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**WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF
ESTABLISHING AN INDEPENDENT
PRACTICE WITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY
SOCIAL CARE FIELD IN ENGLAND?**

John Anthony Hyder-Wilson

**A thesis submitted to the University of Sussex in
accordance with the requirements of the degree of PhD**

October 2012

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis is entirely my own and original work. No part of it was written in conjunction with other people. It has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree. No part of it has been previously submitted as required coursework.

I hereby also 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.

Signed.....Date.....

SUMMARY/ABSTRACT OF THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

John Anthony Hyder-Wilson

A thesis submitted to the University of Sussex in accordance with the requirements of
the degree of PhD

Thesis title: What is the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England?

My thesis examines the journey made by myself and others from paid employment, usually with a local authority, to self-employed status within an independent practice. I have tried throughout, as far as possible, to uncover the many meanings and essential elements of the experience: both my own, and those of others. Fully integrated within my thesis are the detailed experiences of my research respondents who have travelled a similar journey. I have used a heuristic methodology, first established and pioneered by Clark Moustakas. This demands that the researcher and his or her respondents must have lived through the experience being described. The methodology is congruent with my own positioning as a researcher and also provides a suitable, flexible but rigorous framework within which the emerging story (and stories) can be told. This approach has also been of the utmost value in structuring my research. Moustakas defines the heuristic approach as:

A process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries' (1990:9).

I have used other approaches for data analysis as Moustakas does not give detailed guidance in this area. I have principally used the approach pioneered by Max Van Manen which can be described as an evolved phenomenological approach.

My thesis therefore describes and explores the experience of setting up my independent practice from its very first manifestations through to the present. Integrated within that narrative are the detailed and rich ‘borrowed’ experiences of my research respondents captured through 11 in-depth interviews and a consideration of the similarities and differences of the individual experiences.

I have let the individual voices speak fully which draws out the themes of the experience of becoming independent in terms of motivation, preparation, the moment of independence and finally, the experience of independence. In the succeeding chapter I have analysed the findings with reference to the literature on the nature of modern day social care organisations, organisational theory and motivation, and have also explored in some depth underlying issues concerning the nature of identity and selfhood and the autonomy of individuals. I conclude that there is a core of selfhood and that, within defined limits, individuals are free to choose their own path. A final creative synthesis draws the research project to a close by considering how all that has been learned fits together.

My research strategy has essentially been an exploratory one which aims to “generate knowledge about a relatively under researched or newly emerging subject” (D’Cruz and Jones 2003:17). The under-researched and emerging subject here is about the experience of establishing an independent consultancy in the social care field.

My contribution to knowledge on this subject falls into several areas, including what I see as the necessary and gradual liberalisation of the social care field which allowed independent practices to evolve. I also contend that my research respondents had a particular and specific motivational profile which explains why these particular individuals made the move to independence when others did not. A further finding is that my research group exchanged a constricting organisation for a more comfortable one: that of the informal network. I also find that making the move to independence is a near irrevocable step and that, in effect, the research group went through an important identity shift in their transition to independence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sources of information were traditional ones, mainly books, journals and other sources provided through the University of Sussex library and from own collection of literature. I have also used websites and other electronic sources of information and all of these are clearly referenced in the text.

My research procedures were simple ones: I identified six research respondents who had all made the move from paid employment to independence within the last few years and conducted in depth interviews with five of them twice and the remaining person once. I used an aide memoire to guide the interviews which were otherwise unstructured. I used no sources of data other than the information that was provided to me by the research respondents and additionally that which came from my own experience.

I would like to thank my six research respondents who so generously provided their time, five of them on two separate occasions. They have all provided me with a richness and depth of information which has been of inestimable value.

Finally, I must acknowledge my considerable debt of gratitude to my wife and family and to my business partner. Without them, I simply would not have completed this study.

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INTRODUCTION

(i) This study and my background

This study concerns the experience of establishing an independent practice in the children's social care field in England. My own independent practice was originally envisaged as a consultancy-type practice with two relatively constant main areas of work and several more rapidly changing subsidiary ones. The main areas are those of (i) consultancy and (ii) training services. The consultancy work of my business partner (who I will introduce properly below) and myself has focused principally on practice and management improvement within children's services and has developed in range and depth over the past few years as our expertise has slowly grown. It is important to make it clear at the outset that we never set out to be (and to this day have never operated as) an independent practice that takes on direct work with service users, e.g. casework, adoption assessments or one-to-one work with children. We made the decision right at the beginning that our skill set had evolved, over time, away from direct social work practice into social work management both of people and of practice and processes. Our training practice was originally mainly concerned with providing child protection training to 'early years' staff under a contract, although this later branched out into other related areas. While these two broad areas of activity remain, it would be accurate to say that our consultancy practice has grown over time while our training activities have tended to diminish, or at least become subsidiary to our consultancy work.

This research examines the journey made by myself and others from paid employment, usually with a local authority, to self-employed status. I have tried throughout, as far as

possible, to uncover the many meanings and essential elements of the experience: both my own, and those of others.

My professional background is as a qualified social worker (1981), practising first in the adult learning disabilities field between 1981 – 88 with two local authorities and a voluntary provider; and then in children's services between 1989 – 2003 with another local authority. I became a manager within children's services in 1992 and then worked as a manager at various levels from 1992 – 2003.

My independent practice was founded by myself and a female colleague and we remain the co-directors. We had known each other for about 9 years before the commencement of our independent practice and her background is similar to mine: social work qualified and then a manager within children's services from 1999 onwards. In December 2003 I left my regular employment of 14 years with my last local authority. From about the end of 2002 I had begun to seriously plan with my future business partner to leave the authority and set up business together as independent consultants and trainers. In the spring of 2003 the idea of undertaking a research project in parallel with the development of my business took shape. I formally commenced my PhD research at the University of Sussex towards the end of 2003. I should also say that this followed my MA, undertaken at the University of Sussex between 1999 – 2001, which had focused on supervisory practice in the workplace and which had been a significant motivator for further and more advanced study.

The idea of undertaking this particular study first started to take shape with the realisation that what I was doing was a significant and major life choice. I became

fascinated with this, partly because to make such a move seemed out of character with myself. Here I was, a man in early middle age with a family, a mortgage and heavy commitments and yet – inexorably and for reasons which I did not fully understand – I was preparing to give up a well paid and secure management job for an uncertain future. Why? What was driving this? Getting to the root of these questions by focusing on the unfolding experience became both important and – at times – urgent. At other times, as the business steadily developed, the motivational urge became buried under mountains of work. However, it has always eventually re-emerged and become stronger and stronger as time has gone on.

(ii) My Approach

This research project has a strong autobiographical element which is justified methodologically – as will become clear – as it examines my own experience of my emerging business, ranging from the genesis of ‘first thoughts’, which lie far back in time, through to the present. However, also central and equally important to this research is the experience of others, as will also become clear. I interviewed a set of research respondents who had also made the transition from paid employment in the social care field to independent practice, just as I had. Their experiences, alongside mine, form the very core of this research project. When I am speaking of the collective experiences of the research respondents and myself, I will at times refer to the ‘research group’.

My research question (after several early evolutions) has become ‘What is the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England?’ This signals that a personal and autobiographical element will indeed

have a strong presence. However, this research is by no means purely about my own experience: integrated within it are the detailed experiences of my research respondents who have travelled a similar journey. I spent a long time searching for the ‘correct’ methodology in the early stages of the research and trying on things for size. That process will be explained in detail the chapter on methodology, which comes after the first chapter on the changing social care scene. I eventually decided to use the heuristic approach which was first established and pioneered by Clark Moustakas. I sometimes wonder why it took so long to decide on this. I needed something that was both congruent with my own positioning as a researcher and which would also provide a suitable, flexible but rigorous framework within which the emerging stories could be told. This approach has also been of the utmost value in structuring my research, although solely using the Moustakas approach to analyse the data has not proved possible, as I will explain further later. Moustakas defines the heuristic approach as:

a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. Heuristic processes incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries (Moustakas 1990:9).

As I slowly became aware during the early stages of this research that I as the researcher was bound up with the story in ways of which I was aware and also probably not yet aware, the advantages of this humanistic, searching and yet intimate approach appealed

to me more and more. The processes and phases of heuristic enquiry seemed to fit very closely and naturally with my embryonic topic.

I am very aware – and this awareness has increased over time – that the use of the Moustakas approach appears to strongly challenge conventional norms of advanced research. The strongly autobiographical element that Moustakas identifies as being central to the approach and of treating one's own material as data alongside those of the research respondents is unusual. He justifies this by stating that heuristic inquiry begins with a question that the researcher wishes to answer and then explains that:

The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – but perhaps universal – significance (1990:15)

This statement is hugely important and always must be borne in mind in both the writing and consideration of research using this methodology.

I wish to signal at an early stage that I found Moustakas broad brush on data analysis and I will go into more detail on this matter in the methodology chapter. I have had to turn to other approaches for assistance with this. After considering several options I have used the approach to data analysis pioneered by Max Van Manen and set out in his book 'Researching Lived Experience' (1997). This can probably be best described as an evolved phenomenological approach and – in my view – the two approaches fit well together, as will be explained fully in due course. My mission therefore has been to

describe and explore the experience of setting up an independent practice from its first manifestations through to a position that could be described as established, by both my research respondents and myself. Central to this narrative are the detailed and rich borrowed experiences of my research respondents, along with my own experience, and a deeper consideration of the meanings, similarities and differences of these individual experiences. This thesis will also include reference, particularly in the first chapter, to the external circumstances that led in part to the shaping of the practice, i.e. the fluid and changing social policy and political landscape within the social care field. The interrelationship between this phenomenon and the shape of my independent practice and those of others is also something that will be of interest and is explored within the interviews from a number of angles.

It has been clear from an early stage that my research strategy would be essentially an exploratory one which aims to “generate knowledge about a relatively under researched or newly emerging subject” (D’Cruz and Jones 2003:17). The under-researched and emerging subject here is about the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field.

(iii) Research Question and Definitions

My overarching research question is therefore:

What is the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England?

In this context, “to establish” means simply to plan for, set up, maintain and develop the operation of an independent practice.

At least two further definitional issues arise from this sentence. Firstly, and for the purposes of this research, the term ‘independent’ will mean a practice set up and owned by private individuals and completely self-financing through income generated by the business. Secondly, the term ‘social care field’ also needs a broad working definition. This is a somewhat trickier matter, but in my view it is that area of activity within British society aimed at providing assessment, intervention and care services to those defined as needy, vulnerable or in some way ‘at risk’. Nigel Horner, (2006) gives the following similar but wider definition:

Social care has emerged as the preferred term to encompass the range of personal interactions and services – including caring, supporting, assisting, tending, enabling – that are offered to people to promote and further their well-being, but which do not fit under the definition of health care (2006:1).

This is the definition that will be borrowed for this research project.

Agencies operating within the social care field may be from the public, voluntary or private sectors. I have limited the area of operation to England as that is where my independent practice is geographically based and where it operates, in common with the practices of my research participants. Another reason for so doing is that – particularly following devolution – social care and health systems in other parts of the UK are increasingly developing along separate tracks from the English system.

(iv) Research Participants and Thick Description

My choice of research participants was a careful one. I needed to identify other people in a similar position to myself: people with a background in the social care field, who had worked (at some point) as paid employees in the field and who had set up independent practices within the last 10 years. However, there were also other considerations, which I will discuss more fully in the introduction to the chapters concerning analysis of data. The most important of these concerned clearing the path so that an authentic and full discussion could take place unencumbered by any thoughts of giving away trade secrets in what is – by definition and of necessity – a competitive world. I feel that the clear assurances that I gave to my research respondents were effective and that the interviews were all of great value and honesty.

My research participants all had a unique story to tell. I held two sets of interviews, separated by about a year. My original 6 participants for the first set of interviews fell to 5 for the second set but these 11 interviews provided me with an enormous depth and richness of information. My first set of interviews concentrated on the big picture concerning why my participants had left salaried posts to set up independent practices and their thoughts and feelings about this. My second set of interviews focused down further on the ‘experience’ of establishing their independent practice.

I have borrowed from anthropology and ethnography the phrase ‘thick description’ to describe a particular style which I shall employ within this thesis. This will apply both to the analysis of the interviews and also to personal passages describing my own feelings and experiences at particular points in time. These will be used at various stages throughout the text. Clifford Geertz (1973) introduced the phrase ‘thick

description’ to describe the analysis and interpretation of signs to gain meaning within any specific setting or culture. I intend to use the personal passages to illustrate my own emerging thinking and to give a flavour of some personal events which were very significant in the development of my independent practice. These also mark my evolving awareness in relation to my own self-development and to my deepening understanding of the research question. This is absolutely central to the process of heuristic research. My further intention is to use the thick description process in these personal passages to add depth, meaning, texture and context to this study and they will also largely cover my own story. This fits with the broadly heuristic approach that will be used throughout this research. This approach is insistent that the whole research process must include self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery at its heart. These personal passages are therefore intended to be indicative of the growing self-awareness and self-knowledge of which Moustakas speaks.

This first personal passage is a consideration of the experience – that is, *my* experience – of leaving the local authority and is intended both to put into words and to reflect on the feelings I had at that time. It was written very shortly after my leaving, and although I have since edited it by cutting out some unnecessary detail, it remains unchanged otherwise. It begins with a depiction of what I wished, at almost all costs, to avoid.

I had worked for my local authority for 14 years, and in that time seen many “Leaving Do’s”. The traditional model, perhaps fading slightly in favour in recent years, involved some close variation of the following typical scenario. At lunchtime, in some dingy communal meeting room, rather fewer people than had been expected and hoped for would gather. A meagre buffet (including plastic cups of orange juice because “nobody

drinks at lunchtime” and sausage rolls) would be laid out on a table down one wall. The first attendees would usually sit down, quickly using up the few chairs dotted about. Later arrivals would grab a plate and a cup of juice and, balancing these uneasily between one hand and the other, hover about uncomfortably in small groups in the centre of the room. The “leaver” would attempt to circulate, and would invariably and tediously be asked the same questions by anyone that he or she approached – “Managed to escape, then?” being a common and particularly banal example.

