, that employ covert participant observation. A deontological ethical standpoint however, implies that the rights of individual research participants are the prior consideration and as such the benefit of the many does not come before individual rights.

In some ways this dichotomous position is perhaps rather overstated and consideration of both groups, the individual participants and the possible benefits of the outcomes of the research to a particular group of people seem to me to be of equal importance. Indeed, Butler (2002) and Shaw (2003) both raise the issue of the importance of the outcomes of research. Shaw (2003) argues strongly that social work research intended outcomes should:

- "1) contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practice and services:
- 2) enhance social work's moral purpose;
- 3) strengthen social work's disciplinary character and location;
- 4) promote social work inquiry marked by vigour, range, variety, depth and progression."

(2003:114)

Lyons (2001) goes beyond this dynamic relationship between social work research and its outcomes and argues that social work research should also aim at strengthening the relationship between education and practice, i.e. any

social work research should aim at not only benefiting practice but also influence social work education itself.

In my research, I needed to consider the rights of those participating, meeting a number of institutional and professional ethical guidelines and codes as well as consideration of the potential positive benefits of the research – to social work practice in general and in terms of influencing social work education. What is clear is that one needs to go beyond adherence to lists of good research practice. This is not to criticise various ethical codes, as they form an important framework that ensures consideration of ethical issues inherent in undertaking research. A number of social work writers have raised a warning against the uncritical adoption of ethical research codes (Lyons, 2000; Shaw and Gould, 2001c; Butler, 2002; Shaw, 2003). Butler (2002), for example, cautions us to remember that ethical codes, because of their “inherent normative or prescriptive tendency[ies]” (2002:240) need to be “contextualised and situated” (ibid). As such, any ethical code will always be subject to revision and “not for always and everywhere” (ibid). Similarly Shaw (2003) argues that ethical codes of conduct, used indiscriminately, can serve to become a;

“...medicalization of decisions about ethics, which in turn can render research less sensitive to the particular challenges of social work research.”

(2003:113)

My research has been guided by The University of Sussex ethical guidelines for research practice, The British Association of Social Workers’ (BASW) code of ethics for undertaking research and a range of relevant considerations found within the methodological research literature. The Sussex Institute at the University of Sussex has produced a number of standards that need to be considered in any research endeavour. The key standards are as follows:

- Safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research;



- Ensure legislative requirements on human rights and data protection have been met.
- Establish informed consent even where this is difficult;
- Develop the highest possible standards of research practices, in research design, data collection, storage, analysis, interpretation and reporting;
- Consider the consequences of the work or its misuse for those involved in the study and other interested parties;
- Ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant.

These standards are then broken down further into guidelines and a checklist has been produced in the form of a tick box<sup>50</sup>. BASW has also devised a code of ethical conduct for the undertaking of research by social workers. These codes<sup>51</sup> of ethical conduct are quite considerable and in brief require social work researchers to:

1. Be aware of ethical issues inherent in any research process and to take moral and practical responsibility for their work.
2. Be congruent with social work values.
3. Be competent in carrying out research.
4. Produce research that has integrity
5. Ensure respect for confidentiality is maintained and is in accordance with law.

BASW (2006)

Ethical approval was therefore gained from the University of Sussex by completion of the checklist and discussions with my supervisors. These discussions were not a one-off process however, but continued through out the research process. Ethical approval was also gained from my own employers, with the stipulation that respondents remain anonymous and that my employers receive appropriate credit for part-funding my fees. It is interesting to note that

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<sup>50</sup> See appendices for completed checklist

<sup>51</sup> See appendices for BASW ethical code for research conduct

procedures at my own college have developed considerably since I began my doctoral study and there now exists a research and ethics committee for both staff and students undertaking research. I will now go on to consider some of these ethical codes and guidelines in more depth.

### **Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

In relation to the University of Sussex standards one and three, informed consent was sought from all the interviewees. This was maintained by providing as much information about the research as possible in a variety of media, for example through providing information in a classroom setting, email, telephone and through the use of information sheets<sup>52</sup>. I was also mindful about issues of confidentiality and anonymity and ensured all the participants' identities; places of work and the students they discussed remained confidential. In this thesis I have used pseudonyms and have also considered what type of pseudonyms I use; they are all of Western origin<sup>53</sup>. The interviews all took place in private, either at the college, over the telephone or conducted at the interviewees' workplace. The tapes were subsequently stored in a locked cabinet. I also informed the participants in advance of the interview that people other than myself might transcribe the tapes.

I devised a consent form, however on reflection I felt unhappy with this and so produced a revised version<sup>54</sup> to include issues of future dissemination beyond the doctoral thesis, confidentiality of participants workplaces, data protection, and managing my numerous roles. I also added a section on the participants' rights to withdraw from the research.

### **Verification of Data**

In the process of writing a previous research update in September 2006, I reflected on why I was hostile to the idea of research participants having access

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<sup>52</sup> Copy in Appendices

<sup>53</sup> This is to ensure BME practice assessors with distinct names cannot be identified.

<sup>54</sup> Revised consent form in Appendices

to the transcripts with the associated right of being able to make changes. It was a concern as University of Sussex guidelines raise this issue in terms of ensuring verifying procedures for data, from the perspective of respondents, are in place. The question is raised as to how far this makes any research that does not do this unethical? My initial view was that given the interviews were not transcribed until 2008, the time elapsed may make such a process difficult; Would practice assessors be able to remember what was said in the interview to be able to state that the transcription was accurate or inaccurate? However on reflection, this is not an adequate justification and practice assessors should have been given an opportunity to look at their transcript, not least in that if they did not like it, they would have the right to withdraw from the research. The issue of the verification of data is an interesting one in the context of qualitative research however; I spent some time making my transcriptions an accurate account of the taped interviews as possible. What might also be a more relevant issue to participants is how the data was analysed, interpreted and disseminated.

### **Avoiding Harm**

Other ethical issues concern ensuring the well-being of research participants and being sensitive to the fact that when discussing difficult placement experiences it may well raise uncomfortable and/or negative feelings for interviewees (Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Taber, 2007). Indeed, avoiding harm should be considered a central feature of ethical research practice. To ensure I respected this, after the interviews I sent several emails to the interviewees thanking them for their time and suggesting they come back to me if any issue had arisen for them. I also sent research updates via email.

### **Final Thoughts – Ethical Issues**

Overall whilst ethical research conduct is viewed as imperative, what is ethical is highly socially constructed and one needs to go beyond a checklist to critically consider what it means in the context of one's own research. My research proposal did pose ethical issues that could not be addressed by tick

box approaches. It is clear that I did not consider some areas adequately or in a timely fashion, namely the inadequacy of the initial consent form. I also feel on reflection, that I made an omission by not giving the research respondents the opportunity to view their transcript. I feel that overall I have attempted to keep the ethical issues inherent in the research design in mind and recognise that it may be impossible to foresee all possible ethical dilemmas that may arise – having strategies to deal with them when they arise is essential, i.e. the use of critical friends and supervisors. Most importantly I believe I struck a reasonable balance between meeting the needs and rights of the research participants with the demands of producing new research.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the issue of what is methodology. Methodology concerns wider philosophical issues, taking account of differences in epistemological, ontological and axiological understandings of the world. Methodological discussion also aims at justifying what particular methods have been chosen.

The research has been undertaken within a qualitative framework that draws on the spoken word to capture rich data. The research was influenced by a number of qualitative approaches including, ethnography, narrative and life story approaches and practitioner-research paradigms. The initial aim of utilising ethnographic methodologies, gradually eroded away by changes in the design of the research and so by the end of the research process it was clear that although I did not use ethnographic approaches in practice, I tried to implement something of the spirit of such approaches.

The research instrument employed was an in-depth semi-structured interview. The data were analysed using the VCR method. The ethical issues involved in research processes have been fully explored, not least in how such ethical frameworks impacted on my research. I also reflected on areas that I did not adequately consider at the time. The next chapter documents the findings.

## Chapter 4 – The Findings

### Introduction

This chapter details the stories that emerged from the empirical work undertaken. Various theoretical frameworks will be used to contextualise and make sense of the stories; i.e. psychodynamic perspectives as well other psychological theories. The application of the theories yielded an important insight into the existing research in the field, namely that it seemed grounded in technical-rationalist-behavioural models of practice and there was little research from a social work perspective about the impact of the self, relationships and emotions in practice education. I will begin with an account of the theoretical frameworks.

### Theoretical Frameworks

During the doctoral journey I struggled with the requirement to theorise one's findings, in terms of what that actually meant. It only became clear when a visual image appeared in my head<sup>55</sup> of research data as a pile of books, and theoretical frameworks as a shovel, to scoop up and frame these words into something meaningful. It is clear that the employment of theoretical frameworks helps move the discussion from being descriptive to analytical. It would seem imperative that this process occurs in qualitative research methodologies that have theory building as one of their key aims. I have mostly drawn on psychodynamic understandings of human behaviour in an attempt to understand the intense emotions felt by practice assessors when confronted with a failing student. I will now provide a brief overview of psychodynamic theory before proceeding onto the findings.

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<sup>55</sup> I presented my work in progress to EdD/DSW students at the University of Sussex on 21/11/08, using a PowerPoint with an image of a shovel holding animated books, with the various theoretical frameworks employed, named around the spade. See appendix for image

## **Psychodynamic Theory**

It is very difficult to provide a summary of psychodynamic theory given so much has been written on the perspective, as well as much written from the various schools of psychodynamic thought. What follows therefore is a very brief overview of the main tenets of psychodynamic theory. Psychodynamic thinking originates from the work of Sigmund Freud although the ideas have been developed over the years. At the heart of this perspective is the importance of the unconscious in human functioning and behaviour as well as the emphasis on early childhood experiences in shaping our behaviour in later life (Brearly, 1991; Bower, 2005a). A helpful definition of what constitutes a psychodynamic approach in social work is that it focuses on relationships between “self and significant people, past and present experience, inner and outer reality” (Brearly, 1991:49/50).

Brearly (1991) argues that there should be “special emphasis [placed] on the processes of these relationships and interactions” (1991:50). A psychodynamic approach may aim at encouraging people to reflect on and engage with their thought processes and feelings (Hunt and West, 2006). The drawbacks to using such theories is that they are complex and appear to have fallen out of favour in social work practice (Bower, 2005a). Additionally, concerns have been raised that such models are potentially oppressive and pathologising, (Cosis-Brown, 1998; Payne, 2005) in that they are sexist, homophobic and that they individualise problems. Further, they do not take account the environmental or structural factors in human functioning. Another criticism is that they lack measurable outcomes (Cosis-Brown, 1998).

On the other hand, psychodynamic approaches to understanding teaching and learning relationships are potentially insightful and, at their starting point, make the connection between our early childhood experiences with our primary attachment figure and our early experiences in educational settings with how we, as adults, behave and respond in learning and teaching situations (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al, 1983; Coren, 1997; Youell, 2006; Hunt and West, 2006). It is also argued, that psychodynamic frameworks may be a good fit with qualitative research methodologies (Briggs, 2005; Hunt and West, 2006). They

are also useful in explaining internal worlds and so, in the context of this doctorate, of relevance in analysing the stories that emerged from the research process. Particular psychodynamic ideas and concepts will be further discussed later on in this chapter in the context of some of the stories that emerged.

### **The Stories**

I have chosen to use the term “stories” to describe the themes that emerged across the interviews. This is an attempt to ensure the methodological considerations that guided the research design and data analysis continue into the findings section. Given the influence of narrative research methodology as well as the method of data analysis, VCR, it seemed logical to term the themes stories. A story in this context means more than one person’s individual story but the types of stories that emerged, hence the stories have been given names or typified with an adjective, for example, The Angry Story. This process has been termed a “collective story” (Finlayson, 2009:980). The question raised therefore, is, is there a substantive methodological difference between the term theme and story although as Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2009) argue, “stories are the closest we can come to [a] shared experience” (2009:462). In their view, stories are created and recreated in their telling, interpretation and re-telling and so the relationship between story telling and story making becomes complex. I had anticipated that *the* story would be about the failing student or the difficulties on placement but this was one story amongst others. I will begin with The Angry Story.

### **The Angry Story**

The experience of assessing a failing student caused a number of practice assessors to experience anger. This anger was directed towards the students and the HEI, as well as towards themselves. The practice assessors suppressed the anger at the time they worked with the student. What was surprising was how the re-telling of the story brought back these intense feelings of anger as well as other emotions that will be discussed later. The

anger is revealed in the tone of voice and the amount of talk increases significantly. The language changes and becomes less professional, in that there are more personal and pathologising comments about the student; there is less critical analysis of the situation.

Lily, for example, when discussing one failing student, was appropriately professional in her tone and language. She was able to offer an account of the issues in a professional way, with a lack of emotion in the recounting of the story, as well as offering insights into the situation. This contrasts with her account of another student whereby a professional discourse is noticeably absent from the story. The tone is angry and hostile:

“..she was absolutely terrible, she was appalling, she was abysmal and no way should she ever be near clients....there were a million difficulties with her...she was incredibly arrogant and rude...she was also very aggressive...she managed to put the fear of God into me...”

Claire expressed anger when recounting the story about one of the students she had failed and acknowledged that:

“...I was really pissed off with him...I felt angry.”

Later on in the interview, she states that of the three students she failed:

“...the guy I did, the guy out of all of them, I felt angry, which I'd never do again.”.

Jenny states explicitly that she felt angry, she says:

“I got angry with him [the student] sometimes. I wasn't angry at him, I was angry at home. I would be smouldering, pissed off, felt like I was working harder than him in his practice placement...”

Jenny comes back to this issue again, she states:

“I was just very angry at times...the student, I was angry with the student, I am just being really honest. I was angry with the student”.



The question is raised about why Jenny is so angry. Her analysis is that the anger arises in relation to her feelings of resentment that she has to work harder than the student. She perceives the student as not taking responsibility for his learning. She is however, able to reflect on and acknowledge the parent-like role she has assumed, and the child like role the student has assumed but then she equates the child like role with being needy and lazy.

Jenny explicitly describes the roles that she and the student have assumed. This has resonance with transactional analysis (TA), which borrows concepts from both psychodynamic approaches and cognitive behavioural approaches. One of the main tenets of TA is that the human personality is made up of three ego states, each of which is a complex mass of thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Clarkson, 1992). These three ego states are known as Parent, Adult and Child and the interactions between the ego states is the basis of TA analysis (ITAA, date unknown). A dynamic has occurred whereby Jenny has adopted a parent ego state in her interaction with the student who has adopted a childlike ego state. This state of affairs also has resonance with theories of learned helplessness that will be explored later in this chapter. Jenny becomes aware of these dynamics and attempts to develop adult-to-adult interactions but recognised that they “slipped back” into these roles. An alternative explanation is that of transference, i.e. the student is transferring his negative feelings onto Jenny.

Returning to the angry story, Daisy expresses her story of failing her first student in a very angry and dramatic way. The story is recounted in minute detail and my input into the interview was limited. Daisy was livid with the student and all pretence of professional discourse vanishes early on in the interview, to the extent that at one point she recounts how the student claimed her inappropriate behaviour was due to menstruating:

“...I just thought, I am going to be harsh now Jo – I thought, ‘Fuck you’! You are not going to apologise for your fucking behaviour with a period. Every fucking woman in the world gets a period, yes some have difficulties, some get emotional, your deafness didn’t wash, so now you’ve resorted to like fucking bottom of the barrel...”

Later on Daisy still appears angry, she states that the student shouted at her early on in the placement as well as in a meeting attended by her tutor and assessor<sup>56</sup>. She states:

“And I did actually think the next time you shout at me, I might just actually shout back at you because who the fuck do you think you are?...”

She later fantasises about telling the student to “fuck off” and imagines a service user assaulting the student. This story was notable in that the student was failed after just seven days in practice. Daisy acknowledges wryly that; “...apparently it’s a bit of a record...”.