The highlight of the event (usually about 30 minutes after the start) would be heralded by close colleagues of the “leaver” purposefully dashing about with plastic carrier bags, and whispering in the ear of the Most Senior Person present. This person would then, often with a sigh perceptible to acute observers, call for order and commence The Leaving Speech. This would either (i) be funny and short (rarely), (ii) unfunny and too long (often), or (iii) embarrassingly over the top about the “leaver’s” attributes which were curiously not always obvious to people before that moment. Commonly (ii) and (iii) would be combined to particularly excruciating effect. The Gift would then be presented, the “leaver” would say a few stumbling words of their own, and the conclusion of these would be a signal to everyone present that they could now decently and rapidly depart. Five minutes later the room would be empty and silent save for the detritus of the event and a rather sad atmosphere of aftermath.

I decided some time before I actually left that such an event was not for me. When I left it would be different. I had observed too many laboured variations on this theme, and often wondered whose needs were being met by events such as this. Most people, whatever their role in a given event, would say that they didn’t enjoy them, and found

them boring or embarrassing: “not another leaving do”. I was leaving my local authority together with a colleague and close friend to set up a new business. Following our resignation we spent quite a lot of time discussing the format of our leaving event. Both of us were clear it should break the hackneyed mould described above. We eventually decided on a two part event, comprising firstly an informal “join us in the pub” get together late on the afternoon of our last day, with a wide invite to all those with whom we had had contact. We were aware that there would be a presentation at this first event, and we planned to usurp control by being very clear that we would deliver The Speech ourselves and had in mind a gracious, generous and above all brief homily in which we would say a simple thanks to all past and present colleagues. The second event would then be held later that evening and would just involve a few close people in a quiet setting.

I really felt that I had made a difference in the post that I was about to leave. I had been a Service Manager there for five years and my job involved having overall responsibility for the child care service and managing 5 managers who themselves managed nearly 40 staff. The area I managed was both the biggest and most deprived area in the whole local authority by some considerable margin. We had more children Looked After, more on the Child Protection Register, and many more referrals into the office than any other Locality within the authority. Everything about the place was big and busy. I had managers of good calibre, and together we had made it work – we had no major staff vacancy problem, budgets were under control and there wasn’t the endemic and habitual crisis of morale that seemed to afflict other areas. People liked to come and work in our area and – with a few exceptions – staff and managers were energised and positive people. This was my clear view.

However, in my final year I had also started to feel a sense of slowly growing unease, as clouds appeared on the horizon that appeared to signal a major and ominous change in the weather. During this year it became more and more difficult to recruit staff when vacancies arose. A bruising battle with senior managers over the establishment of an admission panel also gave me my first taste of sustained and serious conflict, and it was not to my liking. I began to question whether we were as different as I had thought when reflecting more deeply on matters that I had not been able to put right. Above all, I had started to feel a creeping and gradually perceptible diminishment in my energies to tackle these issues. I put this down to having been around the same block too many times, along with a feeling that, in the end, the organisation simply takes all one has to give without much credit or recognition in return. Added to this was the fact that promotion opportunities were likely to be blocked for a considerable period. This was because a number of key posts were being held by people who by unofficial but common agreement were going nowhere else. This to me spelt out that it was time to leave. It was very important to me to leave on equable terms before I started to get too cynical about the possibilities for change. I had seen far too many people wander down this one-way street and become corrosively negative: in the end this conferred judgement directly upon them, rather than upon the job that they had become trapped in and frustrated with.

All of this meant that the image that I had of myself, my interactions with the workplace and staff, and of the lasting change that I and the management team had been able to achieve was slowly fraying at the edges. I was certainly considerably less sure of the scale and shape of my achievements in the months before I left than I had been a year

or so earlier. It was as if a pleasant garden viewed from a distance had turned out on closer examination to have had significantly more weeds and areas of dead grass than had been apparent from afar.

When I re-read these reflections – written within three months of my departure from the local authority – I am even more struck now by a real sense of doubt and struggle. Perhaps I was only an average manager after all. My previous personal and professional narrative had been about being different, being better, doing things well. Was this true? By the time I left, it was clearly much more open to doubt in my own mind, and I now recognise that my desperation to manage my leaving process differently was bound up with my anxieties about this. More importantly still for this research project, it also meant that I was determined and motivated to make independence work. I will evaluate these matters in more depth below.

(v) Further considerations

It is important to be clear that I brought two related thoughts into this research project. The first one is that the ground within the public sector had become far more fertile in recent years, particularly since 1995, in relation to the use of external consultancy services (although by 2010 and 2011 that view was starting to change). Phenomena such as the internal market and much greater interest in management *per se* (e.g. via management of individual and organisational performance, competitive provision, inspection regimes and published performance ratings) had seemed to create a surge of interest and demand in the public sector for external help in terms of organisational analysis, with the aim of improving performance. Many new independent practices, and particularly those offering (like mine) a more hands-off consultancy service, have

sprung up in the last few years in response to this perceived market gap. At the other end of the organisational scale, established and hugely influential private sector multinational businesses such as KPMG, Deloitte and Price Waterhouse have also seen the market opportunity and have mobilised their considerable resources to become involved in this area.

A second thought was that the essential ingredient that was lacking for the big established consultancies working in the social care field was generally a detailed knowledge of operational practice and management. My provisional appraisal was that such organisations had tried and tested skills in strategic planning, political know-how, information systems and the formation of complex project plans, but often not in the nuts and bolts of operational practice and management and, critically, in the complex relationship between these factors and those higher level activities. These thoughts were gradually taking shape and increasing in coherence in the two years before I resigned my post with the local authority.

Returning to my first personal passage, I think that it gives quite a vivid insight into the lived experience of the leaving process and my interpretation of it at the time. As I have stated, this was written in early 2004, just a few months after leaving my full time post with my last local authority. However, on re-reading it several years later it strikes me that – to a perceptive reader – it perhaps gives away more than I would have wished or immediately perceived. The two vital parts for me when reading this piece in retrospect are firstly my own almost desperate wish to have a different leaving event to the typical or ordinary one, and secondly the re-evaluation of my achievements over time, then just beginning, now further advanced. What comes across to me now – almost as if I was

reading events concerning another person – is the sense of someone who had stayed around a bit too long and was no longer sure of his achievements. This was a big driver to my decision to leave, and some of it is overtly reflected upon in the written piece and some implied.

I do suspect now – with hindsight – that I had ‘peaked’ in this job perhaps two years earlier. The desire to do the leaving event differently from everyone else, the growing (and perhaps insecure) need for external approval of my achievements and the sheer sense of relief upon leaving point to someone who was no longer quite confident that he was giving his best, or perhaps more accurately was starting to doubt whether he was achieving what he once thought he was achieving.

There is no doubt that a factor in this slowly waning confidence (and perhaps even interest) was the rapidly waxing ideas about starting my own business, based initially on my reading of the changing market as set out above. There were other factors too, and these also provided fuel for the exciting and increasingly real prospect of breaking free. A sense of frustration with the anonymity of the organisation, of observing decisions taken for narrow and self-serving reasons, of perceiving an all-pervading scepticism shading into destructive cynicism amongst front line workers: all these had a part to play. To say that I had *outgrown* the organisation might sound extremely arrogant, and does not quite hit the target, but something akin to that was occurring. Perhaps 14 years in the same organisation, doing and saying similar things and feeling increasingly unthanked, unappreciated and unacknowledged is nearer the mark. That sounds rather self-pitying and perhaps that is also an element in the mix. However, none of these emotions or feelings were powerful or overwhelming when taken on their own, but in

combination and over time they proved increasingly difficult to ignore. I was in my early forties and perceived strongly that I was approaching the time for a fundamental decision. I had been in the current job for more than 4 years and had an urge to move on. Should I make a determined effort to scale the promotion ladder, or change direction and do something entirely different? As time went on I was pulled towards the latter, at first tentatively and then decisively. Why?

In retrospect, personal factors of course played a part, but there was something else too that was making me push at the increasingly open door. This was the feeling, at first inchoate and later more evidenced, that the social care milieu was changing. The two related thoughts set out above were in a sense the end product of a longer and intermittent period of thinking and reflecting on the social care scene more generally. The rise of performance target culture (for good or ill, or probably both) was pushing Social Services Departments everywhere towards new priorities – evaluating, measuring and defining outcomes. I had long thought that my own profession was befogged with an identity crisis and saturated with imprecise words as to its essential nature. Were we empowerers, enablers and agents of radical social change or was our core function to provide practical services to vulnerable people on the basis of assessed need? Were we advocates and champions of the disadvantaged or did we take away their children and detain the parents when necessary under the Mental Health Acts? Or do we, imperfectly and clumsily, try to do both? Although this is obviously a somewhat polemical reduction, I believe that there is also more than a grain of truth in these paradoxical juxtapositions, and they were increasingly playing on my mind.

From about the year 2000 onwards, it had seemed to me that the debate was gradually being settled in favour of the evidenced, measurable and concrete. This was perhaps more in evidence in the workplace than in academic circles. Nonetheless, most people agreed that the nature of the social work task was changing. In reality of course this had been occurring for several years before that date – one could perhaps see the twin pillars of the Children Act 1989 (enacted in 1991) and the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 as the grandparents of much of the change that has occurred in the last 20 years or so. However, there was no doubt in my mind that the additional emphasis after 1997 (after the election of Tony Blair and New Labour) on defining outcomes, measurement and external verification was gradually creating a very different organisation. I was not necessarily opposed to this, indeed I felt that change was needed and also (crucially) began to think that this had started to open up opportunities hitherto non-existent. My own response to this was to create my new business.

(vi) The Structure of this Thesis

This research project is structured along traditional lines. Chapter 1 is my literature review where I firstly undertake a contextualising review of some key literature concerning the changing social care field, drawing on various sources with the purpose of illuminating my narrative of the field. The second part explores in a systematic way the limited literature that is *specifically connected* to the topic of establishing an independent practice in the social care field in England. Chapter 2 sets out the methodological issues in depth and both provides an explanation of the reasoning for choosing the approach that I have used and also sets out the fundamental elements of that approach. The weaknesses of the approach are discussed in some detail and I explain how I have attempted to overcome these. Chapter 3 concentrates on the findings

from my research respondents and I have taken a very specific approach here which is driven by my chosen methodology. This has allowed my research respondents' individual and authentic voices to come through in a direct way, with my role being mainly to cluster the themes and to make the connections clear.

The detailed analysis of these findings is therefore contained in Chapter 4. This concentrates on the detailed discussion and analysis of these experiences and draws on literature concerning (amongst other areas) the study of organisations and human motivation. My intention in this chapter is to evaluate what the individual and collective experiences mean in terms of the fundamental question of 'What is the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field?' Finally, in Chapter 5, I return to Moustakas's sequential phases of heuristic research and reflect on what has been learned. I have included within this concluding chapter my own critique of my research. All heuristic research should conclude with a Creative Synthesis where the threads are drawn together in a narrative depiction of the important meanings of the experience, and I have attempted to accomplish this in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHANGING SOCIAL CARE FIELD AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The first purpose of this chapter – contained in part one – is to summarise the changes that have occurred within the social care field in England within the last 30 years and to come to an evaluation of the impact of these specifically in terms of establishing an independent practice. I have set out in the introduction above my own first thoughts, very much based on both my day-to-day observations and empirical evidence, about how the social care field had started to change from about 1990 onwards. The thinking of others about this and the reasons behind any such changes are clearly of considerable importance. Part one of this chapter will therefore consist of a contextualising review of the changing social care field, drawing on some key sources with the aim of illuminating how such changes began to make the ground more fertile for the establishment of independent practices.

Part two of this chapter will provide a review of current research findings that has been conducted with considerable and thorough planning and which concerns the experience of setting up and establishing independent practices within the contemporary social care field in England. I thought it very probable – even before commencing the search – that the literature on this highly specialised area of knowledge was going to be thin. If that proved to be so, I had in mind that I might need to expand the possible range of literature to review by (for example) concentrating simply on the *experience* of setting up and establishing an independent practice by expanding the search on this out beyond just ‘England’. While any such findings from an expanded search of this nature would need to be handled with care, the likelihood of discovering additional material with

which to work seemed to me to be attractive – and perhaps necessary. I will return to the matter of the specific and structured literature search in detail in part two of this chapter.

Part One – The Changing Social Care Field

(i) General Scope of Discussion

The intention of this section is to provide a broad overview, drawing on some important sources, of how the social care field has changed over the past 20 or 30 years and how it has become, over time, more conducive to the establishment of independent practices. I will start by establishing clear and working definitions of the terms ‘social work’ and ‘social care’ in relation to each other and then look at changes in the field; firstly the inevitability of change in general, and then the more specific changes that have occurred as a result of changing government thinking and policy concerning social care since 1979 and the election of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. I contend that there was a major philosophical shift in the 1980s and that this was the first of four main and linked elements that changed the social care field fundamentally – the other three being the rise of the internal market, a more management driven culture and increased emphasis on performance measures.

My argument is that these phenomena have opened up the social care field to external influence, support and challenge in a way that would have been difficult to envisage even 20 years ago. I will suggest that the independent sector has become institutionalised within the social care field.

(ii) Social Work and Social Care

The first task therefore is to further define the terms ‘social care’ and ‘social work’ more clearly in relation to each other as they will occur frequently and be used often in the narrative below and indeed throughout this thesis. It is important that the two terms are clearly defined as there is a tendency, not least within my own thinking and discourse, to conflate them so that they are almost interchangeable.

I have already set out in the introduction the broad but concise definition of social care that I am using for this research. This was devised by Nigel Horner and stated that social care was composed of ‘the range of personal interactions and services – including caring, supporting, assisting, tending, enabling – that are offered to people to promote and further their well-being, but which do not fit under the definition of health care’ (2006:1). Therefore the social care field, using this broad definition, consists of all the agencies, organisations and individuals that engage in and perform these activities. I have gradually come to use the term ‘social care consultancy’ to describe my own independent practice, as my view is that this depicts breadth and works against the impression that what we do is independent social *work*. What then, *is* social work and how does it relate to the wider notion of social care to which it is clearly closely related?

The first comment to make is that defining social work is not an easy task. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) offer the following definition, written in 2001 and widely quoted:

The social work profession promotes social change and problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well

being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW quoted in Horner 2006:3)

Horner notes that this definition, although a powerful one which contains much of value, might be criticised for ‘its failure to emphasise the “control” element of social work practice, which involves the use of statutory powers to intervene in a variety of contexts’ (Horner 2006:3). I agree with this view and will therefore adopt the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) definition of social work in England for the purposes of this research, because it both remedies the above omission and places social work in the correct geographical location for the purposes of this research. The BASW state clearly that they accept the broad IFSW definition, but also create a definition of social work that applies to England specifically:

Social Work in England is that which through the exercise of its statutory functions and/or the employment of its range of skills works to: (a) Promote social justice by helping people to achieve change in their lives, (b) Meet the needs of people and enable their social inclusion and the cohesion of society, (c) Protect those who may be at risk of abuse or harm from others, (d) Reduce the risk of people abusing or harming others, (e) Enhance self-respect and respect for others within families groups and communities, and (f) Reduce conflict and distress in families, groups and communities. (BASW 2011)

Thus the definitions – **social care** is the wider milieu within which the more specifically defined activity of **social work** operates.

I should finally add that my independent practice and my own previous experience as a practitioner and a manager is rooted almost entirely within children's services. However, the philosophical change in the social care field that commenced in the 1980s can be seen to relate both to adult and children's social care, and although (partly as a result of the changes that will be discussed) these two fields developed after 1990 along different paths for a time, there remains a strong relationship between them, partly because the activities that both perform remain substantially rooted in social work practice and values. It should also be noted that, since 2010, there have been initiatives in many local authorities to re-merge adult and children's social care functions. It can also certainly be strongly argued that the rise of the internal market within the social care field, increased managerial influence and a more performance-driven culture apply equally, although perhaps with different nuances, to both the adult and children's social care fields. However, in the narrative below, I will concentrate more on changes in the children's social care field as it is in this field that my independent practice, and those of most of my research respondents, operate.

(iii) The Inevitability of Change

In many situations and settings, the idea that change has only come recently to a given milieu after either a long stable golden age or else an age of stagnation and inertia can be pervasive. This is usually easy to deconstruct, both in terms of showing that change has been continual and also in exposing the deficits of the mythology, be it good or bad, about the previous state of the profession, organisation or area of activity. So it is with

the social care scene. Who would have thought, at the time, that a difficult era in the 1980s, marked by massive social pressures, several tragic and enormously high profile child deaths, such as those of Jasmine Beckford and Kimberley Carlile and the accompanying excoriating enquiry reports (Beal et al 1985 and Blom-Cooper, Harding and Milton 1987) would be held up by some as a golden age of social work before the dead hand of managerialism took over. This is a simplistic reduction certainly, but not without a grain of truth.

Bob Hudson, writing in 'The Changing Role of Social Care' (Kingsley: 2000) quickly dispels any myths about previous ages of stability. Writing from the perspective of the year 2000, 30 years after the Labour government enacted the report of the Seebohm committee (1968) which recommended unified social services departments, he comments that during the 1970s 'notwithstanding the beginnings of financial rectitude, social services departments appeared to have successfully grafted themselves onto the established structure and system of local government' (2000:7). However, the whirligig of continual change was not far behind and Hudson cites in two sentences many of the changes that I will be discussing below in further detail:

From the 1980s onwards, both social services departments in particular, and local government in general, began to change in important respects. Foremost amongst these changes has been the division between providing and purchasing roles, the consequent growth of independent sector providers, the growing emphasis upon "partnership", the changing role of social work as a profession, the shifting balance between local and central government and the emergence of users and carers from the role of passive participants. (2008:8)

These changes, beginning – as Hudson describes – in the 1980s (although it can be argued that the roots go back much further), continue to resonate throughout the social care and social work sectors. Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin (2000) agree that change has been constant for the last 20 years, but make the case slightly differently and focus more on the nature of such changes:

Almost all of the reforms since 1979 have placed questions of organisational design, structure, culture and co-ordination at their centre. Hardly any reform has avoided attempting to re-design the systems of provision, the forms of organisational control and direction, and the relations between “leaders”, “staff” and “customers” involved in the production and delivery of welfare outcomes. (2000:1)

From a more specifically social work (rather than management) perspective the acknowledgement of constant change is similar. Lena Dominelli comments that ‘social work practitioners have consistently worked within changing contexts’ (2004:21). She paints a rather bleak but vivid picture of the forces bearing down upon the social work profession as currently constituted and organised:

Challenges to its current organisational structures and purpose are emanating from several sources: policymakers disillusioned by its failure to control deviant populations and respond adequately to human need; other professionals, particularly those in the health arena who find social work’s remit vague and its helping stance antagonistic to theirs; “clients” who complain about its oppressive

and coercive dimensions; managers who seek to curb professional autonomy.....
(2004:1)

Even in the short time since Dominelli wrote those words in 2004, further changes, particularly those driven by central government, have swept through the children's social care field and in many ways are a cameo of the see-saw nature of many of the reactive changes imposed, particularly those prompted by events such as child deaths and also by the subsequent reaction to them. The death of Peter Connelly (Baby P) in 2007 was followed by the Laming report (2009) and recommendations which further tightened managerial control of practice. Hot on the heels of this came a change of Government in 2010 and the subsequent review of child protection, led by Eileen Munro (2011), which while not explicitly disowning the Laming recommendations, envisaged and promoted very different ways of thinking and models of practice.

To look at a slightly different and less linear perspective on change, Professor Mark Doel gave a presentation to the 2012 JSWEC conference entitled 'Evolving or Revolving: a personal take on the meaning of social work'. Doel suggests that certain debates concerning the social work profession seem never to be conclusively ended and that this leads to a sense of history repeating itself. His presentation made the point that two such debates – (i) on not learning the lessons of child deaths and (ii) on the concerning standards of social work education, seem to revolve endlessly (2012). He also makes the point that other issues in social work, such as the creation of narrow specialisms versus generic work, were being debated within the profession in 1955 and have gone on being debated ever since. I do not think Doel is trying to suggest here that

change within the social work and social care fields has not occurred, but rather that some of the issues on which significant changes have been built recur over time.

Nonetheless, the clear message and consensus here is that change is both constant and unpredictable (even if sometimes it appears circular) in both the specific social work professional field and the wider social care arena within which social work operates.

(iv) The Changing Social Care Field: Specific Changes

What, however, of the specific changes in the social care and social work milieus that have had an impact, direct or indirect, on the establishment of independent practices? There can be little dispute that the social care field has expanded in the past 15 – 20 years and that providers of services, management advice and even direct work with users and carers may now come from the private and voluntary sectors as well as being directly provided from the public sector. What has led to this change? I would argue that the underpinning reason is that a philosophical change has taken place over the last 25 years in terms of how successive British governments have viewed the provision and delivery of public services of which social care is only a part. The outward and visible signs of this shift in thinking have been seen in the following three interacting phenomena: (a) the rise of the internal market, (b) a more management driven culture, and (c) increasing emphasis on the importance of measuring performance. I contend that all these have led to an increasing lack of internal capacity within public sector organisations – and specifically within the social care sector – to make the changes and improvements required and that this has been hugely significant for independent practices and consultancies who have been able to provide some of the additional

capacity needed. These three elements are all related and interlinked and I will explore each in some depth below with reference to the wider literature on each.

(v) The Philosophical Shift and the Rise of the Internal Market

It is important to trace the beginnings and evolution of this philosophical change in terms of governmental policy and practice towards the public sector generally and the social care sector more specifically. I would suggest that the first major philosophical shift that led to concrete actions can be located during the second Thatcher government (1983-87), although it would also be true to say that the ideas that inspired this had been circulating in Conservative circles for rather longer. The Conservative party under Margaret Thatcher's leadership from 1975 onwards had evolved policies that stated explicitly that the social and economic problems of the 1970s would be tackled in a more market-oriented and less consensus-driven way. Butler and Kavanagh, writing in 1980, commented thus on Mrs Thatcher's accession to the leadership of the party five years earlier and her approach after that time:

[Her] election was widely represented as a shift to the political right, by supporters and opponents alike. It reflected a reliance on market mechanisms rather than government intervention in the economy and on individual self help.....however, the record of her leadership defies simple analysis because she was in practice caught between her own free market instincts and her natural caution on matters of tactics and policy. (1980:64)

This is interesting, because major changes in social care policy were indeed relatively slow in coming after the Conservatives returned to power in 1979 and were not

implemented in Thatcher's first government (1979-83) which concentrated much more on economic matters such as control of the money supply and curbing inflation while also legislating to limit trade union power.

Jenkins (2007) sees Mrs Thatcher's 'revolution' as being composed of two distinct stages – the first being the liberation of the supply side of the economy with the intention of giving 'new spirit and confidence to private enterprise' (2007:5). This was put into action as soon as the Conservatives took office in May 1979. Jenkins observes that the 'second revolution' was principally one of power and chiefly took place in the second and third Thatcher governments (1983 – 1990). Crucially, he also argues strongly that all her successors up to 2007 (Major, Blair and Brown) have continued, developed and embedded this second revolution which is one of 'centralized government, enforced treasury discipline and the (regulation of) both public and private sectors to an unprecedented degree' (2007:5). The driver for this was the deeply held belief that the public sector 'had failed to deliver measurable improvements in services' (2007:107). Jenkins then comments wryly that the result of this hypothesis has been:

The introduction into government of tools drawn from the arcane world of management consultancy. These included re-engineering, internal pricing, outsourcing and virtual markets....purchasers had to be separated from providers and everyone defined as a buyer or a seller. This dichotomy....supposedly replicated the free market. (2007:107).

This is a picture that many working in the public sector might recognise to this day. It has also, in my view, proved absolutely pivotal in preparing the ground for the growth of independent practices such as mine.

The first indication of the government's intention to take practical steps to introduce the internal market into the NHS and social care fields can be traced back to the mid-1980s. However, a reading of the 1983 Conservative Party manifesto 'The Challenge of our Times', which is set out in full in the Times Guide (1983) to the general election of that year, gives no more than a hint of what was to come. After a glancing reference to 'asking' Health Authorities to put NHS services such as laundry and catering out to competitive tender, it states – under the heading 'Partnership in care' – that:

Conservatives reject Labour's contention that the State can and should do everything...we will promote closer partnership between the state and the private sectors in the exchange of facilities and of ideas in the interests of all. (1983: 296)

A statement of intent perhaps, but no more than that. Hudson noted, as discussed above, that the first real sign of the changing agenda was the division proposed by the government between 'purchasing and provision' within the NHS and local authorities. Bamford (2001) traces back the exact date of the practical beginnings of this change to October 1984. At the Buxton conference of the Association of Directors of Social Services, the Secretary of State, Norman Fowler, made a keynote speech. Bamford describes it thus:

Ministerial speeches to social services conferences are usually a bland recitation of new policy initiatives. They rarely require much thought by the audience. At the [Buxton Conference] Norman Fowler broke the mould. In a wide ranging speech, he called for a different model of care. He argued that social services should switch their focus from that of the direct provision of care to one of funding and facilitating the delivery of care. (2001:6)

Fowler went on to state that a major priority for social services should be ‘a recognition that (they) should support and promote the fullest possible participation of the other sources of care that exist or which can be called into being’ (2001:6).

Nirmala Rao, also writing in Hudson (2000), commented that Fowler’s speech, ‘in which he proposed a strategic role for social services departments to mobilise all sectors to provide a full range of care to the local communities’ (2000:31), started a chain of events which were to prove transformational. A major link in this chain was the production of the Griffiths report ‘Community Care: Agenda for Action’ (1988). Sir Roy Griffiths – who was a director of Sainsbury’s between 1968 and 1991 – had produced an earlier and well received report for the government in 1983 which had recommended strengthened management structures in the NHS. His 1988 report made two key recommendations which have influenced social care practice ever since: firstly, that social services departments should set up mechanisms to assess care needs of individuals, and on the basis of this assessed need should design flexible packages of care to meet the identified needs. The second important recommendation urged the government to promote the use of the independent sector: this was to be achieved by

social work departments collaborating with and making maximum use of the voluntary and private sector of welfare.

It is of course true that Griffiths concentrated on what we would now call ‘adult’ social care issues, but one must remember that his report came a few years before most social services departments formally split into adult and children functions. However, it is probably also true to say that the twin behemoths of legislation that followed closely after Griffiths and which cast considerable shadows even today – the Children Act 1989 and the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 – did actually institutionalise that split. Nonetheless, the Griffiths recommendations (of which many were carried through into the 1990 Act) did without a doubt have a major impact on both children and adult social care practice in the years that followed. A philosophy which incorporated elements of an internal market expressed as a division between purchasing and provision – sometimes later modified to the slightly more professionally-friendly *assessment* and provision – and a care management approach which saw social care professionals acting as constructors of care packages, did become widespread in both adult’s and children’s social care settings.

I argue that the shift in governmental thinking that led to the adoption of internal market processes was the first of the four main elements that have made the social care sector an area in which independent practices can grow and operate in a way that would have been extremely difficult before such changes took place. The reason why the adoption of internal market processes *per se* has encouraged this is a subtle one and has fewer direct connections to the growth of independent practices than the other three elements. My contention is that the balance started to shift after 1990 towards more

explicit management of social care services – the very phrase ‘care management’ hints at this. In particular, the new social care *processes*, namely purchasing (or assessment) and provision, the construction of care packages and the monitoring and review of these demanded new structures and methods of management. The tension between professional and managerial agendas, seen perhaps most starkly in the NHS where it might be argued that the professions are stronger and better defended, was about to become a larger feature of the social care scene.

(vi) The Management Driven Culture

Much has been written about New Public Management (NPM) and its close relative, managerialism, particularly since Christopher Hood wrote his seminal paper in 1991. Hood has suggested that many commentators ‘associate it [NPM] with the political rise of the “new right”,’ (1991:6) by which he means the sound money, business-focused, non-paternalistic strand of right-wing thought typically associated with the economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and the 1980s governments of Ronald Reagan (to whom Friedman was an advisor) and Margaret Thatcher. Two of the principles of NPM are particularly important for the purposes of this research: (a) ‘hands-on professional management’ in the public sector and (b) explicit standards and measures of performance. NPM was principally a description of the creation of a new model of public administration based on business principles common in the private sector and opinions about it were perhaps inevitably sharply divided. Sir Roy Griffiths’ two reports (on the NHS and on Community Care) were clearly imbued with this philosophy and explicitly and strongly advocated a greater level of management in the public sector while others were considerably less complimentary. Hood commented that there were those who saw New Public Management and its entire works as ‘a gratuitous and

philistine destruction of more than a century's work in developing a distinctive public service ethic and culture' (1991:4).