The question is what purpose or function does the anger serve? More importantly, how does this rage impact on the assessment process? Daisy’s anger seemed intricately bound up with her feelings of guilt, inadequacy and incompetence (this was her first student). This also seemed to be the case for Lily, whose anger at one particular student, appeared to centre around her own feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence and being “out of my depth” in dealing with the complicated dynamics that emerged between herself and the student. Another explanation of the anger felt by some practice assessors is the conflictual roles inherent in the practice assessor role, i.e. that of supporter/enabler versus assessor<sup>57</sup>. It may also be that the anger related to practice assessors not feeling respected or valued by the students. Jenny stated that she did not feel respected by the student. Jenny felt there were gender and age issues that impacted on the relationship with the student. She felt the male student had difficulty being assessed by a younger, female worker. She felt “disappointed” with his performance and felt that the student often rejected her suggestions<sup>58</sup>. Claire too, felt that a male student she had failed had shown a lack of respect towards her, as well as women in general; and she also perceived him as undermining of her authority.

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<sup>56</sup> At HCFHE, if additional meetings are called because of difficulties or concerns in the placement, this is known as a “disruption meeting”. The Practice assessor, student and tutor, as well as the Practice Learning Coordinator, attend this.

<sup>57</sup> This was explored in the CAS, chapter 2 of this thesis and will be explored later in this chapter.

<sup>58</sup> As a mentor to Jenny, I witnessed this occurrence in an observed supervision session and felt frustrated on behalf of Jenny.

It seems that the assessor may fear the intensity of anger felt. Anger in psychodynamic terms is often seen as a defence mechanism, which shields the person from pain (Bower, 2006), perhaps the pain of not being able to save the student. This has resonance with a concept found with TA, namely the drama triangle (Pitman, 1984, Clarkson, 1992). Associated with particular ego states, people will often take the roles of victim, persecutor or rescuer in interactions or will play games (Karpman 1968; Karpman, 1971). Jenny is both rescuer and persecutor.

Interestingly, most practice assessors talked about the HEI. The talk often suggested feelings of anger and hostility towards the HEI. The HEI was talked about as a faceless institution, and less rarely was the individual tutor discussed. The relationship between the practice assessor and HEI appeared negative and there was a sense of us and them as well as feelings of powerlessness and oppression. This has resonance with psychodynamic theories of parallel processes or mirroring. Mirroring and parallel processes are when a supervisee might unconsciously act out the issues, emotions and difficulties in their relationship with a service user in their relationship with the supervisor (Ganzer and Ornstein, 1999). The practice assessors appear to be mirroring, in their relationship with the HEI, the student's likely feelings of powerlessness and oppression in their relationship. The practice assessor becomes the persecuted and the HEI may be seen as rescuing the student.

Lily felt this sense of powerlessness and oppression in relation to the HEI she worked with. She felt the HEI "made it extremely difficult to fail a student". She felt this was due to the university wishing to preserve its "red brick" status in that failing students would somehow reflect negatively on the HEI. Lily was not able to offer evidence that the HEI somehow discouraged failure but she felt this keenly. Susan, who as a freelance practice assessor had worked with a number of HEIs, commented on this "surreptitious" discouragement of failure. Susan felt that she often "got messages" from tutors about their attitudes towards student failure. She claimed that some tutors were more supportive, encouraging and open to the possibility of a student failing than others. She sometimes felt that tutors did not always hear her concerns, with the emphasis

then being on what “we” can do to get the student to pass. The tutor’s role was an area that was explored in Finch (2004b) and seems an important area for further consideration, as the feeling of not being heard by the tutor when the practice assessors express concern causes anger. This is revealed in other accounts. Katie for example says:

“So I went and had a meeting at the university after things had broken down to discuss it, they did not, they were only interested in what he [the student] had to say. And in fact when they sent a report, I wasn’t prepared to sign the report they had sent because it didn’t stress or recalled any of the concerns I had raised.”

In response to my asking whether the university had listened to her concerns, Katie says, “...no, the university didn’t want to hear at all.” Katie speaks later of feeling “intimidated by the university” and again the theme of the perceived power differentials arose, which was felt by some practice assessors as oppressive. Martha felt the tutor was not taking her concerns seriously and felt he had formed a favourable and positive opinion of the student and could not move from this position. She states:

“...we had such different, such difference of opinion that I really questioned my own judgment because I thought actually, this is somebody who has, you know, twenty years experience of teaching, he’s seen lots of students and I seem to be the only one who think there’s a problem, he doesn’t seem to think there is a problem with this student, he seems to think she is quite capable, intelligent and able to pass so I really questioned myself”.

She later returns to this theme:

“I must admit, I really felt the college did not want to fail this person”.

Other narratives of feeling personally and professionally attacked with no right of reply and of not being trusted by the HEI also emerged as well as feelings of being negatively judged. Lily, in relation to one student whom she had passed but on reflection should have failed, cited the influence of the HEI in her decision making process. Lily spoke of this almost irrational fear of “being negatively judged by my colleagues” and of not “being well thought of” if her fail

recommendation was not upheld. This account was interesting in that Lily was a very experienced practice assessor of both social work and nursing students and was often sent the difficult or challenging students. There is a mismatch between her own sense of her abilities and how the HEI viewed her.

Anger emerged in relation to the aftermath of the assessment board, usually when the HEI did not uphold the fail recommendation made by the practice assessor. This caused practice assessors to feel de-valued, undermined, not trusted and resulted in a sense of unfinished business. Thomas felt the criteria for a fail were set so high, i.e. “damaging and dangerous practice”, that he felt it was impossible for any fail to be upheld. Thomas struggled to accept the HEI recommendation, had further correspondence with them and expressed the view that he felt undermined. In his view “the evidence was absolutely crystal clear.” Other practice assessors also experienced their decisions not being upheld; Claire and Susan had their decisions to fail the student overturned by the HEI with quite serious consequences, namely that they both decided not to work with those HEIs again and Claire’s agency lodged a formal complaint. This would seem quite concerning, given the high turnover of practice assessors both in the UK and internationally (Bogo and Power, 1992). In all these stories, the practice assessors voiced their concerns about what they perceived as the universities’ own fears in failing certain types of students, e.g. Thomas’s student had a physical disability and Claire’s and Susan’s students were black<sup>59</sup>.

It is clear that the emergence of the anger story raises more hypotheses than actual answers; nonetheless, explicitly naming the story, and acknowledging the anger experienced, would seem helpful for assessors, as well as tutors and students, to help understand the intense dynamics and feelings that result. Anger however, obscures the assessment process and seems to be a reason why practice assessors do not fail students. The discussion of further stories may also offer alternative explanations for the intense anger felt and so another story to emerge is what I have termed, the Dramatic Event Story.

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<sup>59</sup> The issues of the impact of disability and ethnicity of the assessment process will be explored later on in the chapter

## **The Dramatic Event Story**

Some stories about the failing student or the difficulties on placement were incredibly dramatic. There was an immediate crisis or an event that meant the concerns, some more explicitly acknowledged than others, could no longer be ignored. For example, Peter returned from annual leave to find that clear instructions he had left for the student, in regard to visiting a service user recently discharged from hospital and identified as being at risk, had not been followed:

*“...I developed a fairly good relationship with him [the service user] and I knew he would not cope when discharged from hospital so I stressed to the student and I put all the medical notes and our files notes, for when he’s discharged he should be followed up the following day, a home visit, just go and see him....When I came back after a week, my manager called me urgently and said that, basically this man was discharged on Monday, she told my student to make sure she visited him as I noted and she hadn’t done.”*

The manager then made a decision to terminate the placement given the seriousness of the situation. Peter’s emotional response to this event was one of “disappointment” in the student and concern for the service user; he states:

*“...and as we suspected, he [the service user] hadn’t been able to get out of his chair for three days...he hasn’t eaten anything, he was in a complete mess”.*

The Dramatic Event Story was experienced by other practice assessors and these events whilst clearly dramatic, had not come completely out of the blue – i.e. there were some acknowledgment that issues of concern had been identified. Claire commented on an incident whereby she discovered the student had lied about visiting a service user. Claire felt that this incident was clear, irrefutable proof of the student’s dishonesty and unsuitability for social work practice in conjunction with the existing issues and concerns. The dramatic event story is found in further accounts, Thomas, coming back from annual leave, found that the person supervising in his absence:

“...was ready to hand in their notice in the minute I walked in the door. She was absolutely besides herself with stress about the whole process and I had her and our receptionist both individually come in to me telling me how he’s [the student] behaved with them and what his attitude has been like...”

These incidents resulted in a meeting between the student, practice assessor and tutor that resulted in termination of the placement. Thomas felt that the situation could not be resolved because the student took no responsibility for his behaviour, instead blaming the agency and Thomas. A psychodynamic explanation of this behaviour may be that the student felt such intense guilt and shame at the concerns raised that he has to avoid the concerns by blaming others. Another example of the dramatic event story concerned Louise who, when discussing her concerns about the student’s performance in a supervision session, namely that the student had failed to follow an instruction to visit a vulnerable service user, states:

“...what I was going to do was to ask for her placement to be extended a bit but when I tried to discuss this with her, she threw an hysterical fit...which I sorted with the ambulance being called. A huge great scenario and actually if it had been one of my clients I would have recommended a psychiatric assessment...she was hyperventilating and throwing herself on the floor. Actually she was kicking the metal locker so much that people were coming in to see what was happening.”

This event resulted in the placement being terminated and termination of training procedures being enacted. The dramatic event serves a useful purpose in that it can provide clear evidence that there may be a need to terminate the placement. The issue that emerges from the HEI’s perspective is whether the dramatic event alone is enough evidence to end the placement and support a fail recommendation. I too have experienced the dramatic event in my role as practice mentor. After a direct observation of the PTA candidate’s supervision, the student social worker disclosed that more than two thirds through the placement, a contract had not been devised and she had not had any supervision, other than the one I had just observed. The dramatic event served a very useful function in that it forced me into action as I could no longer ignore

my existing concerns, and it meant the issues had to be shared with the HEI and the employer.

There is a drawback to the dramatic event in terms of when it happens. For Peter, he felt that the incident or the dramatic event was not perceived by the HEI as dramatic enough and had come too early in the placement. Peter felt that the HEI's position was that the event did not necessitate termination of the placement and that a decision could have been made to continue with more time being given to the student to address the concerns. In some ways, Peter perceived the student as being given "the benefit of the doubt" by the HEI although he recognised deficiencies in his own report writing that may have also contributed to the sense of the student being given "another chance".

Herein lies a paradox that emerges when practice assessors are confronted with a weak, borderline, problematic, or concerning student who experiences a dramatic event, that of the need for the practice assessor to demonstrate they have given students the appropriate learning opportunities versus the need to protect service users from poor practice. The lead up to the dramatic event is also important and it may be also useful to consider who initiates the event and who perceives it as dramatic or not. Does the dramatic event arise because the student is looking for an exit from the agency? Or, perhaps concerns not being addressed appropriately then lead to the dramatic event. The question remains as to the impact of the dramatic event on the assessment of the student. Hinshelwood (1994), in his historical and clinical account of the works of Melanie Klein, argues that there can be an acting out process in a therapeutic relationship and so when a patient is confronted with the source of their pain, they may act in aggressive and impulsive ways, what Klein would term a manic defence (Klein, 1931). This dramatic event may be an embodiment of a manic defence in the student. This gives an opportunity for the assessor to admonish the naughty child, usually by termination of the placement, they have a just cause to be the angry parent and the anger becomes legitimised.



## **The Idealised Learner Story**

Practice assessors expressed stories about their expectations of a learner and so I called this, The Idealised Learner Story. I wondered whether there was a link between these rather implicit assumptions and expectations of what constitutes a good learner with how well the practice assessor then manages a student who does not live up to these expectations. This raises a number of interesting questions, for example, how does the gap between expectations and reality impact on the assessment process? How does this gap impact on the feelings experienced by both student and practice assessor? A possible hypothesis is that it might result in the practice assessor becoming disappointed with the student, over compensates and spends time trying to force the student to become this idealised learner or match their initial fantasies of the student which then detracts from the actualities of the assessment of the students competence. In TA terms, the practice assessor becomes the rescuer that will not allow the student to take responsibility for his or her own learning and possibly encourages further passivity and learned helplessness.

A common theme to emerge from the narratives concerned the distinction between a passive learner and a more assertive learner. The passive learners were viewed in a negative way and seemed to be a warning or an early sign that the student may subsequently have difficulties. Thomas explained:

“I felt that early on there was problems in terms of his ability to communicate what he feels and what he wants. That was a difficulty. He wasn’t clear. He wasn’t taking the reins of this placement and saying, right, this is the kind of work I want to achieve, these are the kind of areas I want to work in.”

Peter was concerned about the presentation of the student in the initial interview. He had clear expectations about how a student should present in terms of attitude to the placement. Peter felt that the student presented with little in the way of commitment, interest or enthusiasm and this continued into the placement. Jennifer expressed in her account, assumptions about how learners should behave, by comparing the student’s approach to learning with her own as a social work student:

“...the students on my course were much prepared and much passionate. I can’t articulate it. We were very, all the people that I was with were very passionate. When we wasn’t on placement or, at college in the day time, we’d be on the phone all night about social work. It was like the core of our beings. We were almost obsessed, obsessed about doing work, brilliant work with service users...I don’t feel that level of passion...with my student I never felt that passion, that motivation.”

For Jennifer, the student’s approach to learning is instrumental; the student in her view, is concerned about only meeting the requirements, nothing more, and she begins to doubt his motivations for entering social work. A dynamic emerges whereby she takes a hostile parent role and the student reverts to a dependent childlike role. Jennifer is able to acknowledge these dynamics and feels angry and resentful when these dynamics emerge again in the second half of the placement. Jennifer feels she is taking “total responsibility” for the student’s learning with the result that both she and the student feel overwhelmed. This impedes the students’ learning further and causes more resentment and anger in Jennifer.

Salzberger-Wittenberg et al (1983) offer a useful account of passive learners within a psychodynamic framework. They argue that learning situations can invoke unconscious pre-natal and infancy like needs that require instant gratification. A passive attitude in a learning situation can result in a student expecting the teacher to “feed them information” (1983:27) and that by being passive the student is perceived as good, attentive and obedient. Salzberger-Wittenberg et al (1983) argue that most of us have these infantile wishes to some extent but this can create a difficult learning relationship when the “spoon feeding” (ibid) a student expects does not materialise or is withdrawn at some point during the process; the student then becomes angry with the teacher. In the passive learner, responsibility is handed over to the teacher.

This notion of the passive learner also has resonance with theories of learned helplessness. This theory proposes that learning that one’s actions have no influence on outcomes produces learned helplessness (Walker et al, 2004). Learned helplessness impacts on a person’s ability to master a situation by

undermining their cognitive and motivational functioning (Smith and Mackie, 2000). Events that are considered a threat thus promote a learned helplessness response or indeed a passive response. This also has resonance with the concept of internalised oppression (Burke & Harrison, 1998).

The differences between the students' approach to learning and attitude towards the placement and the practice assessors' attitudes and expectations about the learning process are apparent in other accounts. Tracy spoke of her behaviour as a student whereby she "endeavoured to...find out things myself". Tracy discussed her expectations of the student:

"I was thinking that...I am going to have a student that will take responsibility. I was expecting, you know...think I expected too much".

Tracy then discusses the fantasy she had of the student after reading the initial paperwork, she states:

"....that was my fantasy that I was going to have somebody that would just, you know, kind of gel and adapt to the team...and another big expectation...that she's coming with a variety of knowledge...up to date"

Tracy had also spent time, "convincing" the team that a student would be "marvellous" as there was resistance to taking on a student when the team were currently under strain. Tracy's expectation was that the student would be knowledgeable, flexible, adaptable, have a good understanding of social work values, would be self-directed, enthusiastic, would be able to "fit into the team" and make positive relationships. Tracy acknowledged that she had made assumptions that the student had those qualities at the initial interview stage. Tracy appeared to overcompensate throughout the placement in an attempt to make the student akin to her fantasy of her. Tracy acknowledges that she also got "caught up" in the student's dramas and anxieties; Tracy therefore rescued the student.