Gewirtz, Clarke and McLaughlin (2000) are editors of a book ('New Managerialism, New Welfare') that takes a generally critical look at the embedding of NPM principles in the public sector in Britain. They comment on the rise of 'managerialism' in the public sector, noting that there has been 'a growth in the numbers of public sector managers and in their power relative to other organisational groups' (2000:9) and define it thus:

Managerialism – like professionalism – defines a set of expectations, values and beliefs. It is a normative system concerning what counts as valuable knowledge, who knows it, and who is empowered to act in what ways as a consequence. Indeed, a central issue in the managerialisation of public services has been the concerted effort to displace or subordinate the claims of professionalism....it legitimises and seeks to extend the "right to manage". Its natural home has been the corporate capitalist organisation that provides the reference point for claims about managing in a business-like way. (2000:9)

I do not feel as instinctively and instantly critical of managerialism as many other commentators and writers appear to be. My own view is similar to that of Eve Poole who wrote a paper entitled 'In Praise of Managerialism' for a seminar at Ashridge Business School in 2007. She makes the important point that:

The central objection to “managerialism” seems to concern the probity of transferring private sector work practices into the public sector, as epitomised by Blair’s Modernisation of Government agenda...my paper will argue that, in practical terms, this distinction is a false one. The etymology of management dates back to the notion of controlling a horse, and is most commonly taken to refer to the running of an enterprise. Whether public or private, the management needs of either type of organisation are largely the same. (2007:1)

Poole goes on to make the point that the problems have mainly occurred because an insufficiently sophisticated approach has been taken in transferring management practices from the private to the public sector given the ‘capitalist axiom that underlies traditional management practices’ (2007:1). In my view, it is also possible that managers and leaders in both the NHS and the social care field have had a bad press and that defending their corner has been a much more difficult and thankless task than defending the corner of practitioners, or ‘front-line professionals’ as they are sometimes described. An alternative view might well be argued that, if such professionals were left unmanaged to order their own affairs and set their own workloads, they would run the service in their own interests under the difficult-to-get-at cover of professional judgement. Be that as it may, I would certainly agree with Clarke et al (2000) that there has indeed been a growth in managerial numbers in the past 20 years and, crucially, that managers’ power relative to other groups has steadily risen. There are perhaps signs now, in 2012, that this is changing – for instance, in the recommendations of the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) which talks *inter alia* of restoring power to professionals – but the general trend has certainly been the growth of management influence. Coulshed and Mullender (2006) accurately identified the issue, both by

describing the inevitability of increasing management influence, and also noting the tensions that this has produced:

In common with professionals in most other disciplines and human services, social work practitioners tend to hold negative attitudes towards the administrative and managerial aspects of their organisations and of their own workloads, often arguing that these are distractions from the “real work”. Yet the time consuming requirements to record assessments and care plans on computer, attend meetings, balance budgets and so on brings administration into the heart of social work and is an essential form of accountability to users and funders that cannot be avoided. (2006:3)

Coulshed and Mullender are certainly correct that recording on computers and other onerous and time-consuming tasks cannot be avoided (although perhaps it was ever thus) and this signposts another element that has hugely changed the task of both social workers and social work managers over the past 10-15 years – the advent of computers and computer-based systems. This too has in many ways increased the reach, responsibilities and powers of managers within social care settings – and indeed also the pressures upon them. Quality assurance and performance management responsibilities, often using IT-based systems, have been added to the already existing tasks of day to day management, supervision of staff (again, now often using IT) and attending meetings. To use an example, in an evaluation (2009) of the Integrated Children’s System (ICS) national computer system, Ian Shaw and others commented thus on the significant impact that this particular e-system was having on social work professionals:

Seven out of ten or more agreed that the ICS separated pieces of information that should be kept together, often forced social workers to complete irrelevant tasks, cut the time available for seeing clients, had too many exemplars and should be drastically simplified. (2009:619)

I would suggest that the additional pressures and demands on social work staff, managers and management time over the past 10 or 15 years (which have been given additional impetus by the advent of IT systems) and which in turn have substantially increased the responsibilities of managers, have been the biggest single factor in creating space where independent practices can operate. As management capacity to do the tasks required has reduced, capacity has had to be purchased. As previously noted, the ground had already been softened and prepared by the shift in thinking of the 1980s and by the advent of internal markets and associated mechanisms.

If the roots of the rise of the management driven culture can be found in the philosophical paradigm shift of the 1980s, its exponential growth in the 1990s and early 2000s can be linked to the working thought of what Jenkins calls the ‘second revolution’ which was commenced by Mrs Thatcher and then carried forward by every Prime Minister and administration at least until the change of government in 2010. This has been marked by increasingly centralized government including strong financial discipline and much enhanced inspection and regulation of both the public and private sectors.

It might be argued that this approach reached its apotheosis in the third Labour government (2005-10) led by Tony Blair and from 2007 by Gordon Brown and that,

perhaps, this revolution has now run its course or at the very least reached its high water mark and started to ebb. It is too early to say so definitively at this stage. Certainly, the coalition government elected in 2010 initially promised to cut back on centrally driven targets. However, there are signs, at the time of writing in 2012, that any partial retreat from centralised indicators and control has *already* run its course, as evidenced by David Cameron's recent speech on 9 March 2012 which signalled his personal intervention in the field of adoption. There has been a subsequent stiffening of the performance measures in this area by which local authorities will now be judged as expressed in the *Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* (2012) which states emphatically that 'the action plan sets out how we will measure improvements in tackling delay across the system, through a new performance scorecard' (2012:4).

However, it must still be remembered that my research interviews, which occurred in 2008 and 2009, took place well before the election of the coalition in 2010 and the subsequent changes to social care that the coalition government and, for instance, the 2011 Munro review have advocated. The interviews therefore all took place before the end of the New Labour governments and must be seen through that lens rather than through the partially changed lens of early 2012 (the time of writing).

(vii) Increased Emphasis on Performance Measures

Davis and Martin (2008) give a global perspective on what they call the UK's 'apparent addiction' to inspection and performance measures:

The current faith in inspection is without precedent in the UK and without parallel anywhere else in the world. International observers are frequently intrigued,

though at times somewhat baffled by our acceptance of and apparent addiction to externally imposed performance frameworks. Seen from a global perspective, the UK is a fascinating, though slightly bizarre experiment in public services reform which is testing the effectiveness of top-down, centrally driven initiatives to the outer limits. (2008:137)

This provides some helpful meta-perspective on what many people sense has become an extraordinary situation. I will explore the history in brief below, but there is a widespread perception amongst many social care managers and staff that centrally driven targets, enforced by compulsory reporting mechanisms and regular inspection have become an incubus, an out of control, self-generating and perpetuating system that has come to dominate all life. Whether it is reporting on timescales for assessments, or numbers of change of placements, or the mandatory requirement to produce a strategic Children and Young Persons plan (with its own inherent targets and outcomes), or a myriad of other phenomena, the pressure has been on performing and succeeding. The price for not doing so has steadily risen – naming and shaming via league tables, star ratings and other public instruments has become common, as has the ultimate sanction, at least for senior managers: the loss of career and livelihood.

I have already indicated that the elements that I have identified as being broadly conducive to the development of independent practices are linked and have occurred in a more-or-less chronological order. This has seen the rise of the internal market being followed by a more management driven culture which in turn has led to an increasing emphasis on the importance of measuring performance, which gradually has created a lack of internal capacity and specifically *managerial* capacity to perform all the tasks

required. This is part of the answer, in my view. In terms of the sharply increased emphasis on measuring performance, however, the story is more complex than that and I would argue that there have been two main drivers for this, namely (i) pivotal events, and (ii) the New Labour Governments of 1997 to 2010.

Events – so feared by governments as the phenomena that blow strategic planning off course – have assumed an enormously high profile in the history of children’s social care. Since the Seebohm re-organisation in 1970, the past 40 years have seen a series of events that have been the driver for much of the legislative and policy changes that have occurred since that time. Child deaths and the subsequent public enquiries from Maria Colwell in 1973 to Peter Connelly in 2007 have had a profound impact on policy and, one could argue, a cumulative one.

The repeated messages from such enquiry reports about poor communication between professionals, missed opportunities to protect children and generally deficient practice (particularly social work practice) have triggered many profound changes including the establishment of child protection case conferences (1977 onwards), Working Together guidance (1991 onwards) and the whole battery of practice tools associated with the quantifying and measuring of risk. Successive governments and public opinion have greeted each successive report bearing the same messages of failure with mounting incredulity and frustration. Many authors have identified the tendency of the Labour governments of 1997-2010 to expand central control. Writing in Davis and Martin (2008), Chris Johns and David Lock note that often ‘policy developments in the regulation of social care....demonstrate a shift in government thinking or comprised a response to a particular issue’ (2008:41). Tony Blair’s frustration with the slow pace of

change in the public sector generally was increasingly evident from 1999 onwards as demonstrated by his party conference speech that year railing against the ‘forces of conservatism’ by which he mainly meant established and vested interests working for no change and the maintenance of the status quo in the public sector, and his admission at that time that attempted public sector reform had resulted in ‘scars on my back’. The result of this in the children’s social care sector was the increasing regulation, central control and standardisation of practice as evidenced by, amongst other things, the introduction of the Framework for Assessment (2000) and the ICS (2005 onwards). There was a concomitant rapid growth in the number of performance indicators measuring everything that it was possible to measure (and arguably some things that were not) and significantly enhanced inspection frameworks and arrangements to ensure compliance. There can be little doubt that central government has, by use of these mechanisms, retained a strong grip on the actions of local government. Travers, writing in Seldon (2007), comments that the Treasury has kept a centralising ‘vice-like grip’ (2007:78) on local government and that this and ‘the aggressive use of targets all attest to the Blair decade’s continuation of the centralisation that had flourished for years previously’ (2007:78).

These two elements – events and the actions of the Labour governments since 1997 – have contributed much, in my view, to the greatly increased emphasis on performance measures. Once more, this has made the ground far more fertile for the growth of independent practices such as my own, for reasons that I shall summarise below.

(viii) The Institutionalisation of the Independent Sector

I have noted already at various stages in the discussion above that the *effect* of these three related phenomena set out above – and particularly the final two concerning the more management driven culture, and the increasing emphasis on the importance of measuring performance – has been to stretch the capacity of social care organisations to the limit and beyond, in the last 10 or 15 years. This has meant that independent practices and consultancies (and I am referring here to organisations large and small) have become an institutionalised and integral part of the children’s social care scene in England. The evidence for this is very clear, and two examples amply illustrate this. Firstly, the involvement of independent organisations has been built into the system by the various framework contracts that central government have set up whereby independent organisations can apply to become part of a ‘preferred provider’ list. The most recent and current example of this was the provider framework devised by the Department for Education in July 2011 where organisations could apply to become part of the framework – for a four year term – for support to the Children’s Improvement Board (CIB). Under these provisions, organisations that are successful then have the right to bid for work that is regularly and frequently advertised, usually either of an improvement type nature (for example, following an adverse inspection of a LA), or for larger-scale contracts such as the provision of IT systems and support. The CIB framework is a good example of the former, and work that comes through this channel tends to be small-scale improvement projects. All is not lost if a small independent practice is not listed as a preferred provider on one of the government frameworks – as my business is not. The application process is often very arduous and technical and favours larger organisations. What many smaller organisations do in these circumstances is cultivate relationships with a number of larger organisations who are

on the government framework – and become associate consultants of those organisations and work under their umbrella on specific pieces of work.

The second example of the way that the involvement of independent practices and organisations has become embedded in the social care field is through networks and networking. Not all of the work – by any means – is procured via the large-scale improvement or transformation type projects that are typically advertised through the government frameworks. Leaders within organisations have, over time, become knowledgeable about the various independent organisations that inhabit the field and can commission such organisations personally and directly. This is so particularly when the project is a small-scale one and formal competition and procurement rules do not apply. My own independent practice increasingly picks up work in this way, as do many of our direct competitors. Powell, writing in Thompson et al (1991), comments that transactions of this kind commonly occur ‘through networks...engaged in reciprocal, preferential and mutually supportive actions’ (1991:271) and this accurately describes how the relationship works between senior managers within organisations (who are themselves members of a network) and independent practices who are known for having expertise in specific areas. Further evidence of such networking is discussed in considerably more depth in the research findings.

Part Two – Specific Literature Review

(i) First Steps

I commenced my specific and structured review early in this research project by searching for articles, books and publications via the main University of Sussex library catalogue and also via the Society of College, National and University Libraries

(SCONUL). This general scoping search produced a wealth of results concerning the social care and social work fields generally but nothing specifically about independent practices operating within the social care field in England and absolutely nothing concerning the establishment of such independent practices.

The results from my first attempts at searching the wide range of resources and databases held by the University of Sussex were also extremely thin, even more so than I had anticipated at the outset. I found virtually nothing that related to the establishment of an independent practice or consultancy, in the social care sector in England, or indeed anywhere.

(ii) Specific and Systematic Searches

Some time after these preliminary and general searches, I sought professional advice and assistance from a member of the University of Sussex library team experienced in helping postgraduate students with literature searches and reviews, and with his advice and assistance and using various combinations of search terms that are summarised below, I thoroughly and systematically searched the following databases, all of them related to the social work and social care fields:

- (i) ASSIA – the Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts
- (ii) IBSS – the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences
- (iii) SCOPUS
- (iv) SCIE - Social Care Online
- (v) Web of Knowledge

Between them, these databases had access to a vast range of books, periodicals, articles, research findings, grey literature and other sources of information. As is customary with such literature searches, I used (and was advised and assisted to use) the Boolean operators, particularly ‘and’ and ‘or’ to widen or limit my search accordingly.

I used 1990 as my start date for two reasons related to the matters discussed in the first section of this chapter on the changing social care field. Firstly, I have shown that it was only after 1990 that the factors came together that gradually made the environment more encouraging for the growth of independent practices. Secondly, to attempt to capture the experience and its meanings in a way that allows for comparisons requires working within a specific time frame shared by the research respondents, all of whom became independent within the last 20 years and all of whom, to date, remain independent. The constellation of external factors which surround those of us who are now independent are thus shared by us all and also form a consistent background for us all. These include policy, political and legislative frameworks as discussed above.

I should just re-emphasise at this point that my search had to be extremely specific as I was investigating a very specific topic – that of the *experience* of *establishing* an independent practice within the *social care field in England*. It was perhaps never likely that a literature search would produce much information on such a rarefied human experience. My research concerns the nature and meanings of that experience and it was therefore extremely important to maintain a clear and specific focus on this. I wanted to find out whether anything was already known about this experience and how any findings had been presented.

Fink (2004) insists that literature reviews should be *Systematic, Explicit* and *Reproducible* and notes that this approach would allow others to make:

A rational determination of whether to accept the results of the review. In the past, traditional reviews tended to be idiosyncratic. Reviewers chose articles without necessarily stating explicit criteria for selection and may have given equal credence to good and poor studies. (2004:15)

Although in the end, I would have been happy to have found *any* studies on my chosen subject, good or poor, the principles outlined by Fink that sit underneath those three key words are important ones and guided my review.

Aveyard (2010) makes an important point about reviewing the literature when engaged in phenomenological research concerning ‘the meaning things have in our experiences’ (2010:59). She notes that the researcher using such an approach will be principally searching for literature of a phenomenological kind closely related to the subject being explored within the research. For all these reasons, and while it was important to vary terms in the way that I have set out below, I needed to ensure that the searching remained specific and focused; as it was, some of the search terms that I used produced a mass of irrelevant references which took a long time to sort through.

I will set out a summary of detailed results for the first two databases searched. Using various combinations of words or phrases, a sample of my results were as follows, with examples of findings:

ASSIA database: date range used 1990 – 2012

- (i) “Establish consultancy” and “social care” or “social work”: 14322 results. The references produced were far too general and I could see nothing of any near relevance in any of these. Examples of the general nature of the findings here were titles such as ‘Choosing care: dilemmas of a social care market’ and ‘Good intentions, increased inequities: developing social care services in Emergency Departments in the UK’.
- (ii) “Establish independent practice” and “social care” or “social work”: 14322 results. Once again, the results were too general and contained nothing of near relevance. Examples of the findings here were titles such as ‘Social class and access to expert palliative care services’ and ‘Attitudes of long term care social workers towards physician assisted suicide’.
- (iii) “Independent practice” and “social care”: 3 results. One of these was relevant and will be discussed below.
- (iv) “Independent practice” and “social work”: 6 results. None of these were relevant.
- (v) “Independent business” and “social work” or “social care”: 3750 results and nothing of relevance. Examples of findings included ‘The nature and growth of small firms in Italy’ and ‘How can social work affect health care reform?’.

IBSS database: date range used 1990 – 2012

- (i) “Establish consultancy” and “social care” or “social work”: 1473 results. Once again, the references produced were too general and there was nothing of remote relevance in any of these. Examples included ‘Social work in health and social care’ and ‘Choosing care: dilemmas of a social market’.

(ii) “Establish independent practice” and “social care” or “social work”: 1473 results.

Once again, too general in the same way as demonstrated by the examples above and nothing of any relevance.

(iii) “Independent practice” and “social care”: 0 results.

(iv) “Independent practice” and “social work”: 0 results.

(v) “Independent business” and “social work” or “social care”: 1525 results and nothing of relevance. Examples of findings included ‘Exploring how social media can enhance the teaching of action research’ and ‘The implications of personal budgets for the home care market’.

Searches using the same terms (and others including ‘set up’ rather than ‘establish’) using other three databases produced similarly negative results and so after this I began to be more general and searched using terms such as ‘establish consultancy business’ without using the terms ‘social work’ or ‘social care’. This also produced little of relevance. There was some limited material found of a practical ‘how to’ nature concerning professionals seeking to go independent, but this was not specifically relevant to the social care sector and tended to concern (for example) therapists – and even then it did not cover the actual *experience* of taking the plunge into independence.

Following this, I widened my search to encompass a systematic search of two databases covering the subject of business and management. I used the same date range from 1990 – 2012.

The databases searched were Business Source Premier and ABI/INFORM Global and the combined results were as follows:

- (i) “Establish consultancy” and “social work” or “social care”: 280,064 results. Nothing remotely relevant in first 200 results.
- (ii) “Establish independent practice” and “social work” or social care”: 280,067 results. Nothing remotely relevant in first 200 results.
- (iii) “Independent practice” and “social care”: 580 results. Most of the results here involved health care and even then not on relevant matters, e.g. ‘Fighting AIDS at home’ and ‘Anti-hepatitis push raises medical issues’.
- (iv) “Independent practice” and “social work”: 522 results. A very similar set of results to (iii) above.

I decided to attempt a slightly more general approach, which paradoxically brought fewer results.

- (v) “Establish Independent Practice”: 2 results. One of these was entitled ‘The Golden Rules’ (Burnett 2002) and concerned an architect who had set up an independent business. I read the full text of this article. However, it was a very light one-page piece with little relevance to the experience of establishing an independent practice.
- (vi) “Set up independent practice”: 1 result and not relevant.
- (vii) “Establish consultancy practice”: 0 results.

I took further advice from the research staff at the University of Sussex library who were of the view that there were no further avenues to explore and that there was simply very little literature to be found via these sources.

(iii) PhD Theses

I searched available theses via the British Library EThOS facility (Electronic Theses Online Service) and used the following ten general search terms:

- (i) Establish independent practice: 89 results and nothing relevant.
- (ii) Set up independent practice: 21 results and nothing relevant.
- (iii) Establish social care consultancy: 3 results and nothing relevant.
- (iv) Set up social care consultancy: 2 results and nothing relevant.
- (v) Establish social work consultancy: 3 results and nothing relevant.
- (vi) Set up social work consultancy: 5 results and nothing relevant.
- (vii) Establish consultancy: 90 results and nothing relevant.
- (viii) Set up consultancy: 24 results and nothing relevant.
- (ix) Start consultancy: 34 results and nothing relevant.
- (x) Experience of consultancy: 124 results and nothing relevant.

A few of the thesis titles looked initially promising, but a read of the abstract or summary quickly proved that there was no material specifically concerning the experience of establishing (or even running) an independent practice. I also searched the database of the Index to Theses of Great Britain and Ireland and used the same search terms as used above concerning the EThOS database. Only one result was returned from all the searches and this was not relevant. Finally, I searched the Sussex Research

Online database using the same search terms. None of the results found were remotely relevant.

(iv) Grey Literature

With regard to the ‘grey literature’ of unpublished papers and other texts, I searched 6 main sites which I judged to have particular relevance to the social care field in England. It is likely that if there were any relevant material on these websites it would have been picked up in my systematic database search (particularly any material on the SCIE website), but owing to the paucity of material found elsewhere, I searched them manually nevertheless.

The websites were those of the Department for Education, the Department of Health, the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE), the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), the College of Social Work and the Health and Care Professions Council (all updated in 2012). I systematically searched all the areas of each site which related to research, policy development, books and publications, good practice guides, consultations, knowledge reviews and past seminars given. Two relevant results were found and these were two books, both of which concerned Independent Social Work. These are discussed in part (vi) of this chapter below.

(v) Other Sources

I also searched the internet, using Google Scholar and other generic portals.

The results from Google Scholar were as follows:

- (i) Establish consultancy in social care: 70,100 results. Nothing specific found: examples of findings were ‘Involving service users and carers in social work education’ and ‘Critical practice in health and social care’.
- (ii) Establish consultancy in social work: 106,000 results. All far too general in line with (i) above.
- (iii) Establish independent practice in social care: 1,010,000 results. Nothing specific found: examples of findings were ‘The practice of social research’ and ‘The nature of nursing’.
- (iv) Establish independent practice in social work: 1,500,000 results. All far too general and many results replicated those found under (iii) above.
- (v) Set up social work independent practice: 2,610,000 results. Results much too general.
- (vi) Social care consultancy: 127,000 results. Once more, nothing of a specific nature was found. Examples of findings included ‘The age of the inquiry’ and ‘Professionalism, boundaries and the workplace’.
- (vii) Social work consultancy: 221,000 results. Nothing specific and many results replicated those found under (vi) above.

(vi) Findings

I did find one interesting article and two books of some relevance. It was good to find these because, crucially, it suggested to me that had there been other sources I would have found them.

The article found was a short, polemical and non-academic article entitled ‘Independent Thought’ written by Tony McIntyre and published in the journal ‘Community Care’ on

4th May 2006. McIntyre explains that he established himself as an independent management consultant two years before the writing of the article and some of his conclusions and observations about running his own business are congruent with those of my research respondents and myself. These include (a) the flexibility and variety of the independent role and the advantages of not being pulled into day to day operational matters, (b) the need to prepare carefully before making the move to independence, (c) that ‘cold calling’ does not work and should be avoided and (d) the need to expand one’s own personal network. McIntyre does not go into any further detail on these relevant topics, but it is worth noting that all four of them occurred in the conversations between myself and my research respondents, which will be set out in Chapter 3 of this research project.

The two books found on the BASW website were both edited by the same authors (Tucker, Sambridge and Ogilvy) and effectively form a slim two-volume set, written in 2006 and 2010. The books generally discuss the practical issues concerned in becoming independent and each have chapters written by a variety of contributors on particular facets of independent work. The first book is entitled ‘Independent Social Work – a Risky Business?’ This volume focuses mainly on specific practice areas within social work, such as practice teaching and direct work with children where independent practitioners share their knowledge and experience. The title of the second book is ‘When the Going Gets Tough – Are You Tough Enough?’ This is more of a practical guide for the independent social worker in recessionary times and has sections on (for example) legal issues and accountancy for social work businesses.

In terms of the experience of independent practice, both books make some reference to this, although that is not their primary focus. In 'Independent Social Work', Tucker describes the successful independent social worker as someone who 'must be self-confident, able to network and act as a stand-alone professional' (2006:5). Her advice on finding customers concerns the establishment of networks, and her conclusion would certainly be shared by myself and by the research respondents:

The best advertisement for your services is word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers. Once you have carried out quality work, word will get around that you are worth employing. (2006:6).

In line with my own findings, Tucker is also clear that the literature concerning independent social work is virtually non-existent and claims that her book was 'the first, as far as we are aware, about independent social work and consultancy practice in the UK' (2006:2).

In the second volume 'When the Going Gets Tough', the changing landscape of recession is very much to the fore, just as it was when I conducted my second set of interviews in 2009. The tone of the book is therefore more tentative, even gloomy, compared to the first volume; for instance: 'There is a mood of dismal expectancy in the air surrounding health and social care services, with new ventures being kept on hold' (2010:5). Those who are considering making the transition to independence are advised to very carefully take stock of their own personal qualities and strengths and weaknesses, and the advice given in the book is generally of a more cautious nature. Comparing this with my interviews with my research respondents in 2009, one firstly

has to remember that all these individuals were by then established in independent practice. There was some foreboding expressed in these interviews, but generally a sense of gloom was absent and most of my respondents took the view that the coming storm could be weathered.

Tucker, Sambridge and Ogilvy (2010) do come to some conclusions concerning independent practice in children's services that are congruent with my findings which are set out at a later stage in this research. This concerns the pressing need for the independent practitioner to constantly adapt to changing environments within social care. Some realistic advice is given on this matter:

Independent practitioners have found over recent years that they have increasingly had to broaden out the type of social work they do, the arenas in which they work, the clients with whom they work and the skills set that they have. No longer is it wise to rely on one or two sources of employment. (2010:47)

Those who do not do so are likely to be 'consigned to history' on the grounds that 'that which has no function ceases to exist' (2010:50). While this may sound rather stark, this is certainly a conclusion that my research respondents and myself would share and is an important part of the experience of being independent. I will return to this matter in detail in Chapter 4 when the findings of the research are discussed in depth.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

(i) First Thoughts

As I commenced this research, I was determined to find a methodological approach of sufficient rigour which worked ‘with me’ and not against the grain of what I had already sensed was principally going to be a search for the encapsulation of *experience*, both my own experience and those of others. I knew from an early stage that this was likely, although not absolutely certain, to lead me in the direction of broadly phenomenological approaches. Such an approach, with its emphasis on the structures of human experience and on uncovering and going in depth into the meanings of those experiences, seemed an obvious one.

On that very matter, I came to my final research question by degrees, considering and discarding various early possibilities such as ‘How feasible is it to establish a new small-scale independent consultancy business within the contemporary social care field in England and Wales?’ and ‘To what extent is it possible to establish a new independent consultancy business within the contemporary social care field in England and Wales?’ Although the second question is closer to what I wanted than the first, both questions seemed to imply a degree of measurement which would have been difficult, when working with a small sample. The pivotal point for me came after studying Clark Moustakas’s heuristic methodology (which I will turn to in due course) as a possible congruent methodological frame for my research. The final iteration of my research question, ‘What is the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England?’ is a more focused articulation of what I

want to achieve: an in-depth exploration and examination of the *experience itself* rather than an evaluation of the feasibility, extent or success of the consultancy endeavour.

(ii) Narrowing Down the Methodological Frame

This being the case, what were the implications for methodological choice? On the grounds that there has to be congruence between the research topic, my own ontological assumptions, and my positioning as a researcher and the ultimately chosen methodology, I knew that the specific methodology to be used must have a fluidity and flexibility about it which would support the development of a narrative over time, concerning the development of my business and the milieu in which it operates. This seemed to point me in the direction of grounded theory, heuristic or phenomenological approaches, and it will be helpful at this point to consider these possible methodological approaches in greater detail.

I should say that at the preliminary stage I had briefly considered an Action Research approach as a possibility for this research. However, I quickly came to the conclusion that its basic positioning was not right for this research project. Denscombe (2003) describes Action Research as being concerned ‘with practical issues – the kind of issues and problems, concerns and needs, that arise as a routine part of activity in the real world’ (2003:73). Moreover, the distinctive research cycle that underpins the Action Research approach of ‘practice – reflection – research – action’ immediately points to its orientation in terms of improving practice rather than getting to grips with the human experience. I had written my MA on improving supervisory practice within my own organisation and the Action Research approach had fitted very well with it. For this thesis, however, I quickly put aside the notion of using an Action Research approach, as

my main focus – unlike that of my earlier research – was not that of changing or improving practice within my own organisation. I decided that it would not give me sufficient purchase on the detailed, up-close and descriptive investigation of experience that, from an early stage, I knew that I wanted to pursue.

As my thinking about methodologies evolved I was of the view that a Grounded Theory (GT) approach might well be of assistance when focusing on wider and external themes:

Research questions in grounded theory reflect (an) interest in process and change over time and the methods of making and analysing data reflect a commitment to understanding the ways in which reality is socially constructed. (Morse and Richards 2002:54)

This seemed promising at first sight. I was definitely interested in process and change over time, as both concern the wider environment and what has been happening in my own business since inception. I was also deeply interested in the relationship between these two processes. A GT approach would emphasise the creation of one's own data which, once again, seemed to fit closely with the nature of my research.