Claudette had expectations about the student's increasing independence as the placement progressed. Claudette found the student's anxiety and inability to make decisions without her approval difficult to manage. Terry, in a similar vein, had clear expectations about the skills, knowledge and attitudes a student should bring to the placement. Another expectation of students to emerge in the interviews was that they should respond appropriately to the issues raised. As discussed in the Angry Story, Thomas terminated the placement as he felt the student did not take responsibility for his actions and did not understand the concerns - instead, the student blamed him and the agency for the situation. There is the expectation of the good learner in how the student presents initially, the qualities they should bring to the placement, as well as how the good learner should respond to constructive criticism. Thomas's student fails on all accounts.

So what happens when expectations are not met or the fantasies we have of students are not realised? What happens when our rather unacknowledged expectations about the good learner are not realised? It would seem that some practice assessors over compensate and try to rescue the student. They appear to end up taking responsibility for the student's learning which encourages further dependency and passivity, and in some cases, passive aggression, on the part of the student

Another expectation of the good learner is that development is seen to occur over the course of the placement; that students respond positively to suggestions, feedback or constructive criticism. Terry acknowledges that students should be allowed to make mistakes as long as they learn from them. The reverse of the good learner therefore is the bad student and the behaviours, traits and characteristics of a failing student. The interviewees were asked to narrate the story about the student who experienced difficulties and were also asked to tell me what behaviours in a hypothetical student might result in a fail recommendation. This is a well used technique found in a range of research in social work and other disciplines<sup>60</sup> and whilst there is not space

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<sup>60</sup> I termed this the trait approach in the CAS. See CAS for research in this area.

in this thesis to explore failing traits in depth, it was interesting to note that there was a consensus about what behaviours or attitudes should result in a fail. There was a difference however, between those practice assessors who then recognised those behaviours in the student placed with them and managed them appropriately and those who perhaps inexplicitly acknowledged those behaviours in the student yet struggled to manage those issues. The result being that the student was given the benefit of the doubt even when it appeared the evidence would support a fail recommendation.

Terry for example, was clear that failing to meet deadlines, making the same mistakes and not having appropriate skills in reading, writing and speaking should result in a fail recommendation. Patricia too was clear about what behaviours should result in a fail but like Terry, was unable to fail the student who demonstrated those very behaviours. Patricia states:

“...I also think that whenever you’re assessing, judging, whatever, there must be a cut off point. There must be a point where they can’t do it again where they can’t, you know and that should be used. It always seems to me that it doesn’t matter how bad you are, if you are prepared to go on for long enough you will get there and there ought to be a point where they say, I’m sorry, you failed that. You cannot do it again. Fail should mean something. Well as it is....[name of student] will be referred, she will be able to do presumably another placement again. That’s not going to change her integrity.”

Despite making this statement, Patricia recommended giving the student another placement opportunity. Whilst Patricia laments that her evidence was “woolly” and so she cannot fail her outright, her above statement provides some evidence that her recommendation was not appropriate either as there is evidence to suggest that a further placement will not change the student. Similar contradictions are found in the accounts of Jennifer and Emily. Emily, like Patricia, recommends the student is given a further placement opportunity although from the account there seems strong evidence to support a fail. Emily struggles with the situation, she feels guilty, she likes the student, feels sorry for her and offers her high levels of support. The student in return accuses Emily of not assessing her fairly. Ultimately, knowing what behaviours, conduct, attitudes or practices *should* result in a fail recommendation doesn’t mean

practice assessors do it in practice and this thesis attempts to draw out those complex and contradictory reasoning processes.

Within these narrative of good learners and bad learners one can make connections with the theories of Melanie Klein and her concept of splitting (Klein, 1931). Klein argues that there are two main psychological positions which like much psychodynamic thought, are formed in infancy (Brearly, 1991; Hinshelwood, 1994). These two positions are termed by Klein as the depressive position and the paranoid-schizoid state of mind (Youell, 2006). In infancy, a baby associates feeling well fed and contented with the mothers care, the good breast and “splitting is employed by the infant to preserve the good mother who is loved from the absent or frustrated mother who is hated” (Youell, 2006:21) i.e. the bad breast. Over time the child is able to see that the mother can be both good and bad, the split comes together and the “the infant learns to tolerate the frustration of waiting and to bear ambivalent feelings” (Ibid). In the paranoid-schizoid position, splitting predominates in the person and according to Klein, this results in excessive envy and a lack of trust in the functioning of that person. Whilst I have experienced ambivalence about this particular theory, interestingly, in some accounts this splitting occurred in practice assessors’ stories of the students. So some students were labelled as bad and others as nice. The important point in the context of this discussion is to consider how these labels impact on the assessment process.

Lily for example, labels a student “nice” and “lovely” yet still fails her, although this was overturned by the HEI. She describes her in the following way:

“...she was lovely and she was really willing but she just wasn’t very bright and she just couldn’t do it...and she was not very literate...She was very mumsy and quite working class and she clearly well liked and the service uses responded really well to her and we all responded really well to her, again, I thought she was really lovely.”

This student it seemed played the right game, she responded to the concerns raised and appeared to acknowledge them, although could not make the

development necessary. She also appeared to be looking after the emotional needs of the team. This is in contrast to another student who is described in quite pathologising terms yet is passed. Lily does not have the strength to fail her and fears the student. Terry appears contradictory in his account, referring to the student as “nice” then stating she was a “nightmare”. I would argue that this serves a useful purpose, in that if the person we are failing is horrible and bad, perhaps this lessens the guilt, i.e. the student deserves to be punished. This clearly requires some further exploration and leads onto another story to emerge, the guilt story.

### **The Guilt Story**

The experience of assessing a student where there were concerns was emotionally fraught and difficult. A range of emotional responses was discussed and these included feelings of being out of one’s depth to feelings of guilt, stress and anxiety. Practice assessors reported having sleepless nights, feeling overwhelmed and being exhausted by the experience. Emily, for example, an experienced children and families social worker, described the experience of failing a student as “worse than removing somebody’s child.” This strong imagery of the awfulness of failing a student was echoed in the research carried out by Gizara and Forrest (2004) in the context of supervisors of counselling psychology students. They reported similar metaphors and imagery in the respondents, that the experience was “horrible...painful...very sad...a gut wrenching experience” (2004:136).

One of the common themes that emerged from the practice assessors’ stories concerned the experiencing of guilt and this has been found in the research discussed above, (Gizara and Forrest, 2004) as well as other research. Daisy acknowledged that she began to feel guilty in a supervision session when she had to address the issues that had so dramatically arisen in the first two weeks of placement. At a later meeting with the tutor, Daisy states:

“And also, I think when I heard her tutor say, and if its not going well we’ll move straight into a disruption meeting, that’s the time you need to say whether you’re

going to fail the student or defer her, refer her or whatever. And then the guilt really set in.”

She comments further:

“Oh my God! She’s been on this course a couple of years, the sacrifices she’s made, I’ve been there myself, this is her livelihood, her career and its all ,my fault...”

She returns again to the issue of guilt later on in the interview:

“...because at the time I made that decision, the guilt, it was unbearable...it was a reality check and I don’t know what’s going on with her but all I know is that everyone else in her year were out on their placements and she’s not but at the end of the day it was her livelihood, it could have been the end of her carer, oh my god, what about her children...I felt like I am a rotten shit...”

Other practice assessors also expressed feelings of guilt. Andrew expressed guilt in the sense that he was “ending somebody’s career” and “not feeling great about doing that”. Peter acknowledged that he felt responsible for “ending somebody’s dream”. Martha reported feeling “terribly guilty” and recognised that going on a programme of study and getting to the end stages was a “huge investment for this student”. Practice assessors were able to empathise with some of their student’s personal difficulties but knowing about students’ personal circumstances and difficulties increased the feelings of guilt when they began to acknowledge the possibility of the student failing.

The relationship between the practice assessor and the student did not appear to impact on the levels of guilt felt. For example Lily, when failing one student whom she had a positive relationship with, did not experience any more or less guilt than when failing a student with whom she had a negative relationship. Claire on the other hand, when failing a student with whom she had developed a “goodish relationship” expressed her guilt:

“...it was the first fail, I felt terribly guilty, I felt really...I had sleepless night, felt quite sick...I felt incredibly guilty”.



However, when she failed the male student who had caused her to feel angry:

“I think by the time I got to the second one, the guy, I didn’t feel at all guilty or any remorse whatsoever. I think he deserved it, because of the you know, I just thought and it sounds very judgmental but because of the behaviour that he displayed, it was clear...”

Most practice assessors when confronted with the possibility of failing a social work student felt some degree of guilt. Peter and Andrew for example, did not explicitly state they felt guilty but their comments revealed there was some degree of guilt. This raises the question about possible differences in practice amongst men and women assessors although I have not sufficiently explored this to be able to offer a definitive response at this point, nonetheless, there is interesting existing research in this area<sup>61</sup>.

How does the experiencing of guilt impact on the assessment process? For example, is it possible it might get in the way of addressing the concerning behaviours in the student at an earlier stage in the process? Martha for example, felt that her own feelings of guilt meant the placement continued far longer than it should have. Patricia expressed guilt in the sense that she had not managed the situation appropriately. The feelings of guilt perhaps explain the anger felt by some practice teachers and the dramatic event story then can, temporarily at least, diminish the feelings of guilt. The experiencing of guilt could also be ascribed to practice assessors not feeling comfortable with the cross parent role they might adopt when confronted with a student with difficulties. Gizara and Forest (2004) argue that the feeling of guilt can arise for a number of reasons, firstly because a relationship will have been established between an assessor and the student and secondly because the relationship will have been based on trust and the enabling role may have dominated initially. In other words, the movement from good parent to bad parent may result in this sense of guilt.

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<sup>61</sup> Some of this literature was explored in the CAS

It is also useful to consider what feeling guilty means, perhaps a sense that it is the assessor's fault; they are hurting somebody, they could have done more and indeed guilt seems to be at the basis of the other stories that emerge. Samac (1995) argues that feelings of guilt and shame may arise in the assessor because of the student's denial of the issues, denial in this psychoanalytic model being viewed as a defence mechanism, as a shield to the hurt and loss caused by the assessor. A further psychodynamic explanation is that the student may well feel envy towards the assessor with the result that the student will then transfer their feelings of guilt onto the assessor (Hinshelwood, 1994; Ganzer and Ornstein, 1999; Youell, 2006).

Linked to the notion of guilt are feelings of stress induced by the experience of being confronted with a potentially failing student and practice assessors often used the term stressful. The stress associated with the process of failing a student is well documented in the literature but the reasons for the stress are perhaps less well considered. On the converse a number of stories were remarkable in the lack of emotional content. This could be attributable to those practice assessors having a more sophisticated understanding of the assessment process and greater confidence in their assessor function without the need to resorting to parent-to-child modes of interaction. It also seemed that practice assessors who reported their story in a less emotional way also considered the possibility of failure at the outset and were able to articulate explicitly their gatekeeping function. Peter, for example, saw the process of the assessment of a social work student as a dynamic process between himself and the student. He states;

“...you know its meant to be a mature student I am dealing with, you know, we are entering into this arrangement, right, as adults, you know I had my part to play, the student has their part to play...I just kind of felt well, this is going to happen in practice placement but then, you know, as well, this is primarily your responsibility, its your responsibility at the beginning as well, to think about what you're getting into.”

This has clear resonance with TA, in that Peter tries to maintain adult-to-adult interactions in his dealings with students and, in doing so, it causes him less

emotional pain. He also seems to understand his gatekeeping role in an explicit way and he does not have unrealistic fantasies of the students before they arrive – he therefore does not internalise the student's failure as his own.

### **The Internalising Failure So I Couldn't Always Fail Them Story**

This story reminded me of the experience of waiting for a bus. When the bus does not arrive for some time, the investment you have made in waiting for the bus often means that instead of walking, you will continue to wait for the bus. Practice assessors appeared to internalise the student's failures as their own. Practice assessors questioned how far they were responsible for the student's shortcomings or difficulties and once the investment had been made in relation to the student, it was difficult to let go, Martha discussed her need to find some evidence that the student "was up to the job". Martha states:

"I actually felt that it was my failing because I wasn't getting it [evidence] out of her..."

Practice assessors questioned whether they could have done something different to help the student overcome their difficulties, whether they had given the student enough time or had just not managed the situation effectively. Patricia for example, when reflecting on her perceived own failings felt that she was "...not doing the job that I should be doing". She elaborates further:

"...I should have been more clearer all the way through that I have more concerns about her than I was...I felt that she would only come back and say well {name of practice assessor} never, I never know I was...and I would think that she would have some recourse to say that and so I felt I hadn't supervised her enough. I know that wasn't entirely my lookout but I hadn't done my job how it was meant to have been done".

An image emerged from some practice assessors' accounts of not being able to get a grip on the situation. This seemed to be the case with Patricia, who struggled to manage the student to the extent that she could not even keep a firm grip of the students' whereabouts. Some practice assessors were able to

acknowledge that the internalising of failure may be a factor why students are not failed as often as they should be, although they did not always recognise it in their own practice. Other practice assessors were very explicit that a student's failure was directly related to the practice assessor. Terry said:

"So I think for someone to fail, there has to be failure on both, most of the time, there was to be failure on both parts. I mean that puts a lot for responsibility on the practice teacher but you have to somehow justify that you have done as much as you can...I would say probably 90% of the time if the students fails, there's something wrong with the practice teacher".

He then later goes on to talk about this further in relation to his student. He says;

"That was the issue that I was struggling with through the whole thing. How much of her failure was a reflection on my own practice teaching...?"

He reassures himself that it wasn't and yet despite strong evidence that the student was clearly failing, passes the student. He cannot let go his theory of the connection between the student failing and the perception that it represents a practice assessing failure. In his defence to me states he has made the "right decision" and attempts to offer evidence that the decision is right, yet the evidence contained within his story suggests the student was failing and presented some risk to service users. Perhaps Terry needs to convince himself his practice assessing is satisfactory and the only way he can prove this is by passing the student.

Several practice assessors also acknowledged their own failings in the sense that they ignored their initial misgivings at the initial interview stage. Peter for example, when working with a student who was repeating her placement, had felt at the initial interview that the student had presented with an inappropriate attitude. He states:

"She [the student] didn't seem particularly bothered, or that bothered, you know, well I need to do this, Ok, you know, I had difficulties where I was before and it didn't seem too much acknowledgement of her part in those difficulties..."

Peter reflected on the “gut feeling” he had at the time, that this lack of enthusiasm, interest, motivation, and lack of acknowledgement about the difficulties in the previous placement as he saw it in the student, was a warning sign. Martha too, had “serious doubts” about whether the placement was right for the student. Martha felt at the initial interview that the questions she might have expected a student to ask, were not forthcoming and that:

“...there didn’t seem really to be any evidence that she seemed to be reflective about her needs really or indeed about her strengths and she couldn’t really identify them apart from I think she just said, she needed, her needs were she needed more experience of mental health assessment...that’s what she said she really needed but I didn’t get the sense that she was directly answering my questions”.

Martha goes on to comment:

“I remember thinking, I think this woman is going to struggle in this environment...she just didn’t seem to be thinking about what I was saying to her, she was too focused on trying to impress me by her enthusiasm”.

Martha then contacted the placement officer at the HEI to explain her concerns and seek advice. Martha felt she had no option but to accept the student despite great misgivings. Martha says:

“I said [to the placement officer] I am actually quite worried...and I think she’s [student] really going to struggle on this placement... and I was told that, basically this is the student I’d been allocated and that was the student I was going to have....I didn’t feel I wanted to take her [student} on...”

There is a sense of regret that practice assessors did not take account of their gut feelings or initial instincts and there was a subsequent over compensation during the placement. Perhaps practice assessors did not want this gut feeling to colour the rest of the assessment process so they may ignore evidence that supports the initial hypothesis. Additionally, the practice assessor starts the placement with a sense of foreboding, they have already made the first mistake

and the subsequent failure of the student becomes internalised by the practice assessor.

Another facet of the internalising failure story is frustration that a practice assessor cannot change the situation. Lily discusses a student she failed because of his inability to change his views around sexuality that were incompatible with social work values. Rather than conceptualising the event in a positive way, she states;

“.....I still feel that I must have done something wrong with that one because I couldn't enable him or work with him to see why his way of thinking was inappropriate in social work, never mind in society”.

Lily then sees the failure as her own rather than the student's. I asked Lily at what point she decided that the student could not make a shift in attitude; a dramatic event story then emerged which meant that Lily could no longer go on attempting to change the student's inappropriate values. She says:

“...he stood in reception when other service users were around and he made reference to bum-fucking to our receptionist in a jokey way and I just said, enough, and I asked him to leave the placement and he became a placement failure and then he terminated the training”.

There is a real possibility that by internalising a student's failure as their own, practice assessors may be reluctant to fail a student. There is another explanation for this internalisation of failure that emerged in other accounts, although not directly related to the experience of having failed a student. This concerned the sense that the practice assessor and the student's work was one and the same. There appeared to be no separation between the student's work and the practice assessor's work. The system in most statutory agencies perhaps fosters this lack of separation in that practice assessors are often considered case holders of the student's work but the story of "we" emerged in a number of accounts. For example, Anna, talked about a sense of relief when the placement ended and her language was revealing, she states:

“...its kind of, we’ve got through it. We’ve got through it, we managed to meet all the competences, the report is done.”

It is interesting that Anna felt that “we got through it”, not that the student got through it or the student met the key roles. There is a potential that the blurring of your work/my work could lead to collusion in the assessment process. Another facet to this is the sense that practice assessors felt isolated, the responsibility is felt as theirs alone. Anna felt that the team dynamics did not foster a sense of team responsibility for the student, therefore there was some missed learning opportunities to work with other members of the team. The impact on Anna was that she felt “pressured”. When asked if she felt isolated, Anna felt that the combination of team dynamics and the fact that she felt the student “had a bigger support system around her” did add to a sense of isolation. Jennifer’s story also contained little in the way of reference to how other team members supported the student, the story of the process as being entirely her responsibility strongly emerged, coupled with the sense that the student took little in the way of responsibility for his own learning.

There were examples of stories that counteracted the sense of the practice assessor as being isolated; for example, Martha commented on the team like approach that had been adopted in relation to the student, not least in that another member of the team supervised the student when Martha was off sick. Whilst for Martha, being off sick added to her sense of guilt in relation to the student, staff members were able to provide further evidence of the concerns Martha had already identified. This feeling of isolation demonstrates the need for support for practice assessors, especially when students are considered failing<sup>62</sup>.

### **The Lack of Reflection Story**

Another story to emerge which seems an important learning point for the assessment task more generally, was that practice assessors did not always

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<sup>62</sup> This is explored further in the next chapter

appear to have an insight into the emotional aspects of the learning relationship and struggled to acknowledge both the possible causes and the impact of feelings. Looking at it from the outside I was struck by how many of the feelings expressed by practice assessors were possibly being experienced by the student, namely feelings of inadequacy, being out of one's depth, feeling stupid and feeling stuck. This lack of recognition of the possible cause of these feelings often seemed to result in a situation that could not be resolved and this can potentially result in the student being given benefit of the doubt. Psychodynamic ideas of transference and counter transference are important here, as is mirroring and theories of parallel processes. Another concept, projective identification, may also be of significance. Projective identification is a Kleinian concept and is useful in explaining very strong, intense and powerful emotions that were apparent in some stories. Projective identification evolves from the primitive projection of good and bad onto and from the mother and in short, refers to the projection of unpleasant parts of the self, such as. urine and faeces onto the mother or other person (Mitchell, 1991). An individual splits off these unwholesome parts of themselves and becomes adept at projecting these intense, uncomfortable, unmanageable or disgusting part of oneself onto others, albeit unconsciously. This results in intense uncomfortable feelings and importantly; the recipient believes such feelings are their own (Terry, 2008). This was seen most starkly in Lily's intense feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, fear and being out of her depth. She was not able at the time, or in the reflective, discursive space of the interview, to make the connection that these feelings could have been the student's. Lily comments that for the two students who caused her much emotional angst she felt:

“...out of my depth...I felt really out of my depth...I was completely out of my depth at that point.”

She states further that:

“I was incredibly confident with the successful engaged students but with the difficult student my confidence levels went down a lot...I was anxious...I was worried”.



These feelings would be normal to expect in a student who was in danger of failing the placement. Indeed in relation to feeling out of her depth, the student, a black Muslim, was placed in a field very alien to her, namely a drug and alcohol service. Lily describes another student who “put the fear of God into me” and uses the term “unjust” several times over. Similarly Jennifer’s and Claudette’s feelings of anxiety and of being overwhelmed were also experienced by the student and whilst those practice teachers acknowledged that their students reported such feelings, did not make the counter transference or projective identification connection. The advantage of recognising the phenomena in operation, means that the practice assessor can then help the student to name and own such feelings, as well as employ different teaching strategies and/or support the student in other ways. This process has also been referred to as the need to attend to feelings (in both practice assessor and student), and then support the student to identify the particular emotional barriers to learning.

At the core of these stories lies one that seems unnamed and hidden, namely fear and terror that was acknowledged in Lily’s account and HEIs’ fears in relation to failing students with disabilities or from ethnic minority backgrounds. In this fearful culture, blame then arises in the network. From my own experience as a tutor, I feel frustrated with the practice assessor for giving students the benefit of the doubt, or likewise writing such poorly evidenced reports or not addressing the issues sufficiently that the recommendation of fail cannot be upheld. Practice assessors are angry that the HEI sent them such a student. The student is angry with the practice assessor and their tutor, who are both perceived to be the cross parent. The practice assessor may also feel that the tutor has not taken their side or feels unsupported by the tutor. Again, the concept of the drama triangle springs to mind, with stakeholders occupying all the positionings and roles, at differing times.

This situation of intense emotion experienced by all stakeholders reminded me of an article I read in the context of working with looked after children (Rocco-Briggs, 2008). In such an environment of intense emotion when working with looked after children who generally will have experienced negative and

damaging care-giving in the past, adults in this network will often lose their ability to reflect upon the intense and uncomfortable feelings experienced, reacting rather than reflecting. It seems a similar process occurs in the context of assessing social work students where there are concerns. We all, Roccco-Briggs (2008), assert, want everyone else in the network to suffer what we unconsciously suffer and we are all, it seems, engaging in some degree of projective identification.

Issues of containment therefore arise and this resonates with the works of Bion (Bion, 1962; Bion, 1965). Bion's contention is that the mother's ability to receive, process and understand a child's projection of a range of emotions onto her, helps a child develop emotional resilience once this process is internalised by the child. The mother needs to contain the child's feelings by projecting back onto the child the angry feelings, in less intense, more manageable ways. The notion of contained-container thus arises and this refers to the ability of one person in the relationship to have sufficient emotional resources to contain their own feelings as well as those that are being projected onto them. In the melee of anger and blame when a student is failed, no one is contained and this causes what Bion describes as a nameless dread. This leads on to consider the story the practice assessors told of themselves, i.e. what they understood their roles to be, including the assessment process.

### **What is my Role and The Assessment Story?**

Another story to emerge is what I term the What is my Role and the Assessment Story. The notion of role strain or role confusion has been explored in the CAS, in chapter two of this thesis and is well documented in the existing research - that there is a possible tension between the different functions inherent in the practice assessor role, namely the supporter/enabler/nurturer role versus the managerial/assessor role. In Kleinian interpretations, these two positions would represent the good mother and the bad mother. Practice assessors and students alike struggle with comprehending and making sense of these two potentially conflictual roles. This struggle was documented in the stories that were told and whilst there is

not space within this dissertation to explore this at length, there seems gain in concentrating on those stories where this role strain or confusion was not so apparent. This is because it may aid practitioners in managing these conflictual roles in a more helpful manner<sup>63</sup>.

Peter appeared to have a clear understanding of his role and responsibilities although he acknowledged that potentially there could be a conflict; he states:

“...its about providing appropriate opportunities...helping students to also have a look at themselves, you know for them to try and identify where they feel they are at in terms of meeting the requirements. I also feel that as a practice teacher you also have some responsibility to...the people who are likely to be served by the students.”

Peter, compared with other practice assessors, appeared to be clearer about where his and the students' responsibilities lay. A similar theme was found in Andrew's account, of clarity around what were his and what the students' responsibilities were. It could be argued that because of this, Peter and Andrew did not then later internalise the students' failings as their own. Andrew for example, whilst recognising there is potential for confusion and conflict about the various component parts of the assessor role, states:

“...you can sometimes be drawn into that role, often as a rescuer...at the same time you can be perceived as a persecutor and it all can get very complicated, which is where I rely, very much again, on my own boundaries, establishing these boundaries at the beginning...establishing the fact that this isn't a therapeutic placement, you are not here to heal, you're here to learn”.

Katie, too, was clear about her boundaries and by implication her role. She was wary against what she termed, “owning the student's soul” by blurring her work with the student work. Katie was equally clear that the student was responsible for providing the evidence and doing the work – support was available but there needed to be clarity about what support was required. This contrasts with Lily's

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<sup>63</sup> Ways forward will be discussed in the following chapter.

account where she acknowledges that she cannot reconcile these two positions:

“...there was a clash for me between the facilitator of learning role and the kind of management roles...now I felt that as a facilitator of learning, I felt very nurturing, especially when a student was clearly evidencing what they were learning and showing that they were enjoying it and saying, “I enjoy learning” and I respond really well to people who enjoy learning and so there was almost like a maternal feeling about that facilitation of learning but the flip side of that was when I had to become the kind of teller-off or the person who was making judgments about somebody, I did struggle with that....”.

This excerpt is interesting in that it is clear that there is evidence of splitting, that is, the good mother, the facilitator of learning that feels comfortable and the bad mother, the “teller-off”, that does not feel comfortable. Lily cannot bring this split together.

Part of the consideration of the role of the practice assessor, concerns the explicit acknowledgment of practice assessors’ gate keeping function. I was surprised at how few accounts explicitly acknowledged this function and only Emily, talked about “the gate” and “passing through the gate”. For Emma, the fact that there were “other gates” the student had to pass through was part of the rationale to recommend the student had a further placement opportunity, rather than fail her outright.

Within the, what is my role story lies a closely related one, the assessment story. I asked practice assessors what they understood by assessment, how they went about the process and what theories informed their work. It was notable that only one practice assessor explicitly used theory to inform her assessment practices. Claudette used the notions of formative and summative assessment to aid her in the assessment task, as well as providing clarity about her role. Claudette used the learning gained from undertaking a certificate in education to inform her assessment practice rather than the PTA programme she had attended. Practice assessors made rather generalised references to learning theories and this seems at odds with a profession that advocates the

use of theory informed practice. The assessment story told by practice assessors largely concerned how they might go about sourcing evidence. They could articulate the types of evidence they might rely on namely, the direct observations, service user feedback and supervision discussion etc, but they did not seem to have at their disposal an abstract, academic understanding of the assessment task or relied on particular learning theories to guide their work.

Practice assessors were also asked to comment on their views of competency models as a basis to assess professional practice. What emerged in the stories were quite different uses of the competency frameworks. Andrew for example, had his own standards about what was good enough but made them “fit” the key role requirements. Peter too, felt that his role was more than assessing whether students had met the key roles, he states:

“...I also think its about helping students to also, have a look at themselves...”

For Peter, the key roles provided a framework for the report writing but his expectations were based on an almost unconscious notion of what was satisfactory practice that did not necessarily connect to the key roles. Peter however expected students to understand what the key roles could mean, required that students continually demonstrated them in the placement and that students were able to critically reflect on the process. Andrew and Peter, appeared to “shoe horn” the competency and key role requirements into their idea of what was competent or good enough practice. These two accounts contrast sharply with Terry’s story of assessment that appeared to adopt a tick box approach. The student, it seemed, had to demonstrate them once or twice but nothing more. Terry acknowledged that as an American trained social worker he “had to get my head round the competencies” (and later the key roles) and complained they were vague. Terry stated that he felt that there were key areas he was assessing against:

“All you have to do in this job, it’s very simple, you have to deal with and just get on with people. You have to have some sort of social skills,

even if you hate the person you are working with...you have to be able to write, you have to be able to speak and you have to be able to think.”

This suggests that different practice assessors do not use competency frameworks in the same way. It is interesting to note that differences in assessment practice were explored in 2004 in the context of an audit of practice learning in the first year of the degree (Doel et al, 2004). The authors found that there were differences in what practice assessors were using as a framework for assessment with various interpretations of the NOS for social work in terms of what key roles, units and elements were assessed. They also found that some assessors were using the Codes of Practice as an assessment framework. This area is clearly of interest and requires further research. The Department of Health evaluation of the degree in social work (2008) explored the different expectations assessors had of DipSW students compared with degree students as well as how practice assessors experienced the assessment regime in both qualifications. The report offered little in the way of a definitive answer, other than some assessors felt the new regime was an improvement. The discussion will now move on to consider the differences in practice that emerged within the narratives.

### **Why The Difference In Practice?**

There were three accounts in particular in which the story told was not constructed with the drama and intense emotion found in the other accounts (Andrew, Peter and Katie). Associated with that, the practice assessors also did not depict themselves as victims of an HEI or of the system and overall there appeared a lack of blaming. For example, Peter's recommendation of a fail was not upheld by the HEI. Rather than feeling hurt by this decision, Peter was able to reflect on why the HEI had reached a different conclusion. For Peter there was learning in this process, in that he realised that his report writing had concentrated on the positive aspects of the student and so the evidence in his report was at odds with his recommendation. The same three stories also portrayed the students in a different way from the other accounts. For example, the students were not pathologised; students were depicted as

neither good nor bad and the levels of emotionality were significantly reduced, it seems in students as well as in practice assessors.

In these three accounts the practice assessors also had very clear understanding of boundaries and an explicitly articulated narrative about their responsibilities. Whilst these practice assessors did not always explain their understanding of the assessment process with reference to particular theories, it seems their understanding of the assessment task was more sophisticated and certainly went beyond the tick box approach. Peter and Andrew talked about the use of intuition and feelings, of using the competency framework as just that – a framework only - and their practice requirements that they went beyond what was required on paper at least.

It was also notable that the three approved social worker (ASW)<sup>64</sup> practice assessors (Andrew, Peter and Martha) all failed students outright and indeed two of the ASWs, Peter and Martha, failed their first student. This may lead us to consider whether ASWs operate within different frameworks or are more comfortable in the assessor role that enables them to fail students. Andrew made this connection and argued that as both a practising ASW and an out of hours, emergency duty social worker, he was used to making difficult decisions, making them alone and making them quickly. For him, failing a social work student was part and parcel of his everyday working life, it was not pleasant and he did experience a degree of emotion but he felt confident making difficult decisions. Clearly, the ASW role requires practitioners to make difficult decisions, namely to detain someone under the Mental Health Act (1983) and the decision can sometimes be carried out in isolation. The ASW role contrasts with children and family work, in which, although very difficult decisions are made, e.g. removal of children from their homes, the decision to proceed with a Care Order is initially taken with a range of professionals, including solicitors, before going to court, where ultimately a judge makes the decision. This is not to make the claim that all ASW practice assessors will more readily fail poorly-performing students or find the process easier as Martha, an ASW,

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<sup>64</sup> The term now employed for Approved Social Workers is Approved Mental Health Practitioners.

experienced similar distressing emotions as other assessors but managed in the end to reflect beyond the emotions and failed the student in light of very strong evidence of dangerous practice which was subsequently upheld at the practice assessment panel and assessment board.