I was also interested in the possibility of generating theory from the data. In fact this intrigued me greatly and there seemed no immediate methodological mismatch or discord – it seemed to be quite possible to get close to an experience using a GT approach. However, a warning was sounding for me, which is articulated by Carpenter in her book 'Qualitative Research in Nursing' (2007). She describes the aim of the GT approach as being to 'develop a theory about dominant social processes rather than to

describe a particular phenomenon' (2007:133). I definitely wanted to describe and go in depth into a particular phenomenon. Nonetheless, the GT reverse process of data collection, coding, categorising and gradually building up and creating a theory was initially attractive because there seemed to be congruence in using an approach that was about my developing business: emerging business, emerging experiences, and emerging data and theory. I thought I could see how this might work. However, something was still concerning me, related to the definition provided by Carpenter quoted above. I have heard GT described in the past as 'high church empiricism' although I cannot now trace by whom. This sounds accurate to me. Gradually generating theory from observed experience rather than using a pre-existing theoretical approach to *frame* and *explain* empirical findings felt too limiting. Denscombe makes the clear point that 'Interpretivists will be unhappy with any suggestion that substantive theories provide the one correct explanation of things' (2003:128) and criticises the 'positivistic strand of thought' within GT which implies that once theoretical saturation (a key concept within this approach) has been reached, then the theory is to all intents and purposes complete and that no further interpretations can be made. I do acknowledge that other authors take issue with this point. Gilgun writing in Sherman and Reid (1994) observes that:

In actuality, researchers may never reach an absolute theoretical saturation. The findings of grounded theory research are forever open ended, open to the possibility that the next case will challenge existing constructs (1994:118)

Nonetheless, the final and clinching problem for me in using a GT approach was its built-in limitations which resist insights which might be gained, as Denscombe puts it, 'from general theories' (2003:128) and which focus solely on the data generated to

understand the phenomenon under discussion. I intended to use a wider frame of reference, particularly when I turned to an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of establishing an independent practice. Even at that early stage, I was aware that the rich literature on, for example, motivation and the impact of organisations on individuals would be likely to contribute greatly to my emerging understanding of this matter.

There seemed therefore to be a clear case for the employment of a phenomenological approach to this subject. It involves lived experience and I wanted to be able to show as closely as possible how I, my business partner and others in similar positions in the field have lived, breathed and experienced the setting up of a small independent practice. I strongly suspected that there was something *intensely* personal for all of us who had made such a step and that using this approach would get to the root of that phenomenon. Immediate questions came to mind: What was it like? Describe in detail the triumphs and disasters. How does it feel to be in this position? Such an approach would be likely to produce a wealth of material about the lived experience and the many meanings of setting up an independent practice in the social care field. As these emerged I could expand the frame and place the findings in context by reference to the milieu within which the research group and I had previously operated. I could also explore the motivations of individuals to make such a move and additionally the nature of the independence that had been gained. I started to feel as if I might be on the right track with such an approach, although I was also aware that phenomenological approaches are usually geared to encapsulating the meanings and ‘essences’ of a facet of human experience *per se* (for instance, asking what the experience is of ‘laughter’) rather than being focused on one’s own broader experience and those of others, over time. So it still felt as if something did not quite fit.

As my professional background is that of a social worker and social work manager, I also explored certain texts that examine in depth and detail the parameters of qualitative research as specifically applied to social work settings (for instance, D'Cruz & Jones 2004, Shaw & Gould 2001). These texts were helpful and thought provoking, but I quickly decided that I did not wish to limit my approach simply to a style or method of research that has been designed specifically for use by those practising in the social work field. This is for two reasons. The first is that, although my independent practice has strong links to social work, it is not as fully immersed in this field as, for example, a practice that focuses exclusively on offering independent social work services would be. Most of the work of my independent practice (and indeed those of my research respondents) lies in the social care consultancy field, and a broader and less specific methodological approach was therefore likely to be necessary. Additionally, although I have a social work qualification, I also have a management qualification and my more recent practice and studies in this latter area have greatly altered my own thinking and perceptions about social work and the social care milieu as a whole. The second and closely linked reason for wishing to have a broader methodological framework is that I did not necessarily wish to be constrained by the distinctive set of assumptions, values and beliefs of social work which quite properly find a powerful expression in such models of research. D'Cruz and Jones make this point in the very first page of their book:

Therefore, we show how social work research, along with other practice approaches, can realise the emancipatory goals and objectives of social work.
(D'Cruz and Jones 2003:1)

While understanding and accepting that the realisation of such goals and objectives are a strong current within social work research, such a specific approach tied closely to social work professional values felt too limiting and specific to use as my main research methodology. I felt that my approach should be different as I was principally, as already described, intending to focus primarily on the nature of the experience of becoming independent.

(iii) Ontological and Epistemological considerations

I am aware that the paragraphs above have begun to reveal more about myself and my own positioning as a researcher, and so it is to this area that I wish to turn now. Indeed, simply making the choice of a particular methodological approach begins to define one's ontological and epistemological position. Wellington, Bathmaker et al (2005) write:

It is impossible to take the researcher out of any type of research or of any stage of the research process. The biography of researchers, how and where they are socially positioned, the consequent perspectives they hold and the assumptions which inform the sense they make of the world, have implications for their research interests, how they frame research questions, the paradigms, methodologies and methods they prefer and the styles they adopt when writing up their research. (2005:21)

I very much like and agree with the phrase that one's past and background have 'implications' for the framing and conducting of the research undertaken. However, I would not want to push the argument any further towards determinism and I am always

instinctively uncomfortable with models which imply that who we are and what we do as individuals is largely or perhaps even entirely shaped by structural factors such as education, social class and ethnicity. This to me has disturbing echoes of predestination. My view is that we have a modicum of choice as human agents that can sometimes transcend important and potentially limiting factors such as birth, education, poverty, religion and upbringing.

Nonetheless, my own background as a person of white British origin has of course shaped me in many different ways – from a relatively comfortable ‘middle-class’ upbringing in the Home Counties, through schooling leading to a failure at A-level stage for reasons I shall probably never really understand (but which was also a personal motivator for this research). Social Work training, living independently, marriage, children, bereavement, further academic studies and work experiences have also shaped and impacted upon me in significant, complex and not really quantifiable ways.

I have always disliked assignments of class, not because of the widely accepted and observable reality of social stratification, but because of the inescapable and inbuilt assumptions that one set of people are in some inherent way superior or inferior to another set. For myself, I am a father, a son, a football supporter, a research student, a person who has set up his own business, a husband, a cyclist and a badminton player. I feel that many of these definitions of who I am are more important to me than assignments of class or ethnicity.

To broaden out this discussion further beyond individual positioning, Della Porta and Keating (2008) offer a helpful summary of ontological and epistemological orientations

in the social sciences. They take four broad approaches – Positivist, Post-Positivist, Interpretivist and Humanistic – and examine these in the context of ontological and epistemological issues (2008:23). The ontological questions posed are twofold, firstly does social reality exist? Secondly, is reality knowable? As one would expect, the two positions at either end of the spectrum take more or less opposite views – in positivism, social reality is an objective artefact and can be known and captured. In humanistic approaches, social reality is entirely subjective and cannot be known – human subjectivity is the determinant in both questions. The other two positions are more subtle: in post-positivism there is an acceptance that social reality exists, but that ‘our knowledge of it is often socially constructed and subject to challenge and re-interpretation’ (2008:24). This is the critical realist position. In the interpretivist position, the objective and subjective are ‘intrinsically linked’ (2008:24). On the issue of whether reality is knowable, in post-positivism it is knowable but is difficult to capture, and in the interpretivist approach it can be known somewhat, but is inseparable from human subjectivity. Writing from a slightly different angle, but in the same vein, Brian Roberts (2002) notes that ‘a key debate within much biographical research is ‘realism versus constructionism in the study of lives’ (2002:7). Roberts makes the point that each position readily criticises the other – realists are critical of the constructionist position because of its denial of any external reality and because, devoid of any consideration of context, ‘interpretation feeds upon interpretation in a swirl of language and symbols’ (2002:7). This indeed speaks to my concerns about a pure humanist or (as Roberts labels it) a constructionist position. On the other hand, a researcher working from a constructionist viewpoint would criticise the realist attempt to capture an objective reality as being an illusion which does not consider important factors such as process – *how* was the story told, *how* was it interpreted and *how* was it written up.

These are vital considerations. My research question ‘What is the *experience* of...’ points to the fact that I am looking to explore the root of the experience of my chosen topic, both for myself and for others. I cannot accept the positivist/realist position with its assumption that the concrete reality of the experience of establishing an independent practice can be known, captured and measured. When I think of the discussions that I had with my research respondents I can recognise that there was a *groping* after glimpsed truths, of attempts to *create* meaning, of ideas *imperfectly* expressed, of the sense of a *possibility* of a whole somewhat beyond our grasp, of fragile but definite linkages between us as if a flashbulb had for a split second illuminated a tableau we both partially recognised and where there might be shared meanings. These experiences also made me feel somewhat uneasy with a purely humanistic or constructionist position which Roberts in particular sees as stating that reality is *entirely* subjective (although Michael Crotty (1998) takes careful issue with this point, as discussed below). The interpretivist approach of reality being partially knowable but inseparable from human subjectivity corresponds more with my thinking and ontological positioning. As Roberts says, ‘Usually, biographical researchers take a pragmatic stance in research practice instead of a firm allegiance to realism or constructionism’ (2002:7). I feel reasonably comfortable with such a positioned pragmatic approach, although as I have considered these matters further I have found myself drawn more towards a constructionist position.

These ontological issues raise for Della Porta and Keating (2008:22) two important epistemological issues: firstly, what is the relationship between the scholar and his or her object? Secondly, what forms of knowledge are being used? Once again, the epistemological orientation is strongly determined by the broad approach, so that a

researcher located within the positivist paradigm would see him/herself and the object under consideration as fundamentally separate things, while the humanistic researcher would be likely to conclude that no objective knowledge is possible and that all knowledge is constructed by human beings. Post-positivists would agree that knowledge is ‘influenced by the scholar’ (2008:23) and the interpretivist researcher would aim to understand subjective knowledge. The forms of knowledge within the different paradigms also differ from natural law (positivist) to empathetic knowledge (humanist). For interpretivists the knowledge used is contextual knowledge. Once again, these distinctions as represented by Della Porta and Keating would tend to place my research within the interpretivist position. My aim is certainly to understand subjective knowledge within a common context.

Crotty (1998) however, points to the subtle but real difference between constructionism and subjectivism, and this is an important consideration, particularly as he describes constructionism and phenomenology as being closely linked. This is an extremely relevant matter for this research. He comments that:

Some researchers describing themselves as constructionist talk as if meanings are created out of whole cloth and simply imposed on reality. This is to impose an out and out subjectivism and to reject both the existentialist concept of humans as beings-in-the-world and [the] phenomenological concept of intentionality. (1998:43)

Crotty goes on to comment that constructionists *construct* rather than *create* meaning from the world and from objects within the world. The notion of intentionality used by

phenomenologists concerns how human consciousness is always directed towards *something*. In my research this something-within-the-world to which the consciousness of the research group is directed is the establishment of our own independent practices within a shared milieu. This is what my research is about and I am using a methodology which is rooted within the phenomenological tradition to describe the findings. Therefore this definition of constructionism as advanced by Crotty, which explicitly disowns pure subjectivism, feels very close to the position that I have adopted for this research. So does his definition of the interpretivist approach which he states ‘look[s] for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world’ (1998:67). It does not seem to me that these closely related positions are mutually exclusive.

In the introduction to their book, Della Porta and Keating (2008:12) make the statement that the fundamental epistemological question of ‘what we know and how we can know it’ can never be answered to the satisfaction of all, and indeed the discussion above shows that one’s ontological position relating to the existence (or otherwise) of a real and objective world in turn begins to define and shape the epistemological approach employed. I would tend to go further than that and would suggest that the epistemological approach and the choice of methodology have to be closely linked. These in turn shape how the research is conducted, presented and written up.

(iv) Firming Up on Methodological Choice

I have already indicated above that I was, even at an early stage, moving strongly towards a phenomenological approach. In his book ‘*Phenomenological Research Methods*’ (1994) Clark Moustakas states that:

Evidence in phenomenological research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences. In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through description that makes possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience. (1994:84)

Description that *makes possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience* excited me. What is the *experience* of establishing an independent practice? This approach clearly offered rich possibilities. However, reading on into the literature concerning pure phenomenological approaches made me become concerned once more that a specific approach did not quite fit what I was trying to achieve. The emphasis in phenomenological research is to move gradually away from the individual stories and comprehensive depictions of ‘the experience’ upon which the research is based towards a definition of the essence(s) of the experience itself, somehow disembodied from the voices within. As Moustakas puts it:

From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (1994:13)

I certainly wanted to uncover meanings and essentials, but I was convinced that I wanted to do so in a way where my own experience and that of my research respondents remained clearly visible throughout, even at the point where the meanings of the experience were distilled from the data. To put it another way, the individual stories and voices had to be part of the data gathering and the subsequent analysis.

Towards the conclusion of this process of being drawn step-by-step towards phenomenological approaches (or a better phrase might be ‘approaches located within the extended phenomenological family’), my first sustained ‘breakthrough’ methodologically was my discovery of the heuristic approach as pioneered by Clark Moustakas. This connected with me very quickly in a visceral as well as an intellectual way. Moustakas ‘said it like I felt it’. He explains (1990:9) that the word ‘heuristic’ itself has its root in the Greek word *heuriskein* which means to discover or to find. He goes on to say that:

It refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon in increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. (1990:9)

For me, this could not have summed up my intentions better. Discovering the *nature* and *meaning* of the experience and understanding the phenomenon in increasing depth was precisely my intention, as was ‘being present’ throughout the whole process. A further important stipulation that Moustakas makes is that the heuristic researcher ‘must have had a direct personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated’. (1997:14). He contrasts this with the pure phenomenological approaches (to which the heuristic approach is otherwise obviously related) where – as has been described above – such a direct *personal* experience is not necessary and the concentration is on uncovering the structures and essentials of a given human experience. However,

Moustakas does not simply advocate an autobiographical approach focusing solely on one's own experience and is clear that the study of one's own *and* others' experience adds enormous depth and richness to the research. Unlike in phenomenological research where 'the individual co-researchers disappear in the process on interpretation and structural analysis' (1990:19), in heuristic research they remain fully visible throughout. For me the continuing presence of other respondents and their stories is vital, as just considering my own experience, or indeed trying just to define the structures of an experience 'out there' would have felt extremely limiting. Relating back to ontological and epistemological considerations, it is broadly possible to see Moustakas as taking an interpretivist or even constructionist position. Some may argue that his approach is principally a humanistic one focusing entirely on human experience in all its glorious subjectivity, while others may see his search for essence as close to positivism. An understanding of the phases of heuristic research and particularly those of illumination and explication suggest that there is much that can be shared by individuals. I take this to mean that meanings are constructed by individuals but that they can be partially shared because of the shared consciousness and understanding of the world-out-there within which we all operate.