Katie however was from a children and families background and recounted her narrative in a similar way to Andrew and Peter. There was the lack of emotionality, a clear understanding of her role as well as clarity about her expectations of a student. Whilst Katie felt support was appropriate to offer a student, she would clearly work out what that support meant and what was appropriate. Katie, now an experienced Chair of a small voluntary organisation as well as an experienced lecturer in social work may be comfortable with the assessor role. This contrasts with Lily's account where she explicitly acknowledges her discomfort with the assessor role – which she equates with a “teller-off”. Katie then, has an understanding of what a competent social worker should achieve, like that of Andrew and Peter, which seemed to go beyond a simplistic understanding of just meeting the competency requirements and key roles

In terms of what is evidence, whilst there were some agreement amongst all practice assessors about the sources of evidence, their views on how it was gathered, whose responsibility it was to gather such evidence and what it was evidence of, differed. I noticed for example that some practice assessors so called evidence for making the decision to pass a weak (I would argue failing) student was based on their “hope” that they “will be all right” in another setting. This clearly is of concern, and has resonance with the rule of optimism (Dingwall et al, 1993; Blom-Cooper, 1985; DH, 1991). That is, practice assessors are applying overly positive interpretations of the students performance because of some or all of four possible reasons, i.e. cultural relativism, making assumptions that students share the same values as themselves, fear of the negative consequences of making a decision to fail a student, both for the student and self and wanting a “better” outcome for the student. Whilst the application of the “rule of optimism” is usually found within child protection literature, it seems that there are lessons for practice assessors.



For example, Terry's ultimate decision-making process seemed to rest on this rule of optimism.

"I think I ultimately did [make the right decision] because I think if I had failed her that would have kept her from doing any other kind of social work job. She wouldn't work in this team and she probably wouldn't work in statutory but because she was a nice person, because she was able to engage with people, I think probably there other aspects to social work that she could have easily done".

He argues further:

"There's different sorts of social work...the social work we do is specified, its not residential work, its not working with elderly so when you take the whole field of social work, simply because she wasn't able to do this kind of social work, doesn't mean that she not able to work with people and help people in some capacity."

And then adds:

"The question is, is she going to be able to do social work? Well yes, and not anything that involves a whole lot of deadlines. So, maybe not statutory but I mean she was working in a residential unit and as far as I know, she wasn't having any problems.

It is it is clear his rationale was based on hope and optimism that the student would "be all right" in a different setting but he had no evidence of this. Terry, like other practice assessors, raised the issue of how ethnicity impacted on the assessment process.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

The potential impact of race and ethnicity on the assessment process emerged in a number of stories. White practice assessors at times feared failing black students in case they were labelled a racist. Andrew, a white practice assessor, for example, failed two black students and commented that his colleagues had raised the issue of him being labelled a racist in the predominantly white authority he worked for. He referred to being called by some colleagues, "the

hatchet man of [name of local authority]". The term "using the race card" emerged in other stories, and the fear that if a white assessor failed a black student, the student would claim they had experienced racism. Susan, a white freelance practice assessor, who regularly failed around two students a year out of about twenty-five, commented that she had failed only black students to date and that caused her some concern about her own assessment practice. Susan reflected on the impact of having English as a second language and how far cultural differences impacted adversely on students from African backgrounds.

Martha experienced this concern, and felt that the student placed with her had an insufficient command of English, both spoken and written. Martha wondered how the student "had managed to get through the course so far" when her written English fell far below the standard required by the agency. Martha then began to doubt herself and this was made worse by what she perceived as a tutor who saw the student in a positive way.

Claire, who is of African-Caribbean origin, felt "bad" failing black students due to the low representation of black social workers. In relation to her experience of failing a black male student, Claire had had misgivings at the initial interview stage but had felt she wanted to give a black man a chance in a profession heavily dominated by white women. The HEI in this case, overturned her recommendation of a fail and she felt that the decision was based on the unacknowledged fear around failing a black man and of being accused of institutional racism. Likewise, Peter, a black practice teacher, felt some degree of guilt in failing two black students.

Lily, a white practice assessor, worked with two Asian women. Lily acknowledged her own fears at the time, that as she had always lived and worked in an area heavily populated by white people, she lacked exposure to people of different cultures, felt "out of her depth" and was concerned that she may be unconsciously racist. Lily acknowledged that she passed one student, when the evidence was clear she should have been failed, because the fear of being labelled a racist was so strong, not least in that the student had threatened to

“report her” because of her alleged racism. The issue of religion also emerged from the narratives.

## **Religion**

In four narratives, the issue of religion emerged. Patricia, for example, worked with a Christian student whom she felt discussed her religious beliefs in an inappropriate way in the work place. For example, when challenging the student about her behaviour, the student was allegedly reported to have responded, “only God knows what happened and he knows I am innocent”. Lily worked with two Muslim students in the context of a Drugs and Alcohol service. She felt that the students, because of their religious beliefs and cultural upbringing had had little exposure to alcohol and could not move beyond seeing the imbibing of alcohol in any way other than being morally wrong and against the teachings of Allah. For one student, whilst she embraced learning about alcohol and the effects on the body, her attitude to service users who abused alcohol was often inappropriate. Jennifer also experienced this when working with a male Muslim student, who again struggled to move beyond his personal values around alcohol and found it difficult to consider why young people may enjoy using alcohol. For Patricia, Lily and Jennifer, they struggled with wanting to respect their students’ religious views, whilst at the same time maintaining appropriate social work values in how service users should be treated or what was or was not a professional discourse. This seems an interesting area for further exploration. It is also particularly interesting to me due to the nature of the students I teach who come from predominantly African Christian backgrounds, some of whom struggle with issues of sexuality. I, in turn, struggle to reconcile the need to respect someone’s religious beliefs when I feel those beliefs are oppressive to gay men, bi-sexuals and lesbians.

## **Disability**

Another issue to impact on the assessment process was when a student had a disability. Tracy for example, struggled with the notion of what was “reasonable

adjustment”<sup>65</sup> in relation to a student with dyslexia, particularly around written work. I felt that in this case, the student got the benefit of the doubt although I felt that Tracy lacked knowledge around dyslexia and how best to support the student. Tracy got caught up in the rescuing mode, and began taking responsibility for the student’s learning. In two interviews, the practice assessors felt the HEIs had not informed them about the students’ disabilities. In one case, a student who was HIV positive worked for an agency that supported people with HIV and work was chosen which, had the agency known about his condition, would not have been deemed as appropriate. Whilst one can understand sensitivity around conditions such as HIV, the practice assessor felt that given the nature of the agency, this student was unlikely to be viewed differently or experience discrimination. The practice assessor equally felt that this student was used to being treated as disabled and “special” by the university and hence, in this agency, where HIV status was not unusual, amongst the staff or service users, the student lost his special status and reacted adversely against the loss.

Emily worked with student who discussed the fact that she had dyslexia half way through the placement and claimed that she had not been assessed fairly because of this. This story clearly raises very important issues about HEIs sharing students personal information and indeed this issue has been explored in a North American context (Duncan-Daston and Culver, 2005; Watkinson and Chalmers, 2007). This raises issues about the limits of confidentiality and the importance of having protocols in place for when these issues arise.

### **Gender, Sexuality and Class**

Issues of gender, sexuality and class were rarely discussed in the interviews although I did not ask specific questions about them. There is clearly scope to consider how gender impacts on the assessment process and indeed there is a wealth of literature on this issue as explored in the CAS. Claire, Jennifer and

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<sup>65</sup> This is a term found in the Special Education Needs and Disability Act (1991) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), which requires educational establishments and employers to make “reasonable adjustments” for students/employees with disabilities.

Katie felt their male students did not respect them. Peter reflected several times on his relationship with two female students although I failed to notice his comments about “being a man” at the time. Sexuality rarely came up, other than how practice assessors identified themselves and indeed the issue of sexuality often appears missing from social work education; however when students were homophobic and could not move from that position, then practice assessors acted accordingly.

The issue of class did not explicitly emerge although I felt that in Lily’s account, her working class identity added to the extreme emotion she felt when working with a Black Muslim student who appeared middle class. Again, these unspoken stories needed teasing out of the interview process. There would seem to be scope to explore these issues again in more depth and clearly further research is indicated.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the distinct stories that emerged from the research process, namely what I have termed the angry story, the dramatic event story, the idealised learner story, the guilt story, the internalising failure so I couldn’t fail them story, the lack of reflection story and the what is my role and the assessment story. I have considered how these stories may impact on the assessment process, namely in the context of why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students. The extreme emotion felt, the internalising of failure, the lack of understanding about the assessment process and the inability to manage all the roles inherent in that of a practice educator can all potentially serve to make the assessment task extremely complicated and difficult. This causes students in some cases, to be passed, when the evidence suggests they should be failed. These conclusions will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

On a final note, in the dramas that unfolded in the stories and still haunted some practice assessors, it was clear that all practice assessors made use of the experience to consider how they might practice assess differently in the future –

it was positive to note that they all learnt something from the difficult experience, although perhaps those who did not learn anything or did not choose to were unlikely to volunteer to be interviewed.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Ways Forward**

### **Introduction**

This concluding chapter firstly considers the research question of why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students. The chapter then goes on to consider issues of validity, reliability and generalisability and discusses how far the research met its intended aims. The issue of quality in social work research will also be explored. Additionally, the chapter offers a reflexive account of the research process including a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the research questions, design, methods, theoretical frameworks and the findings. The chapter goes on to discuss practice issues that arise from the findings and considers potential ways forward. I will then briefly consider a dissemination strategy and in the light of the findings, highlight possible areas of further research in the field of practice education. Finally, I discuss what I learnt, both personally and professionally from undertaking the doctorate.

### **Why Do Practice Assessors Find it Difficult to Fail Students?**

I will begin this section with a rather generalised account of why practice assessors find it difficult to fail social work students but will explore these issues further. It would appear that assessors find it difficult to fail students because of the intense feelings of anger, guilt, shame, stress and sense of internalised failure. It appears that these uncontained feelings can sometimes obscure the assessment process. Some of these intense and uncomfortable feelings may result in a practice assessor ends up taking responsibility for the failing student and inadvertently disadvantages the student. It seems there are many influences on how assessors effect their final decision, some of which have been documented in the thesis. Assessors not recognising the sources of the strong feelings, (projective identification on the student's part), was also unhelpful in the assessment process – there is a need then for reflection. This perhaps resulted in practice assessors again internalising the student's failure

by not recognising that their feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, being out of their depth etc, were possibly what the student was feeling. The stories that emerged all potentially explain why practice assessors find the process of failing a student so difficult and by implication, explain why students often get given the benefit of the doubt.

There are clear differences however, in approaches and practices of assessors and those that seem to experience less emotional angst and pain, appear to find the process more straightforward. Those practice assessors who do not construct their practice and that of the student within a dramatic, uncontained discourse seem to be able to manage the process of assessment in a clearer, less emotional way. The high emotion obscures roles and boundaries, which make the assessment task all the more difficult. Most importantly, this obscures the fundamental question, is this student competent to practise social work?

Another difference in practice, although this needs further exploration, appears to be the setting in which the practice assessor is based or has been based. ASWs, it seems, appear to be comfortable with the managerial function and have clearer boundaries in relation to the student. The practice assessors who were also ASWs appeared confident in their decision-making and assessment process and were able to clearly articulate their gatekeeping function. Practice assessors with more sophisticated understandings of the assessment system and competency models also seem to find the process less painful. It may be also be that practice assessors who employ psychodynamics frameworks in their own work may be able to reflect on their feelings and so manage a difficult situation with a student, although I did not explore this in my research.

It seems that practice assessors have a generally agreed abstract notion of what behaviours, conduct or practice may result in failing a student, although whether they then recognised those behaviours in their own student was sometimes questionable. They were also able to express what the line was between a pass and a fail and this ultimately seemed to rest on the notion that the student had made some development, although how much is enough or sufficient remains unclear. Practice assessors appeared to understand the



procedures of the various HEIs around potentially failing students although the interactions with HEIs were often far from comfortable.

I would argue that students still get given the benefit of the doubt by practice assessors (and perhaps tutors?) and this is based on the stories explored in this thesis but also seems to be rationalised by some practice assessors on the basis of hope, i.e. they hope the student will be all right in another setting. However this is not to say that all failing students were given the benefit of the doubt, as the thesis clearly identifies cases where this did not occur, but there does appear to be significant differences in practice. It is clear that practice assessors do fail students but there seems some issue about how far their recommendations will be upheld by the HEI. Research that explores how many fail recommendations are upheld would seem required. It is clear that my research also links into issues of suitability, termination of training and fitness to practice and so these all seem areas for further research. Lastly, there are always going to be difficulties with competency models – not least in the notion that social work practice can be broken down into discrete, clear and objective tasks, behaviour and conduct. Practice assessors on the whole found the system useful, or at least said they did. However it was noticeable that the assessors had very different approaches and understanding of the assessment framework. The remainder of this chapter critically considers the research process, beginning with an account of validity, reliability and generalisability before going on to critically appraise the research that was undertaken.

### **Validity, Reliability and Generalisability**

Validity, reliability and generalisability are considered the gold standard for measuring the success of a research process although they are terms usually associated with quantitative research methodologies and have a distinct meaning within quantitative paradigms that are at odds with qualitative research paradigms. The outcome or results of quantitative research are therefore seen as:

“*Valid* if the explanations are really true or accurate and correctly capture what is actually happening.

*Reliable* if the results are consistent across repeated investigations in different circumstances with different investigators

*Generalizable* if they are true for a wide (but specified) range of circumstances beyond those studies in the particular research”.

(Gibbs, 2007: 91)

It is argued that within qualitative research paradigms and methodologies such concerns are rendered meaningless, however that is not to say that anything goes, rather the aim should be to produce research that is fit for purpose and of high quality. The central question therefore is on what basis can we judge quality? Gibbs (2007) argues that qualitative research can still adhere to principles of validity, reliability and generalisability but what we mean by these terms will be of a different nature to the definitions offered above.

Validity in qualitative paradigms can be measured by a process of reflexive accounting. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that this means researchers need to be open and transparent about the influences on the research, their predispositions, their epistemological stances and how understandings and interpretations may have changed or altered during the process of research. There is a need for constant reflection about these influences. Brewer (2000) in a similar vein offers a strategy for ensuring validity in qualitative research through the process of reflexivity and this includes being explicit about the values you bring to the research process, a full consideration of methodology and methods and why certain choices were made, being ethical, having integrity as a researcher and critically assessing the data as well as showing the limits and the complexities of the data. I have explored these issues in the methodology chapter as well as reflecting on what I could or should have done differently in this chapter. I have also attempted to consider the development of my ideas in this thesis.

Gibbs (2007) advocates techniques to ensure reliability and generaliseability which aim at ensuring a researcher has eliminated “obvious mistakes” (2007:94) although he recognises that qualitative research does not aim at producing a “true picture of reality” (ibid). My concern with Gibbs’s (2007) account is that it appears to pander to quantitative criticisms of qualitative research. The question remains as to how far my research is valid. I have tried to offer a reflexive account and have sought to be honest about what I consider to be the influences on the research and perhaps the limitations. What I struggled with was being able to offer a coherent account of why some stories in the data emerged or became apparent to me, recognising that another researcher may see or hear different stories from the same transcripts. It will therefore be interesting to come back to the transcripts in a few years time to see what different stories may become apparent or how my analysis may change. My position as a researcher is that my results cannot be generaliseable, due to the ontological and epistemological position that I hold, namely a social constructionist version of truth. My findings are therefore knowingly based on a small number of cases and I cannot claim universal truths. Nonetheless there may be new learning and new insights that can be extrapolated from the findings. Another way of determining the quality of the research undertaken is to consider literature that explores how we might define quality in social work/social care research

### **Quality in Research**

Pawson et al (2003) argue for six generic standards that should underpin judgments about what is quality research and knowledge. This moves the debate on from methodological considerations of quality, which they argue have become overly privileged in the debate about quality and indeed is seen in the discussion above, towards the appraisal of the research outcomes in a more generic way. The six standards or “basic questions” (Pawson et al, 2000:40) to ask of any knowledge or research are as follows:

“Transparency – is it open to scrutiny?

Accuracy – is it well grounded?

Purposivity – is it fit for purpose?

Utility – is it fit for use?

Propriety – Is it legal and ethical?

Accessibility – is it intelligible?”

(2004:40)

The TAPUPA framework as it has come to be known, has been further explored by Sharland and Taylor (2006) in the context of systematic reviews in social care research. Overall they argue that this is a useful framework although they suggest that there is a danger that conceptual and theoretical research may not fit this criteria and this is a point argued below by Shaw and Norton (2007). They also argue that the concept of utility may need further development. The question is; how does my research measure up against these criteria?

Shaw and Norton (2007), in exploring the issue in terms of both the types and quality of social work research in UK universities, refer to intrinsic indications of quality in research, namely methodological considerations, and extrinsic criteria, that is, its direct use to people or its value. In Shaw and Norton's (2007) work, they found agreement within the social work academic community about what counts as intrinsic epistemological and methodological quality. This included:

“A well considered and argued epistemological and theoretical position.

Well informed research that draws on the existing knowledge base.

Choice of methods related to the question and was justifiable in the context of the aims and objectives.

Appropriate analytical techniques that are used and justified.

Conclusions that are valid, in the sense of being carefully founded and plausible.”

(2007:viii)

But there was disagreement over the extrinsic criteria, how far should the emphasis lie on user-engagement, values or social justice as an outcome of the research? They draw on the work of Furlong and Oancea (2005) in bridging this debate – arguing that the purpose of research should have potential to have a real impact on people’s lives. This schism between intrinsic quality and extrinsic quality, highlights the debate about the purpose of research, to have some direct practical outcome or to further the understanding of ideas and theory. In terms of my own research, however, I believe I have met the criteria as suggested above which is evidenced in this thesis. Additionally, I will now work towards dissemination and developing practice further. As part of a reflective, quality audit of my own research I now need to critically consider its limitations and weaknesses and so I will critically consider the research questions, methodology, methods and the method of data analysis. There is also a need to consider what I might have done differently.

### **Research Questions**

An area where I consider myself to have made errors concerns the research questions that until the end of the process never felt quite right or very clear. I felt that throughout the research journey I struggled to articulate my questions in a way that seemed satisfactory. Some of this I attribute to my inexperience as a researcher and perhaps some of this is an inevitable part of qualitative research processes (Sarantoakos, 2005) and so in hindsight, my approach may have been closer to grounded theory approaches. Overall by the end of the research process, I was clear that the focus was why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail students. This does raise some possible ethical issues, not least in terms of the impact on the research participants and the question is raised as to how I was clear at the outset about what the research was exploring (Nespor & Groenke, 2009). Indeed, I considered this, perhaps rather too late, in a student doctoral conference presentation (Finch, 2009b).

## Methodology

I feel that my methodological position was the most useful for considering the substantive issue. My positioning as a researcher became more firmly established as my confidence grew and the research progressed. By the time I actually wrote the methodology chapter I had clearly worked out what had informed my research design although I can acknowledge that the methodological influences only became clear when writing the chapter. I felt comfortable that my design was influenced by a number of approaches rather than being a pure model. I also had the benefit of thinking about the chapter for approximately a year<sup>66</sup> and so by the time I wrote it, whilst challenging, I really enjoyed the process of being able to put my thoughts down on paper. Perhaps there was scope however to be clearer about the methodological influences *before* proceeding with the data collection; on the other hand flexible research designs are a necessary feature of qualitative research methodologies (Robson, 2004; Sarantakos, 2005). Despite my growing confidence in terms of wider methodological issues it is clear that I made some errors in design and in carrying out the research.

## The Research Design

As discussed in chapter 3, the research design evolved considerably from my initial plans. There were clearly two distinct phases to the research design: The first stage, consisting of interviewing candidates on the practice teaching award programme as well as being mentor to them; and the second phase, which consisted of interviewing a range of practice assessors who had experienced a failing or marginal student. What I have learnt from this process are the practicalities of undertaking qualitative research; the time constraints and getting access to the field can all impact on research designs and indeed, these are points made by Robson (2004) in his many references to undertaking research in the real world. Managing the constraints in a flexible manner, without issues of quality suffering, all seems part of the research task (Flick, 2007).

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<sup>66</sup> I intermitted from the doctoral programme for a year (Jan 07 to Jan 08) when I gave birth to my second son, William.

## **Methods**

The method of utilising in-depth interviews was the most appropriate in the context of the research questions and the methodological predisposition. With the benefit of hindsight, I realised that I rushed into the first round of interviews despite being warned by my first supervisor. I was also over ambitious about the number of interviews I could achieve with each participant, originally planning to do three interviews. This issue of being overly ambitious is raised in a Canadian study (Ungar, 2006) albeit in a different context, the funding of qualitative research. I also made this mistake in commissioned research undertaken in 2006 (Finch, 2006) however in recent commissioned research, I have been more able to accurately predict how many interviews are both practicable and methodologically sound (Finch, forthcoming). With the benefit of hindsight, I perhaps interviewed too many practice assessors, asked too many questions and had more data than I could use. I believe this was due to my lack of confidence and experience as a researcher, i.e. better to have too much information than not enough. This was perhaps also due to lack of clarity about the research questions. Again, in recent research (Finch, forthcoming) I have been clearer about the research questions at the outset and clearer about what to ask in the interviews – hence the interviews were shorter. However, the differences between commissioned research and doctoral research are obviously huge and I like to think my doctoral research was that of an “unfolding qualitative study” (Punch, 2005:268); so there seemed some methodological gain in a design that was flexible. (Robson, 2004, Punch, 2005) However, it could equally be argued that one can never have too much data, as this will afford me great opportunities in the future, to draw further findings or stories from the interviews as well as engage in a process of re-analysing the texts as explored in Maunther and Doucet, (1998). However this does raise ethical issues about using data for the purpose in which it was not intended, although there is scope for renegotiation with the respondents.

There were also some technical difficulties I experienced when recording the interviews, namely batteries running out on the Dictaphone and the issue of poor quality recordings which is highlighted in a number of accounts, for example, Darlington and Scott (2002) and Robson (2004). Transcribing the

hour long interviews also took up more time than I anticipated which, at the time, felt overly burdensome but on reflection this process gave me a chance to remind myself of the issues raised and was another way of swimming in the data (Darlington and Scott, 2002). The process of transcription, albeit time consuming, was therefore very useful and this is found in other researcher's accounts, for example, Bird (2005).

### **Ethical Issues**

The first round of interviews was problematic in a number of ways, not least in the ethical issues it posed in being both a mentor and researcher although it is also important to note that the University of Sussex, like many HEIs, did not have a formal ethics approval process when I began the fieldwork in 2005.

However it is clear in hindsight that I did not fully consider the ethical dilemmas that could arise from the situation of being both a mentor and researcher. These ethical issues could include, how I would distinguish between information gathered in terms of the assessment of the practice teachers and information gathered in the course of the research process, how practice teachers might view me or confusion about my roles, the potential power imbalances in being a researcher and mentor, and what is being used as data, i.e. just the interviews or the process of mentoring a PTA award candidate. The clarity would have been useful to me as well as to the research participants/practice teaching award candidates. To that end I did attempt to address some but not all of the potential issues by devising new consent forms and having support strategies in place to manage any further ethical issues that might arise from this situation. On reflection however, these were perhaps inadequate and I would not want to put myself or research participants in such a situation in future research endeavours. It was interesting to note however, that in all the research updates I completed, these ethical issues did not go away and my supervisors required that I continually reflected on the situation.

Overall attention to research governance issues developed over the course of the study, for example by being required by my supervisors to continually reflect



on the potential ethical dilemmas, to adhere to and consider the ethical guidelines adopted by the University of Sussex in the middle of undertaking the research, by changing the research design in the second year of the fieldwork, by the writing up process and by the opportunity to present aspects of my research to both practice assessors and the academic community. Exploring the ethical issues inherent in research generally and in the context of my own research has been a major learning experience for me. It is clear that I will use the knowledge gained in future research endeavours although from the literature in this area, it is apparent that ethical issues pose many challenges for qualitative researchers, not least when undertaking social work research where ideological commitments to social justice also underpin ethical considerations (Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002). That said, I am still considering the ethical issues that my research raised and recent conference presentations have given me an opportunity to reflect further on those ethical issues (Finch, 2009a; Finch, 2009b; Hyder-Wilson & Finch, 2009).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

I found this aspect of the research process challenging not least in using psychodynamic theories as well as transactional analysis to contextualise the findings. This is due in part to my ambivalence about such frameworks; I like them and they appeal to me, yet at the same time I have some suspicion and hostility to them. I discussed in Chapter 4 some of the criticisms levelled at such frameworks and my concern is that such criticisms could therefore be applied, by default, to my own work. To defend my position however, I would argue that such theories offer a useful explanation for the intense feelings felt by not only practice assessors but also tutors and students alike. They also act as a framework for managing such intense emotions, not least in advocating a reflective stance. This at least seems to be in accordance with social work values. Further, I would argue that such theories are useful if they make the assessment processes fairer and prevent unsuitable people from becoming social work practitioners.

There was scope of course, to consider other theoretical perspectives, for example, sociological theories, symbolic interactionism and learning theories to name but a few. During the early parts of the research process, I began reading around the literature around risk (Beck, 1992; Webb, 2006), power (Lukes, 1986) as well as complex and sometimes quite mathematical literature around decision-making (Gelles, 1982; Elster, 1989; O'Sullivan, 1999; Baron, 2000) but decided not to pursue these further. On reflection this was for a number of reasons: Firstly the literature itself was not particularly appealing to me and I found the decision-making literature particularly challenging. I felt that the mathematical nature of it, did not fit well with the qualitative aims of the research. Also, the literature presented the decision making process as quite clinical and I made the realisation, that the research was not about the cognitive decision making process per se, of whether to fail or not a student, but something far more complex. On reflection, I perhaps started reading the literature too early on in the research process.

At the writing up stage in the research process, I employed literary theory, that appeared in an earlier draft of this thesis but was subsequently removed for the final draft (Peck and Coyle, 2002; Murfin and Ray, 2003; Booker, 2004; Waugh, 2006; Bradley, 2007; Moses and Knutsen, 2007). However it still appeared in a presentation at the JSWEC Conference (2009), focusing on the notion of the practice assessor as a "tragic hero" (Finch, 2009a). The decision to remove the literary theory from the thesis was a rather pragmatic one, namely that the word count did not allow full exploration and justification of its use however I would like to return to it at a later date. I am looking forward therefore to both coming back to the data and using other theoretical perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

Like all methods of data analysis, the VCR method is not without its limitations or disadvantages. Most notably the method is extremely time consuming, with each transcript needing to be read five times. Initially I wrote copious notes on the scripts and began to transfer those notes onto an excel spreadsheet as well as writing the "I" poems (Gilligan et al 2003). I later realised that the transferring

of data onto a spreadsheet served no useful function and so abandoned this early on in the process. I found that I sometimes struggled to separate the five readings so distinctly and my comments on the script and analysis as I went along seemed quite similar for the different readings. I also worried that I was over analysing in places and perhaps under analysing in others. This of course may be due to my inexpert use of the model rather than a fundamental drawback of the model itself.

Another drawback seemed to be the lack of guidance on how one might present one's findings, i.e. as five distinct areas, relating to the five distinct readings or presented as a generic account. In the end I presented my findings in a generic way. As time consuming as this process was it did allow complete immersion in the data and so really feel and hear the many stories being told. Overall I appreciated utilising this method. In particular I liked the way the method of analysis was able to both focus on the minutiae of the various relationships, stories, subplots and imagery yet also took account of wider structural and contextual factors. I also enjoyed the focus on the "I" of the narrator in the interview and tracking the different "I"s, representative of our multiple selves. This has resonance with qualitative research paradigms which aim at eliciting rich and complex data, recognising that truth is messy, complex and dynamic. I liked the way of both considering the stories within each transcript and across the transcripts, of being able to document the commonalities of stories as well as the minority voices, contradictions and the uncertainties. The method also allowed me some flights of fancy, to analyse the data as I went along, without fear of being wrong. For example, when analysing Lily's interview, the theories of Melanie Klein suddenly became relevant, in terms of the splitting between good students and bad students. Had I not been swimming in the data, this would not have occurred to me and so as the process unfolded and I gave myself permission to let go and be open to what emerged, therefore being truly inductive.

The idea of stories, subplots, relationships, metaphors and images became important to me in considering the metaphors and images surrounding my own doctoral journey and the wider process of undertaking qualitative research. As

the research progressed the resonance between the methodological aims of the research, the method of data analysis and the theoretical frameworks to explain and make sense of the findings became more firmly established. It is clear however that some stories may have been left out and there will be further opportunities to explore these stories in the future. Some of these areas identified in this thesis for further research will now be briefly discussed.

### **What I would have done differently**

It is clearly important to consider what I might have done differently in terms of how I planned, designed and conducted the research. As aforementioned, clarity around the research questions at the start of the process would have been helpful for a number of reasons. I felt in hindsight, that I rushed into the first round of interviews and did not give full consideration to the methodological issues, research design and most importantly the ethical issues that arose from being both a mentor and researcher (as discussed in the ethics section). I therefore should have thought through the potential ethical issues further, given myself time to think about the research design and research questions, taken further advice from my supervisors and only then go into what became by default, the second phase of the research. I can see that there was no great methodological insight to be gained by being mentor and researcher, rather the reverse, and it also created unnecessary ethical issues. It was subsequently clear that the second round of interviews were less ethically fraught and the data gained was more interesting, due to greater clarity on my part about what I was trying to find out.

Also, what I would have done differently was to consider the sample (of the second round of interviews) rather more thoroughly and there might have been methodological gain in interviewing practice assessors who, on the surface, did not have the experience of failing a student, as it is possible that this may have produced substantially different stories. There are other practical things I might have done differently, firstly transcribe the interviews as I went along, rather than leave them so long after the interviews. I would not have asked so many questions and perhaps would have had a smaller sample. There are however

aspects of the research that I would not have done differently, for example, I would still have chosen to use VCR because I felt it was useful framework through which to organise the data and felt it had many positive aspects to it as discussed elsewhere in this thesis. Whether I would use it in future research endeavours is debateable however, due solely to its time consuming nature. Further things I would keep the same were the research questions, as by the end of the process, they captured what I was trying to explore. I also feel that the qualitative approach taken was the most appropriate one. The thesis now goes on to consider possible ways forward in light of the research findings.

### **Ways Forward**

This section of the chapter considers the practice issues that emerged from the findings and considers possible ways forward. One of the potential ways forward concerns the issue highlighted in the findings - that of the problem that once a student has been identified as struggling or in danger of failing this may mean that the learning relationship between the assessor and the student will be fractured and difficult (Vaughn & Baker, 2004; Youell, 2006). The range of emotions a practice assessor may feel might get in the way of an open and trusting learning relationship and all actions of the student may be seen as further evidence of failing (Goodman, 2004). The practice assessor may feel frustrated with the perceived lack of progress and the student in turn will be in a learning relationship where trust may be gone, where admitting further difficulties or uncertainties may result in a fear of being failed (Sharp and Danbury, 1999). The practice assessor's role is now firmly within the assessor mode. The student is under additional pressure to perform adequately and may not feel she/he is being enabled, rather that she/he is being judged and assessed. Current practice suggests that it might be the tutor who offers the student support; however this may set up even more complicated dynamics as the student may then split, with the tutor becoming the good parent and the assessor the bad parent (Youell, 2006). What would seem indicated in this situation is mentor support for the student from an independent individual. This has clear problems however; the cost of providing additional support and the ethical and practical issues that may arise if the mentor also has concerns

about the student's performance, conduct or attitudes. Another scenario could arise if the mentor feels the student should pass and the assessor may feel the student should fail. There is an issue of who would be accountable and who would make the final recommendation. This could be potentially overcome with clarity about the mentor's role, e.g. that they should not contribute to the assessment.