I will return later in this chapter to a fuller discussion of those potentially problematic terms 'meaning' and 'essence' which carry, as they do, more than a hint of a reductionism which concerns me. However, I want to make it clear at this stage that I will not be seeking a single meaning or essence of the experience of establishing an independent practice; for me, the task has always been to uncover the richness of the different *meanings* of the experience – always in the plural.

(v) The Moustakas Approach

Although I am now going to describe Moustakas's concepts and processes in some depth I should at this stage signal that I will deal in detail with critiques of the Moustakas approach in due course, as some serious criticisms have been made and these must be discussed. Indeed, I also have my own concerns, which I will come to later.

The seven 'concepts and processes' of heuristic research as set out by Moustakas are elegant and logical and require some introduction and description at this stage as they will remain important throughout this research. They are meant to be roughly rather than strictly sequential, and although some do follow on naturally from others, several of them operate in an iterative way throughout the duration of the research.

The first of these involves going inside the research question, achieving 'immersion in active experience' (1990:15) and attaining an in-depth understanding of it. Moustakas calls this *identifying with the focus of enquiry*. One has to live with the question and let it seep into all conscious and unconscious thinking. I remember an unnerving experience that happened to me on several occasions when I was a boy of about 12-14. I would think about a word, often while on the threshold of sleep, and endlessly repeat it, turning it around in my head until it gradually fragmented and became meaningless, somehow cut off from the concrete object it signified. Then, after a while, the word and the object would slowly become merged again. I often wondered what this meant, but I realise now that a similar if elongated process has occurred in identifying with the focus of the enquiry. At times the question has become meaningless and almost detached from

reality. Then it gradually falls back into place again, enriched by the detaching and re-connecting experience.

The second closely related concept – that of *self-dialogue* – involves letting the question play back and forth in one's mind until the 'multiple meanings' (1990:16) have been uncovered. Additionally, this must at times be a *visible* process so that research respondents are drawn into the thinking and respond accordingly. The interviews with my research respondents show this process clearly in the way that we had extensive and exploratory dialogues on various matters, such as how the experience of working for an employer had, over time, become difficult for most of the research group. Moustakas sees this as particularly important and makes a vital point in this quote from one of his earlier works:

At the heart of heuristics lies an emphasis on disclosing the self as a way of facilitating disclosure from others – a response to the tacit dimension within oneself sparks a similar call from others. (Douglass and Moustakas 1985:50)

The third concept and process is that of *tacit knowing*. Moustakas states that 'underlying all other concepts in heuristic research, at the base of all heuristic discovery, is the power of revelation in tacit knowing' (1990:20). This is a concept first described by Michael Polanyi (1891 – 1976) and made famous in his 1966 book '*The Tacit Dimension*'. By its very nature, tacit knowing is not an easy concept to describe or put into words. It can be simply described as 'know-how' rather than 'know-what' (facts) and 'know-why' (science) and this is helpful as it locates tacit knowing as a skill and conjures up images of creativity: the master baker creating wonderful bread but

struggling to find the words to precisely explain how, or the carpenter or sculptor creating a thing of beauty, integrity and internal coherence from a lump of raw material. Moustakas describes the experience of learning to ride a bike, employing Polanyi's description of the *elements* of tacit knowing: subsidiary and focal. The subsidiary skills are those which impinge on conscious awareness – such as pedalling, braking and steering. The focal (or subliminal) skills are those such as confidence, readiness and a sense of the wholeness of the experience. Thus this research project has its subsidiary elements: framing questions, following leads and creating narratives. The focal elements consist perhaps in sensing an emerging outline as the information builds up and in distinguishing this from false leads and blinkered presuppositions.

Fourthly, Moustakas introduces *intuition*. The concept and process of intuition as developed by Moustakas is closely related to the meaning of the word as used in everyday language. 'Intuition makes immediate knowledge possible without the intervening steps of logic or reasoning.....in the intuitive process one draws on clues; one senses a pattern or underlying condition that enables one to imagine and then characterise the reality, state of mind, or condition' (1990:23). Moustakas sees intuition as linking implicit – or tacit – knowledge with explicit knowledge as drawn from what can be observed and described, and suggests that it is a skill that can be honed and developed. I feel that there are clearly dangers here, although I understand and accept Moustakas's insistence that intuitive clues enable 'the whole' to be glimpsed, defined and gradually revealed. However, false or inaccurate intuition seems to me to a distinct possibility and something to be guarded against by (for example) using working hypotheses and not jumping to conclusions on the basis of hunches. When talking to research respondents I had the early sense – or intuition – that most of them had a set of

similar views about their previous employers and it started to fall quickly (and in retrospect too quickly) into place that this was a significant and driving factor behind the urge to become independent. I had to revise this view as I went deeper into their accounts and found that the actual picture was much more complicated.

Fifthly, Moustakas sets out *indwelling* as a distinct concept and process in heuristic research. This he describes as:

Turning inward to seek a deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature of a quality or theme of human experience. It involves a willingness to gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and its wholeness. (1990:24)

The point here is to take understanding to a deeper and deeper level. Moustakas's own oeuvre provides examples of him doing just that and attempting to get to the root of human experiences such as loneliness and shyness. The task for me is to try to uncover the complexities and points of contact for my research respondents and myself in terms of the experiences that we have all had in establishing an independent practice and to focus on these intensively.

Penultimately, Moustakas emphasises the importance of *focusing*. Put briefly, this is about removing clutter and concentrating on essentials. Moustakas comments that, via the act of focusing,

The researcher is able to determine the core themes that constitute an experience, identify and assess connecting feelings and thoughts, and achieve cognitive knowledge that includes refinements of meaning and perception that register as internal shifts and alterations of behaviour. (1990:25)

My view is that the concepts of indwelling and focusing are closely intertwined and that both lead to a concentration on core elements, with indwelling describing the process of becoming suffused with the subject matter and focusing enabling the gradual identification of the central and defining themes.

Moustakas sets out the *internal frame of reference* as his final concept and process: ‘To know or understand the nature, meanings or essences of any human experience, one depends on the internal frame of reference of the person who has had, or is having...the experience’ (1990:26). The starting point for this concept is that only the person who has had the experience will be able to portray this authentically. This of course applies to both the researcher and his or her respondents. Therefore the researcher must ensure that the right conditions are created for the research when conversing with research respondents. This means that an ‘atmosphere of openness and trust’ must be created and careful rapport built in order for the research conversation to be as rich, unconstrained and unqualified as possible. This will not only enable the experience to be freely explored, but will also mean that the researcher understands why what is disclosed is important to the research respondent. My own internal frame of reference, for example my previous experience and a deep seated drive for change, brings relevance and context to my account and, I would suspect, to the accounts of others.

These, then, are Moustakas's concepts and processes of heuristic research. They seem to me to be refined, well-crafted and – to apply one of Moustakas's concepts to his own research processes – intuitive. A broadly phenomenological approach which retains a strong personal dimension throughout the research process might be an apposite description. However, questions of research validity and how this is achieved seem to me to be important considerations at this stage. Moustakas makes the obvious but important point that 'validity in heuristics is not a quantitative measurement that can be determined by correlations or statistics' (1990:32). So, how therefore *can* it be achieved? Moustakas readily admits that validation is largely a subjective process and is primarily made by the researcher as the only person who has undertaken the heuristic enquiry from beginning to end. He quotes P.W. Bridgeman, a Harvard physicist, as saying effectively that validation is a private task that can only be done by the researcher continually checking meaning, significance and ensuring that concentration remains on the task in hand without being deflected off course. Validity would therefore seem to be embedded within the research methodology and would be an iterative process of going inside the data, allowing it to simmer away both consciously and unconsciously, appraising meanings from every possible angle and slowly building up an authentic picture over time.

Drake (2011) discusses the concept of validity in practitioner research more widely. In one sense, my research respondents and myself are somewhat semi-detached practitioners, having all once worked inside large organisations before becoming independent. However, this independence is not total and we still move in and out of organisations and our identities are still partially defined by them. We are also

practitioners within our own small independent practices. Drake ponders how validity might be achieved and rather tentatively suggests that:

The overall challenge seems to be to come to terms with how to devise practitioner research that investigates experience, understands and describes it in such a way so as to be recognisably worthwhile, whilst appreciating simultaneously that this may be theoretically impossible. (2011:39)

This pragmatic positioning resonates for me. I am fully aware that I will not be able to produce a perfect piece of research that is beyond criticism and so my aim is just as Drake describes – to produce research that investigates, understands and describes experience in a recognisably worthwhile way.

Punch (2005) separates questions of research validity into internal and external categories. It is clear that this research makes no great claim to external validity; in other words the findings of this study are not perhaps freely ‘generalizable’ (2005:255) to other similar situations. It would be difficult to make such a claim. Nonetheless, questions of internal validity are important ones and principally concern ‘the internal logic and consistency of the research’ (2005:254). For my research, I would take this to mean that it should have an internal coherence with demonstrably strong links existing between the epistemological and methodological approaches and with a clear rationale shown for the selection of research respondents. Furthermore, I-as-the-researcher must (to use the terms of validity as put forward by Moustakas) continually and openly check the meaning and significance of the themes, findings and conclusions and also ensure that my concentration remains focused on the task in hand without being diverted into

less relevant areas. I do subscribe to the Moustakas position that the phases of heuristic research will *in themselves* be a key factor in research validity as they follow on naturally from one another and broaden and deepen the knowledge of the researcher over time. Eventually, he or she can approach the final phase of creative synthesis where the pieces are put together into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

(vi) A Critique of Moustakas

I intend now to turn to the first of two critiques of the Moustakas methodology. It is important to look at this first one at this stage, as the main criticism concerns Moustakas's own failure to observe his own first research process; in other words, that of identifying with the focus of the enquiry. The second critique concerns issues connected with essentials and meanings and will therefore be discussed later in this chapter at the relevant point. Both critiques pre-date my research project. Writing in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in July 2002, Sandy Sela-Smith describes her own intensely painful experience of leaving a familiar relationship (with her husband) and an environment (their joint business) that had gradually and imperceptibly ceased to be hers. It took a terrifying dream to bring her to the realisation that she had to step away from these worn-out realities and launch into to new and frightening world as a single person. She was attracted to the heuristic approach as a way of authentically and systematically setting out her experience and recounts that:

I decided I wanted to use the Moustakas method for my dissertation to complete the work that remained unfinished in my thesis. Toward that end, I conducted a review of research literature that used Moustakas's heuristic method. (2002:58)

Somewhat to her surprise, she found that of the 28 research documents that she studied, only 3 had successfully employed Moustakas's methods and had used 'personal and subjective' experience in their research manuscripts. She reported that the other 25 showed little evidence of rigorous self-searching, particularly in terms of the authors themselves – and she also reported no discovery of the tacit dimension. Rather, these research documents seem to have been based on methods more reliant on 'procedural rules' and by the dictates of time. This finding led Sela-Smith to revisit Moustakas and to take a closer look at his guidance on heuristic research to see if there were clues as to why this might have occurred. She found areas where there was ambiguity – and this principally concerned a slippage from the insistence that *self-enquiry* is the fulcrum on which heuristic research rests to a more general examination of the *experience* itself. In Sela-Smith's view, as one progresses through Moustakas's book, a more traditional phenomenological approach concentrating on the experience itself, disembodied from the individual who had experienced it, gradually replaces the earlier heuristic approach contained in Chapters 1 and 2 of his work. Why had this happened? Sela-Smith argues that this is likely to have occurred because of Moustakas's own acutely painful experiences at a crucial point in his life. She recounts his description of a situation where he had to make a potentially life or death decision about an operation on his young daughter. He felt absolutely terrified about this responsibility and experienced this terror as an acute and overwhelming loneliness. This was not personally resolved, because of the immediacy of the situation which meant that the decision was taken out of his hands by his wife. In what was clearly a very difficult few days for Moustakas, he later tried to comfort his daughter when she was having a seizure following the operation and she rejected his overtures, calling him 'bad'. Sela-Smith makes the assertion that this rejection left Moustakas convinced that his child was experiencing the

same acute loneliness as he was – and that he alone understood this. Sela-Smith concludes from these episodes that Moustakas was unable to fully confront his own acute feelings of loneliness and indeed ‘cut himself off from his own feelings for a long time’ (2002:74) by projecting these onto his daughter. She suggests that he thereby navigates around the truly heuristic question which would have been ‘what is **my** experience of loneliness’, substituting the less raw and personal ‘what is **the** experience of loneliness’ (2002:74) in its stead (my emphases). This latter question then became the focus of his work on the topic of loneliness over the next few years. As a result of this, Sela-Smith believes, his evolved and detailed approach to heuristic research – as set out in his later 1990 book – deviates from the true path after the first two chapters and slips into a more ‘objective’ phenomenological approach. It follows therefore, using Sela-Smith’s argument, that those using the Moustakas methodology will be liable to follow the same path, as indeed her findings have reflected. She writes:

The application portion of his method in the later chapters has been codified into an external process that requires making lists, constructing methods, and following data-collection procedures in a prescribed fashion. The final product is a document that depicts themes, meanings, and essences of the experience. Other participants become the major source of data. (2002:76)

This is serious criticism. However, I am left with some considerable unease about this. In the end, as we are dealing with intensely personal matters, perhaps only Moustakas would be able to say whether, at a crucial moment, he turned aside from his chosen path into something less painful and personal. I am also concerned that Sela-Smith seems to be suggesting that that there is no room in heuristic research for the accounts of other

research participants for reasons of validity. This seems to place her at the very extreme of the ontological spectrum that was discussed earlier: that *only* subjective reality is possible. It is at least possible that her pre-positioning was ‘father to the thought’ about the dilution of Moustakas’s pure methods. I am not sure either that her observations about the split between Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) and Part 2 (the rest) of Moustakas’s book are fully justified. Sela-Smith comments that ‘the method in his later chapters has been codified into an external process’ (2002:76), thus compromising the earlier emphasis on the phase of immersion and losing oneself in the data until the full picture emerges. It is true that Moustakas does try to put some light structure around this in his later chapters, but in my view this is necessary. In some crucial ways – which I explore below – he remains extremely broad brush and vague on matters such as data analysis, which might be said to compromise the heuristic approach as a serious research methodology. However, I understand what Sela-Smith is suggesting: the first two chapters *do* emphasise the primacy of an emergent – at times almost mystical – process without earthbound mechanisms such as list writing or developing contracts with research respondents. Nonetheless, if her arguments are followed to a logical conclusion, I believe that we would be left with only an eloquent statement of the concepts, processes and phases of heuristic research with no guidance at all on ‘how to’. Finally, it is just not true to say that Moustakas has ‘codified into an external process’ the broad vision of the concepts of his research model. At many points in the later sections of his book, and not only in Chapters 1 and 2, the putative researcher is reminded to ‘evoke richer, fuller, more comprehensive depictions’ (1990:47) from research respondents and advised strongly that the ‘rhythm (of research) must take its own course and will not be satisfied until a natural closing occurs and a sense of wonder

has fulfilled its intent and purpose' (1990:55). In my view, these are not the words of a man who is trying to unduly constrain and prescribe data collection methods.