Another possible way forward concerns support for practice assessors, not least when confronted with a marginal or failing student. As highlighted in the CAS and in Chapter Two, the need for support for practice assessors has long been noted (Brandon and Davies, 1979; Coulshed, 1980). In a similar way, it seems imperative that practice assessors receive support when confronted with this challenging phenomenon and in my research, practice assessors reported positively on the levels of support they received from their line managers. They found this helpful in a number of ways:

- To confirm their concerns about the student
- To offer advice about managing the often difficult and emotionally fraught situation with the student
- Supporting the practice assessors to make informal complaints to the HEI.

Support for practice assessors was also sought and received from colleagues and this was helpful in providing further evidence of the student's difficulties as well as offering emotional and practical support. Other practice assessors whilst on the PTA course reported good support from their practice mentor as well as their colleagues. Support from the HEI also seems essential, not least in tutor accessibility and clear guidelines and policies in respect to managing difficulties on placement (Degenhardt, 2003). This is explored further by Burgess et al 1998a and 1998b. What is also very useful is for the tutor to understand their role in the process, to ensure the HEI's policies are maintained rather than take sides or get caught up in the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968: Pitman, 1984). This in itself will provide support for both student and practice assessor. I have found that just acknowledging to practice assessors that the

process is very stressful is helpful. The continued importance of practice assessor forums is also highlighted.

In my research, what also emerged as useful was advice regarding report writing in the context of writing a report recommending a fail. This was perceived by practice assessors to be of practical benefit but also supportive. It is also useful to stress that the practice assessor makes a recommendation – it is not their decision alone and indeed in some universities the student may have the right to repeat any failed module.

Closely linked to the issue of support is continuing professional development (CPD) activities for practice assessors. The new post qualifying frameworks certainly give practice assessors the opportunity to develop their skills further, not least in practice mentoring candidates on the various post qualifying courses as well as in the field of practice education. CPD is also a requirement as part of continuing GSCC registration although I have some concern that the system is not as robust as it might be. This issue of CPD was raised in Finch (2004b) where one of the tutors interviewed felt this was particularly necessary for freelance off-site practice assessors although still important for all practice assessors. What might also seem indicated is a need for practice assessors/mentors to have some kind of formal registration and CPD requirement requirements. It is hoped that the new initiatives in practice education that focuses on quality of practice learning opportunities (GSCC et al, 2008; Doel et al, 2009a; Doel et al, 2009b; Doel et al, 2009c; Tarpey, 2009) will mean that some of these issues may be addressed. Another possible way forward identified in this thesis concerns the disclosure of sensitive information.

From the research undertaken in an American context by Duncan-Daston and Culver (2005) it was clear that few HEIs had policies around the disclosure of sensitive information. This could include information around health and disability as well as clarity around what is shared from previous placements. It seems the case that most practice assessors would have access to previous placement reports however my research found that this was not always the case. Clarity around health needs or disability needs seems to me essential, to

protects the needs of practice assessors, students and by implication, service users. This is an area that might be useful to explore in a UK context – perhaps there is scope here for some further research.

### **Practice Assessor's Reflective Toolkit**

My research highlighted that some practice assessors appear to get caught up in the emotionality of the situation. What might seem helpful therefore is a reflective toolkit that could assist practice assessors to reflect upon and make sense of their own feelings as well as the student. Another possible feature of the toolkit would be to aid the practice assessor in planning a practical way forward, with some practical strategies to assist in managing the situation. This might include a four week plan about what the student needs to demonstrate in the particular agency as well as the more intangible issues at stake, such as further support for the student and/or practice assessor. Whilst this toolkit is yet to be devised (my first task after completion of this doctorate) it could include the following:

- A questionnaire to encourage assessors and students to reflect on the current emotional climate, the source of these feelings and how they might be managed
- A practical guide to setting up action plans to manage the situation.
- Learning styles inventories/questionnaires to aid the development of the learning relationship further (although this is considered current good practice anyway).
- A questionnaire or flow chart to consider how far the assessor has provided the appropriate learning opportunities and what could be done differently/better etc.
- A questionnaire for students to consider what they perceive as their areas of difficulties and what might be their solution to the issues (i.e. promote a more solution focused approach).
- A flow chart to consider the starting point of the student and progress to date.



As it can be seen, the reflective toolkit is in its infancy but something very practical that encourages assessors and students alike to be reflective would seem to be indicated. What might be useful therefore is to pilot such a toolkit with some practice assessors in the context of my own workplace. The chapter now goes on to consider further research.

### **Areas For Further Research In The Area of Practice Learning**

I would like to continue researching the topic of the assessment of social work students further using different research strategies, in particular utilising ethnographic methodology, although the realities of undertaking such research - the issue of time, access etc, seem at this point to be prohibitive factors. It is clear that my research touched on issues that need further exploration, in particular the impact of disability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class on practice learning assessment processes although this has been explored in existing literature both in social work and other disciplines. A question is raised about the assessment of PQ candidates, are they possibly being given the benefit of the doubt by PQ mentors? As mentioned earlier, there is also a need to develop and pilot the practice learning reflective toolkit.

Another area that seems pertinent to explore is to consider how far ASWs' practice in relation to practice assessing is different from that of practice assessors in or from other settings. Is there indeed a higher failure rate by ASW practice assessors than non ASW/mental health practice assessors? It is clear that a quantitative approach may be initially useful in this respect. This leads to an interest as to what are the qualitative differences between ASW's, and other social workers. This interest was sparked in an informal discussion with another doctorate student, who made a comment that ASWs were "different beasts" to children and family social workers. Such research inevitably moves away from the practice education per se but leads to consideration of the environmental factors that shape practice norms, culture and values and by default, assessment practice.

The impact of the new qualifications for practice assessors also seems pertinent for research, not least in the differences in practice between those practitioners who have undertaken just one module and those who have undertaken the post graduate diploma. My concern is that practitioners' understanding of the assessment process and their role may not be sufficient if undertaking just one module – this may make failing a student even more unlikely. The numbers of practitioners pursuing the post graduate diploma/masters route rather than just one module would also be interesting to explore as my concern is that employers are only funding the very minimum.

Another area of further research that seems pertinent concerns coming back to the work I undertook in year 1 of the DSW programme, namely the evaluation assignment, which focused on tutors' attitudes and practices in relation to students failing in practice learning settings. This seems an interesting area to pursue further not least in light of the research findings that found that the tutors' attitudes towards the student and or/failing impacted on the process. The perceived power differentials between the HEI and the practice assessors/agency also need further analysis. How this power differential can be minimised also seems pertinent. It also is clear that the views of students themselves is missing from this doctorate and therefore another area of future research would focus on how students perceive the assessment process, not least when they have been failed or referred. Indeed there is only one UK study that has looked at this, Burgess et al (1998a, 1998b). It is also clear at this stage in the research process that I did not explore whether there are any differences in practice or the experience of failing a student between on-site and off-site practice assessors and the possible dynamics that may emerge in these on-site/off-site assessor arrangements. My hypothesis would be that the off-site assessor may be more comfortable in the assessor role (and indeed the off-site role demands it) and the on-site maintains the enabler role. It also has only recently occurred to me that the thesis raises another issue, that of how assessors manage their social work roles. If practice assessors fail to fail students, do they also fail to fail service users, for example, is it possible that social workers give potentially dangerous parents, the benefit of the doubt?

## **Dissemination Strategy**

A dissemination strategy is now required to ensure the findings contained in this thesis do not gather dust in The British Library. In the early stages of thinking about possible dissemination of the findings, i.e. when I was still writing the thesis, I had to critically consider my career plans and goals and made the realisation that I would need to work in a university to become more consistently part of the academic community and be able to give myself the best opportunity to disseminate my findings as widely as possible. To that end, in October 2009, as I was in the process of submitting my thesis, I applied for a job as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of East London and was fortunate to be offered the position and will commence employment on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010. It is clear that I will need to disseminate my findings to the practice assessing community and the academic community. The plans for dissemination within the practice assessing will now be discussed.

My priority is to disseminate the findings back to the research participants – to that end, although I will no longer be employed by Havering College, the college will be hosting an evening event whereby I will present details of the research to the research participants, college staff, service users, practice assessors and representatives from agencies that the college work closely with. It is hoped that the event will also gain some publicity.

I have been asked to attend an event at Coventry University in March 2010 to facilitate a workshop on managing failing students in practice learning settings using the research findings. This forum is a practical way to disseminate my research findings. Additionally, I have and continue to, facilitate teaching sessions on the issues raised by failing social work students in practice learning settings and good assessor practice at Sussex University on their post qualifying programmes in my role as associate lecturer. This has proved a useful way of disseminating my research findings. I hope to be able to develop my freelance training role further and offer the sessions to local authorities and indeed, have had some interest from two agencies – again very practical ways of disseminating findings to practitioners.

Clearly, the research findings need dissemination amongst an academic community as well as practice assessors and to that end there is clearly scope to write some papers for a range of academic journals. My plans for the focus of articles and which journal may be most appropriate to submit them to are detailed below:

- ◆ Article on the overall findings – Journal of Social Work Education
- ◆ The use of VCR in social work research – Qualitative Social Work
- ◆ Good assessment practice when failing a social work student – Journal of Practice Teaching
- ◆ Practice Assessors Relationships with HEIs – Social Work Education
- ◆ The ethical issues involved in practitioner research, i.e. uncovering bad practice – Qualitative Social Work

To date I have begun writing an article based on the research findings and have given myself a deadline to complete this task. I have also devised a timetable for the completion of the remaining articles. For me, timetabling is a useful approach and one I adopted throughout the research process.

Another way of disseminating the research findings would be attend conferences and I have recently submitted an abstract for the JSWEC 2010 conference around the issue of practice assessors relationship with HEIs as well as a jointly submitted abstract, looking at the issue from an Italian social work perspective. There is also scope to submit an abstract for the National Organisation of Practice Teachers Conference in 2010. I also need to think about presenting at other professions conferences, for example, nursing or Youth and Community work. It is interesting to note that I have had some interest from nurse educators who are also exploring the same issues, i.e. how to improve the clinical assessment of student nurses.

Clearly I need to ensure these ideas become reality although I am confident that working in a university setting will be of enormous benefit in ensuring these ideas come to fruition as well as utilising my organisational skills, sheer

determination and single mindedness that helped me complete this doctorate. I will now go on to discuss what I learnt from the process of undertaking doctoral research.

### **What I Learnt From The Research Process**

My knowledge of research methodology has been considerably sharpened and developed. I have also come to understand how I position myself as a researcher, which is as far along the qualitative spectrum as it is possible to go. This is because I enjoy the uncertainties, the contradictions and complexities of human behaviour and I like the notion of story telling. I realise this preferred position may change depending on the context of the research, in terms of what is its purpose and who is commissioning it etc. Nonetheless, I learnt from undertaking this doctorate that I really enjoy being involved in research, despite its challenges - indeed I also learnt that research processes raise mixed emotions, from despair to exhilaration. At times it felt that I would never finish the doctorate and it felt like a huge millstone around my neck. I also often got frustrated with my lack of progress when work pressures continually got in the way of working on the thesis. In year 1 of the DSW programme I came close to failing one of my assignments and I therefore had to confront my own inadequacies and consider why the process at the time had made me so angry. Despite some miserable times, I never contemplated giving up the doctorate as the unhappy periods were balanced against moments of great excitement, a sense of growing achievement when the thesis began to take shape and things seem to magically fall into place.

In terms of the substantive issue itself, the assessment task in practice learning situations, I feel my skills and knowledge have developed in respect of my own ways of working as a freelance practice assessor and mentor and how I manage placements in my role as a tutor. I have also used the knowledge gained during the process to offer support and guidance to practice assessors who may be confronted with potentially failing students. To that end, I have run sessions on failings students for practice education candidates in a number of

HEIs as well as attending practice assessor forums to discuss the issue of failing social work students. Acknowledging the difficulty of the task and how stressful it is seems enormously helpful to practice assessors, not least when they realise they are not the only one to have experienced such intense and uncomfortable feelings. The research has also made me critically consider the nature of social work training itself and the issue of competency models for the assessment of professional practice. Clearly, it is impossible to account for everything I have learnt whilst undertaking this research but I like to think that the students (and staff<sup>67</sup>) I teach have benefited from my learning as well as my employers, who are continuing to allow me to carry out research projects on a range of issues in the college.

## **Final Conclusion**

Overall this thesis has explored why practice assessors find it so difficult to fail social work students. This is because:

- Practice assessors sometimes get caught up in the emotionality of the situation and lose their reflective ability.
- Practice assessors are not always able to demonstrate insight into the dynamics and relationship created between themselves, the student and the tutor.
- Practice assessors often internalise the students' failings as their own failings – to fail the student would mean they themselves have failed.
- Some practice assessors struggle to manage the potential conflicting roles within the practice educator umbrella, i.e. the nurturer/enabler with the managerial/assessor functions.
- Some practice assessors struggle with notions of competency and the assessment framework.

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<sup>67</sup> I also carry out staff training at the college and have run sessions on “Doing a Doctorate” and “Qualitative Research for Scientists, Sceptics and Positivists”.

- Some practice assessors often have an unacknowledged understanding of what is competency, that they try to “shoe horn” into the competency assessment model.
- Some practice assessors have an under-developed and under theorised working notion of the assessment process
- Some practice assessors do not explicitly acknowledge and recognise their gate-keeping role.

Given the timing of the eventual completion of this doctorate, when the Social Work Taskforce are reporting back on the perceived failings and inadequacies of social work and social work training, these findings are potential grist to the mill. On the other hand, the findings pose an opportunity to develop practice education further and by implication, develop social work practice. That practice education requires closer attention is demonstrated by this thesis and it is clear that the practice-learning element of social work education is incredibly important, yet does not receive the academic attention it ought. Hopefully this thesis will make a useful contribution to the debate.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Interview Schedule (Phase 1 of the Research)

### 1) Personal details

- How do you define your identity? (age, ethnicity, where you live, sexuality)
- What was your pre-qualifying social care experience?
- What was your route into social work?
- What is your current social work role (when you worked with student?)
- What types of assessment did you/do you do in your social work role?

### 2) Motivations for Becoming a Practice Teacher

- What led you to do the PTA?
- What were your experience of your own practice teachers/supervisors?
- How were you assessed as a student?
- Did you understand the assessment process?
- Did you understand the college process?
- What do you see your role(s) is/are as a practice teacher?

### 3) Impressions of the Student

- What did you imagine your “student” to be like?
- Was there a “type” of student you didn’t want to have?
- Was there a type of student you did want to have?
- What did you think when you first met the student?
- Were their distinct periods where you had different views/thoughts/concerns about the student?
- In what ways did you see yourself as similar/different to the student?

### 4) Assessment

- What types of assessment did you use in your work with the student?
- What books/theories have informed your understanding about assessment?
- What evidence did you draw on to support your final recommendation?
- Were the college assessment systems clear?
- Do you think the system of social work assessment may pre-dispose against failure?
- Do you think the assessment system might be oppressive?
- What do you understand and feel about competency models of assessing professional practice?
- What expectations do you have about minimum standards of practice a student must reach?

### **5) Management**

- What do you think now at the end of the placement?
- What might you do differently?
- What did you learn about yourself and more generally about practice teaching?
- Do you see the range of “roles” required to do practice assessing as complimentary or conflictual?

### **6) Failure**

- What do you think a student has to do to be recommended a fail?
- What constitutes good enough practice?
- How might you identify “at risk” students?
- How would you/did you feel about a potentially “failing student?”
- Do you think more students should fail than who currently do?
- How do you conceptualise and manage “failure” in your current work role?
- Do you think you would be more or less likely to fail a student on their first placement?
- Do you think you would be more or less likely to fail a student on their second placement?
- In what ways did you “fail” the student?

### **7) Power**

- In what ways did you have “power” over the student?
- In what way did you feel the student had “power” over you?
- How did you attempt to mitigate against the power imbalance?
- How do you mitigate against the power imbalance in practice?
- Was there anything potentially oppressive about your work with the student?
- Looking back on the work you did with the student, was there any thing which perhaps collusory?
- How far did you see the work the student carried out under your supervision as “your” work?

## **Appendix 2 - Interview Schedule Interview – Phase 2 of Research**

### **1) Personal details**

- How do you define your identity? (age, ethnicity, where you live, sexuality)
- What was your pre-qualifying social care experience?
- What was your route into social work?
- What is/was your current social work role (when you worked with student?)
- What types of assessment did you/do you do in your social work role?
- How many students have you worked with?
- How many have you passed, failed, referred?
- Where there any difficulties on placement?

### **2) Motivations for Becoming a Practice Teacher**

- What led you to do the PTA?
- What were your experience of your own practice teachers/supervisors?
- How were you assessed as a student?
- Did you understand the assessment process?
- What do you see your role(s) is/are as a practice teacher?

### **4) Assessment**

- What types of assessment did you use in your work with the student?
- What evidence did you draw on to support your final recommendation?
- Were the college/university assessment systems clear?
- How confident do you feel about the assessment procedures you and the college use?
- In what ways might the assessment system be oppressive?
- What do you understand and feel about competency models of assessing professional practice?
- What expectations do you have about minimum standards of practice a student must reach?
- What factors did you consider in decision-making process with student?
- What were your thoughts during the assessment process?
- When do you think you made a firm decision about your final recommendation?
- Do you think you made the “right” decision?
- How confident did you feel making your final decision?
- Did anything impact on your assessment/decision regarding the student?
- Do you think on reflection, there were things/issues you ignored/chose to ignore? How did the realisation emerge?
- Are you clear about the college’ disruption procedures? What are they? How would you use them?

### **6) Failure**

- What do you think a student has to do to be recommended a fail?

- What constitutes good enough practice?
- How might you identify “at risk” students?
- How would you/did you feel about a potentially “failing student?”
- Do you think more students should fail than who currently do?
- Do you think the system of social work assessment may pre-dispose against failure?
- How do you conceptualise and manage “failure” in your current work role?
- Why do you think pts may be reluctant to fail students?
- What might get in the way of failing a student?
- Do you see the range of “roles” required to do practice assessing as complimentary or conflictual?
- Do you think you would be more or less likely to fail a student on their first placement?
- Do you think you would be more or less likely to fail a student on their second placement?
- In what ways did you/have you “failed” the student?

#### **7) Power**

- In what ways did you have “power” over the student?
- In what way did you feel the student had “power” over you?
- How did you attempt to mitigate against the power imbalance?
- How do you mitigate against the power imbalance in practice?
- Was there anything potentially oppressive about your work with the student?
- Looking back on the work you did with the student, was there any thing which perhaps collusory?
- How far did you see the work the student carried out under your supervision as “your” work?

#### **8) Concluding Remarks**

Anything you want to add/say/comment on (could be pta, college, pta course, research process)

### Appendix 3 – Initial Consent Form

I have read the attached information and agree to participate in the research.

(Please tick) Yes or No

I am aware that what I say in the interviews may be used anonymously in the assignment.

(Please tick) Yes or No

I am clear that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, without affecting my rights and without affecting my assessment as a practice teacher

(Please tick) Yes or No

Signature:.....

Name:.....

Date:.....

When I receive this form, it will be stored separately from the interview data.

Thank you again.

**Appendix 4 – Revised Consent Form (Practice Teaching Award Candidates)**

**C O N S E N T   F O R M**

I confirm that Jo Finch has previously provided me with written information about the research project and has verbally provided up to date details about the current focus of the research.

I am aware that what I say in the interviews may be used anonymously in the final assignment (doctoral thesis). I understand that Jo Finch may also use the material at a later date to write an academic paper for a journal(s) and a book.

I am aware that Jo Finch is also using her experience as a practice assessor/mentor to generate further research data.

I am aware that the tape recordings will be held in secure storage during the research process and then destroyed after the statutory period.

I understand that I will not be identified in any way and pseudonyms will be used. My place of work will not be identified other than the particular area/type of social work.

I am clear that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, without affecting my rights and without affecting my assessment as a practice teacher

I understand that this consent form will be stored separately from the research data so as not to identify me. I hereby give consent to participate in this research.

Signature:.....

Name:.....

Date:.....



## **Appendix 5 – Information about Research Given to Respondents**

### ***Information Sheet – DSW Research (Oct 2005)***

I am currently a student on the Professional Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Programme at Sussex University and am now in the third year. The first year of the course was spent learning about methodology and undertaking a small-scale evaluation. The second year of the course entailed undertaking a literature review with the aim of planning for the research to be carried out in year three.

My studies so far have centred on the issue of the assessment of social worker students on placement, in particular, those who may be marginal or failing. My work has also looked at how tutors' support practice teachers in those situations and how practice teachers make sense of assessment criteria. I start this research with a view that perhaps more students should fail social work courses than perhaps who currently do and last year looked at statistics from a range of providers across London to ascertain the failure rates on the placement module.

I therefore hope to capture the process of how practice teachers make assessment decisions at the time rather than retrospectively as most existing research focuses on. The literature is also somewhat divided with those advocating a "fail more" approach and others advocating systems that might reduce failure. Therefore this research hopes to close that dichotomy by focusing on the assessment process within a qualitative framework.

To this end, I hope also to use my experience as a practice assessor to also create research data by using a reflective narrative approach. I would anticipate that I would need to interview you approximately three times, probably the third time would be after the student has finished. The interviews would certainly take no more than an hour. I would then need to transcribe the interviews and use discourse analysis and/or a ground theory approach to make sense of the data.

You would be anonymised in the eventual write up and I would not indicate what borough you work in. Clearly being both your practice assessor and practitioner-research raises interesting ethical dilemmas but I would like to assure you that if you choose to withdraw from the research this would not in any way affect my assessment of your practice teaching.

The eventual write up, will be carried out from September 2006 and I hope to submit sometime in the summer of 2007. I would like to thank you in advance for agreeing to participate in this research, especially given how busy most social workers are. I would try and be as flexible as possible with the interviewing and could also do it in the evenings/weekends if that would meet your needs better.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 01708 455011 ext 4075 (Tuesdays, Thursday and Fridays) or

Jo Finch

## Appendix 6 – Table of Respondents Data – 1<sup>st</sup> Round of Interviews

Table 2:

Date of Interview	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Length of Pre qual	Qualification	No. of Years Qual	Current role	Date of PTA	Total No. of Students worked with	No. of refer or fails
5/3/06	Jennifer	Dual Heritage White/black British	13	DIPSW	1 1/2	Youth Justice – social worker	Pta cand.	1	Pass (but probs)
23/3/09	Claudette	White UK	12	CSS	17	Manager – Fostering & Adoption	PTA cand.	1	PASS but probs
29/3/06	Marion	White Irish	N/a	NURSE	33	Manager – Drugs and Alcohol	PTA cand.	3 (plus nursing students)	0
5/4/06	Caroline	White Welsh	20	DIPSW	5	Manager Fostering & Adoption	PTA cand	2	0
5/4/06	Anna	Black British/African	Not given	DIPSW/ MA	7	Youth Justice – SW – Social Worker	PTA cand	2	0
4/5/06	Tracy	Black African	18	DIPSW/	8	C&F - Social Worker	PTA cand.	1	Pass (but problems)

## Appendix 7 – Table of Respondents Data – 2<sup>nd</sup> Round of Interviews

Table 3

Date of Interview	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Length of Pre qual	Qualification	No. of Years Qual	Current role	Date of PTA	Total No. of Students worked	No. of refer or fails
9/10/06	Terry	White American	none	MA	4	C & F – Senior Prac	PTA cand	2	Pass but 1 prob
11/10/06	Jane	White Irish	Not given	DipSW	11	C&F Fostering & Adoption	PTA cand.	1	Pass but problems
16/10/06	Patricia	White UK	3	Nurse CSS	20	Manager – Day Care Centre - PD	PTA cand.	15 nurse 1 social worker	1 nurse fail 1 refer sw
18/10/06	Andrew	White Uk	Not given	DIPSw	19	EDT ASW	2004	4	2 refer 1 fail
2/11/06	Louise	White UK	Not given	DipSw BA	11	Guardian Ad Litum Freelance SW	1999	8	1 borderline 2 fails
6/11/06	Susan	White UK	Not given	Home Office Approve Status	35	Freelance PT	1993	150-200	Approx 12 fails
7/11/06	Emily	White UK	3	DipSw MA	7	C&F Social Worker	Not got	3	1 refer

## Appendix 7 Continued – Table of Respondents Data – 2<sup>nd</sup> Round of Interviews

Table 4

Date of Interview	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Length of Pre qual	Qualification	No. of Years Qual	Current role	Date of PTA	Total No. of Students worked with	No. of refer or fails
8/11/06	Lily	White UK	5	CQSW MA	15	Social Work Educator	1994	36 (including nursed)	2 fail 1 refer 1 passed should fail
14/11/06	Peter	African Caribbean	6	DipSW	8	CMHT ASW	2001	6	2 fails
29/11/06	Claire	Black British African origin	4	CQSW BA	20	SW lecturer	1991	12	3 fails
9/12/06	Daisy	British Indian	17	DipSW	1 1/2	C&F social worker	PTA cand.	1	1 fail
20/1/07	Thomas	Welsh	N/a	N/a support worker	27	Manager – adults placements	1989	3	1 fail
10/7/07	Katie	White UK Jewish	7	DipSw	12	SW lecturer	1998	14	2 placement breakdowns
16/7/07	Martha	White UK/French	6	DipSw MSc	10	CMHT ASW	2003	1	1 fail

## Appendix 8 – Sussex Institute, University of Sussex Ethical Checklist

### UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX SUSSEX INSTITUTE RESEARCH ETHICS CHECKLIST

The Standards apply to all research undertaken, whether empirical or not. When planning non-empirical work, you will need to consider how specific standards and guidelines may best be applied to your research approach, processes and potential impact. Where there is no equivalent for non-empirical work, tick 'not applicable', explaining briefly why in the comment box for each standard.

#### Standard 1: Safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research

1.1	Will you consider the well-being, wishes and feelings, and best interests of those involved or affected?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
1.2	Will written and signed consent be obtained without coercion? Will participants be informed of their right to refuse or to withdraw at any time?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
1.3	Will the purposes and processes of the research be fully explained, using alternative forms of communication where necessary and making reference to any implications for participants of time, cost and the possible influence of the outcomes?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
1.4	Where covert research is proposed, has a case been made and brought to the attention of the School Research Governance Committee and approval sought from the relevant external professional ethical committee?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.5	Does the proposal include procedures to verify material with respondents and offer feedback on findings?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
1.6	Will conditional anonymity and confidentiality be offered?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input type="checkbox"/>
1.7	Have you identified the appropriate person to whom disclosures that involve danger to the participant or others, must be reported?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above Re: 1.5 – feedback on overall findings agreed, but not to check transcripts				

**Standard 2: Ensure the safety of researchers undertaking fieldwork**

2.1	Have you identified any physical or social risks to yourself in undertaking the fieldwork?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2.2	Will you have access to an administrator who will keep a diary of any fieldwork visits and your whereabouts?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2.3	Have you considered how you will collect your material and whether this could make you vulnerable?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above				

**Standard 3: Uphold the highest possible standards of research practices including in research design, collection and storage of research material, analysis, interpretation and writing**

3.1	Will literature be used appropriately, acknowledged, referenced and where relevant, permission sought from the author(s)?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
3.2	Is the research approach well suited to the nature and focus of the study?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
3.3	Will the material be used to address existing or emerging research question(s) only?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
3.4	Does the research design include means of verifying findings and interpretations?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
3.5	Where research is externally funded, will agreement with sponsors be reached on reporting and intellectual property rights?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
3.6	Will plans be made to enable archiving of the research data?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above				

**Standard 4: Consider the impact of the research and its use or misuse for those involved in the study and other interested parties.**

4.1	Have the short and long term consequences of the research been considered from the different perspectives of participants, researchers, policy-makers and, where relevant, funders?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
4.2	Have the costs of the research to participants or their institutions/services and any possible compensation been considered?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4.3	Has information about support services that might be needed as a consequence of any possible unsettling effects of the research itself been identified? <sup>68</sup> Where is the note to which this number refers?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
4.4	Are the plans flexible enough to take appropriate action should your project have an effect on the individuals or institutions/services involved?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above				

**Standard 5: Ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant**

5.1	Have colleagues/supervisors been invited to comment on your research proposal?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
5.2	Have any sensitive ethical issues been raised with the School Research Governance Committee and comments sought?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5.3	Has the relevant external professional ethical committee been identified?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5.4	Have the guidelines from that professional committee been used to check the proposed research?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above				
5,2 – whilst my research raises potential ethical issues, has been fully explored with supervisors				



**Standard 6: Ensure relevant legislative and policy requirements are met**

6.1	Do you need an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check?	<b>Yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>N/A</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
6.2	Are you certain about implications arising from legislation? If not has contact been made with the designated officer (Chair of the SI Research Governance Committee)?	<b>Yes</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>No</b> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Please add further comments if helpful to clarify the above				

## **Appendix 9 – BASW Codes of Ethics for Undertaking Research**

### **4.4.4 Research**

In applying the general provisions of this Code, social workers engaged in research will observe the following specific ethical responsibilities.

- a. At all stages of the research process, from inception and resourcing through design and investigation to dissemination, social work researchers have a duty to maintain an active, personal and disciplined ethical awareness and to take practical and moral responsibility for their work.
- b. The aims and process of social work research, including choice of methodology, and the use made of findings, will be congruent with the social work values of respect for human dignity and worth and commitment to social justice. Social work researchers will therefore:
  - Predicate their work on the perspectives and lived experience of the research subject except where this is not appropriate;
  - Seek to ensure that the research in which they are engaged contributes to empowering service users, to promoting their welfare and to improving their access to economic and social resources;
  - Seek to work together with disempowered groups, individuals and communities to devise, articulate and achieve research agendas which respect fundamental human rights and aim towards social justice;
  - Retain a primary concern for the welfare of research subjects and actively protect them from harm, particularly those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or oppressed or have exceptional needs;
  - Consider and set out clearly how they would deal with the ascertainable consequences of proposed research activity for service users, in order to ensure that their legitimate interests are not unwarrantably compromised or prejudiced by the proposed investigation;
  - Not use procedures involving concealment except where no alternative strategy is feasible, where no harm to the research subject can be foreseen and where the greater good is self-evidently served.
- c. In accordance with their duty of competence, social work researchers will, in their chosen methodology and in every other aspect of their research, ensure that they are technically competent to carry out the particular investigation to a high standard. Where research is carried out primarily as an educational or instructional tool, this responsibility also falls on the student's supervisor.
- d. In accordance with their duty of integrity, social work researchers have a duty to:
  - deal openly and fairly with every participant in the research process, including participants, service users, colleagues, funders and

employers;

- inform every participant of all features of the research which might be expected to influence willingness to participate, especially but not exclusively when access to services may be, or be perceived to be, affected by or dependent on participation;
  - in all cases respect participants' absolute right to decline to take part in or to withdraw from the research programme, with special attention to situations in which the researcher is in any way in authority over the participant;
  - ensure that subjects' participation in a programme is based on freely given, informed and acknowledged consent, secured through the use of language or other appropriate means of communication readily comprehensible to the research subject, conveying an adequate explanation of the purpose of the research and the procedures to be followed;
  - seek to exclude from their work any unacknowledged bias;
  - report findings accurately, avoiding distortion whether by omission or otherwise, including any findings which reflect unfavourably on any influential body or research sponsor, on the researcher's own interests or on prevailing wisdom or orthodox opinion;
  - seek to ensure that their findings are not misused or misrepresented;
  - acknowledge when publishing findings the part played by all participants and never take credit for the work of others.
- e. In accordance with their duty of confidentiality, social work researchers will respect and maintain the confidentiality of all data or information produced in the course of their research, except as agreed in advance with participants (including research subjects) or as prescribed by law.

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## Theoretical Frameworks! The Biggest Surprise