(vii) The Phases of Research

Moustakas also identifies six temporal **phases** of research and as I gradually familiarised myself with his heuristic approach, I began to realise that these fitted well with my progress thus far and could continue to guide my research. Moustakas suggests that these phases should 'guide unfolding investigations and comprise the basic research design' (1990:27) and, as far as possible, my research and its findings do closely shadow these six stages or phases.

The first research phase is that of *Initial Engagement* with the topic or subject. This is where one identifies a topic of 'intense interest....that calls out to the researcher' (1990:27). This was certainly the case for me. I was intrigued and fascinated by my compelling urge to leave a secure and generally happy job within the local authority and cast myself upon the terrain of uncertainty by setting up a new business. I had not previously thought of myself as a risk-taker or someone who was prone to acting upon impulse. Was this selfish? Where did the motivation come from? I could sense that there were deeper drivers which manifested themselves in restlessness, a feeling of being stalled and of having let crucial time pass me by. These were the questions and issues that nagged at and motivated me. I sensed that, by exploring in depth the experience of leaving the local authority (LA) and setting up my own practice, these questions might be answered. At the same time, I began to wonder whether exploring the experiences of others who had undertaken the same journey might add lustre,

validity and depth to the equation. This first phase of the research is where the research question began slowly to emerge.

The second phase concerns *Immersion* in the question and its complexities. Moustakas rather dramatically describes how in this phase the researcher ‘lives the question in waking, sleeping and even dream states; everything in his or her life becomes crystallised around the question’ (1990:28). While this might sound a little unlikely, actually and in retrospect this has been largely true. My business and its gradual development have indeed been present components in much of my conscious or unconscious life over the past few years. The question ‘What is the *experience*?’ has been always been in my thoughts, sometimes in the form of concrete constructs – for example, excitement or apprehension at various specific scenarios or upcoming pieces of work – and sometimes as more abstract thoughts manifested as unease, self-doubt or alternatively a feeling of achievement or well-being. Immersion describes well the experience of the past few years as the following two short personal passages pieced together from thoughts and recollections jotted down at various times are intended to demonstrate. The first recollection came after a report was well received and a meeting to feed back our conclusions and recommendations had gone particularly well:

For several days now I have been riding on the crest of a wave. It all seems to have come together: the freedom, the recognition, the validation, the status, financial comfort and our – and my – boldness and initiative created this. I must ensure that we do not become complacent. ‘Pride becomes before a fall’ and all that. We have traded job and income stability for this more exciting life and it could all be gone, if not in a flash, then within a few months. But nonetheless, to feel so free, so unconstrained, recognised as an

*individual and not merely as an obedient representative of some gigantic organisation – **that's** what it is all about. People now hear my voice. I can say what I believe to be true. I was saying the same things when I worked for the Local Authority and no-one listened or heard. Becoming independent is like moving from the silent movies to being the star of the show. People's perceptions of me are changing.*

This second recollection came at the end of a period of about 3 months where a particular project had slowly but irrevocably gone wrong – phrases such as 'slow motion car crash' come to mind:

That horrible, unfair, but perhaps sometimes true saying often heard in the independent field – 'you are only as good as your last assignment' – reverberates around and around my head. I can't let it go. This will affect our reputation; has already affected our reputation. Word will get round. We are not in control of this. All these senior people know each other and word will spread like wildfire that we do not know what we are doing, that we are out of our depth, that we take on work for which we are unsuited. Is it true? Perhaps it is. Who do we think we are to advise organisations on this matter? We don't know enough about it and have left ourselves hopelessly exposed. No, come on. Wait a minute. We have a huge amount of knowledge. In another setting and with different people it would have been fine. But isn't that an excuse: mere self justification? You are not in some cosy social care setting now where mistakes can be swept under the carpet, forgotten about, rationalised away with phrases like 'we're all in the same boat'. You are not 'in the same boat' as anyone now. You are on your own and if you can't do the job, word will get round and others will be asked – have already been asked – to do it. There is no hiding place now: face the facts.

The ways that these two feelings, so deeply experienced at the time and almost (but not quite) mutually exclusive, both authentically constitute ‘the experience’ continues to astonish and intrigue me. The interaction with experience on personality is unique – or is it? I will turn to what others have to say later.

The third phase of research – called *Incubation* – is less obvious as a discrete and sequential process and I prefer to see this as ‘infilling’ and non-conscious activity occurring in parallel with some of the other phases, particularly that of Immersion. Moustakas appears to envisage this as a distinct phase following Immersion where ‘the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question....and is no longer absorbed in the topic in any direct way’ (1997:28). By shifting the focus away from a direct contemplation of the question or issue, one’s understanding of it should deepen and expand. This should open up possibilities for understanding to grow over time. I have seen this happening in several ways during the course of the research and a good example would be the importance and centrality of networks in the experience of setting up an independent practice. At the beginning I ‘knew’ that having networks of contacts would be useful in establishing and developing the business – in short, in gaining work. However, the centrality and importance of networks in terms of peer support, reputation, a base for comparison, expanding the business, orientating it in relation to the outside world and defining its function were almost entirely hidden from me. This I did not ‘know’. Only over the course of several years have these things become clear to me bit by bit and usually through unconscious reflection over time rather than conscious consideration. I cannot place when I first ‘knew’ these things. So it is with the research question in totality – the passage of time alters one perception of it gradually and deepens understanding. By the time of my research interviews this had

started to develop and I was keen to add the understanding and experiences of others. What other insights and meanings could be added to my own evolving and changing thoughts on this matter? Moustakas describes how the process of incubation reveals new understanding, perspectives and a 'vision of its unity' (1990:29). That such unity might contain apparently irreconcilable opposites is a revelation in itself.

The fourth research phase is that of *illumination*. I have always been drawn to metaphors involving light and find them powerful and compelling. Illumination can be seen as making the connections between fragments of knowledge and seeing the themes and qualities emerge. Moustakas describes illumination as 'an awakening to new constituents of the experience, thus adding new dimensions of knowledge.....or illumination may involve corrections of distorted knowledge or disclosure of hidden meanings' (1990:29). During the course of this research I have found that illumination has occurred for me principally when talking to others about their experiences. This has been the 'third dimension' which has provided perspective and depth to my own experience. Emerging themes in my own journey have been strengthened and validated. Some preconceptions which I thought may have been themes have faded away. Moustakas gives the intriguing example of 'not seeing' a cemetery in the midst of a beautiful natural setting of woods, trees and hills despite having viewed the scene many times before. Then a friend died and the next time he passed the familiar scene he became aware of the cemetery in its midst. It had always been there, but only the death of a friend had brought it to the fore. In the same way, many phenomena in my own experience of becoming independent had 'always been there' such as the awareness that this was likely to be an irrevocable step. Rather like Moustakas and his cemetery, I did not want to see or acknowledge this for a long time and only by thinking and discussing

the matter with others and gaining their perspectives on their own experiences did this twist of perception become conscious.

Moustakas's final two phases of research are *explication* and *creative synthesis*. He describes explication as a process in which 'a more complete apprehension of the key ingredients is discovered....ultimately a comprehensive depiction of the core and dominant themes is developed. The researcher brings together discoveries of meaning and organises them into a comprehensive depiction of the essences of the experience' (1990:31). For this thesis, this has happened slowly but surely as not only my own experiences but also those of others have been integrated into the frame of reference and the themes have slowly emerged. Creative synthesis is the final phase of research where all is drawn together. Moustakas describes how 'a period of solitude and meditation' should precede this stage and then the researcher 'is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis.....the researcher must move beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realised' (1990:32). From a distance, when I was involved in the earlier stages of research, these two phases appeared to form a logical conclusion to the process although I was a little concerned even then that the final phase in particular appeared just a little mystical. As I drew nearer this phase of research my doubts increased – just *how* does this happen? I will expand much further on this later in this thesis.

(viii) A Further Criticism of the Moustakas approach

I now want to consider another author who has used Moustakas's heuristic approach for his doctoral research (completed in 2005) and who has some interesting and important

points to make about its general application. This is Peter Martin, now Principal Lecturer at Roehampton University. In his research dissertation entitled ‘The effect of personal life-events on the practice of therapists’ he considers the Moustakas approach carefully. He quickly becomes concerned that what he perceives as Moustakas’s ontological and epistemological assumptions do not match his and explains:

Ontologically, I have no real sense that anything is served by believing or not believing in a reality. I am agnostic on such matters, as is Garfinkel’s (1967) version of ethno-methodology. He suggests the supposedly objective contexts in which we live are fragile and transitory (in Giddens, 1991:36-37). Moustakas’s (1990; 1994) attractive methodology, however, appears to hold on to versions of reality to which I have no impetus to subscribe. (2005:45)

Martin goes on to explain that he believes that Moustakas’s research approach is grounded in ‘neo-positivism’ because of its emphasis on essence and essentials. He is clearly troubled that his own ‘agnosticism’ about an external reality will be compromised by a search for essence – particularly if this is assumed to be a concrete artefact rather than a subjective construct. However, he is keen to preserve an approach to his research based on Moustakas’s thinking, as it contains much that is valuable. The point he raises about essence is an important consideration for me too as I have positioned myself a long way from the positivist end of the ontological spectrum, while not discounting entirely the existence of some form of external reality. Max Van Manen’s approach – which I will come to in detail shortly – has some answers to this as he deals directly and deftly with the potential problem of essence. However, Martin goes on to explore potential answers to the conundrum he himself raises and considers

constructivist epistemology as a possible bridge. He notes the many similarities between constructivist and heuristic approaches; for instance, the reliance on thick rather than merely factual description, the position of the researcher as being inside the research as 'a visible and reflexive author' and the fact that 'emotional and aesthetic experience is actively communicated rather than merely talked about in an objective manner' (2005:59). He also names several other similarities. However, there is one big problem for Martin in this comparison. Constructivism insists on multiple realities and what Martin calls 'the co-existence of different meanings'. However, he sees the heuristic approach as being fundamentally a search for essence. He concludes that:

If Moustakas's methodology does not need to be essentialist, his methodology could be subsumed in a constructivist epistemology. This would entail the capacity of heurism to incorporate many voices in its findings rather than the single voice that prevails in Moustakas's creative synthesis, which, in my view, reduces the voices to one story. (2005:60)

He carries on to propose a modified methodology which does allow for the incorporation of different voices within his eventual findings. I will also incorporate many voices in my findings, but I am not in agreement with Martin on this point. I do not think a 'single voice prevails' or has to prevail in Moustakas's creative synthesis. This is the final stage of heuristic research where the researcher as 'scientist-artist develops an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon' (1990:52).

I carefully note the phrase ‘essential **meanings**’ rather than ‘essential meaning’ or indeed a single all-defining ‘essence’. If producing a single meaning or essence of the experience was the ultimate aim of the research, I would have the same concerns as Martin. I do not think that Moustakas wishes to distil everything down to one voice: in fact I am sure that this would run counter to his intentions of creating something that is greater than the sum of its parts – the very opposite of a reductive process. The analogy of glorious polyphony comes to mind here: the master polyphonists such as Tomas Luis de Victoria or Pierluigi Palestrina could set music for up to 30 concurrent voices that could at times be in harmony, at other times dissonant. Many of these voices would be singing different melodic lines and yet all would somehow create a marvellous tapestry of sound that had ultimate internal coherence and integrity.

However, as indicated earlier, after some time of immersing myself in the Moustakas thinking and approach, and particularly as my own data from the interviews with research respondents built up, I became more and more aware of a significant omission in the Moustakas approach. Moustakas actually says very little about methods of data analysis and indeed is close to elusive on this subject. Just eight paragraphs, or two pages, of his book deal with analysis of data. It is telling that this short section of the book is entitled ‘*Outline* (my italics) Guide of Procedures for Analysis of Data’ (1990:51). In this section Moustakas explains that the data is all gathered together and that ‘timeless immersion’ is then necessary until all is understood. The researcher then starts to identify the ‘qualities and themes manifested in the data’ (1990:51) both for his or her own data and from that of research respondents. An iterative process of reading and re-reading is then suggested until the ‘universal qualities and themes of the experience are thoroughly internalized and understood’ (1997:52). Although brief,

Moustakas's section on data analysis does indeed contain much of value – but only in the very briefest outline. I must be clear at this stage that I am not rejecting the Moustakas approach, in fact quite the reverse, but as a guide to the detailed and painstaking *analysis* of data and the careful and methodical drawing out of themes, he simply does not provide adequate guidance. The process he suggests in outline seems to me to owe more to mysticism than to method. I would suggest that most researchers (and I would count myself among their number) need more detailed steps than those Moustakas provides between collecting the data and coming to the 'creative synthesis' that is the ultimate goal of the project.

Max Van Manen makes some important points about this when discussing 'human science research' of this kind and the need to have a rational foundation to underpin it. He states that in his belief:

Human science is rationalistic in that it operates on the assumption that human life may be made intelligible.....it is to believe in the possibility of understanding the world by maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relationship with the world. Rationality expresses a faith that we can share this world, that we can make things understandable to each other, that experience can be made intelligible. (1997:16)

He adds that lived human experience is always more complex than can be described but that 'to recognise that life is fundamentally or ultimately mysterious does not need to make one a scholarly mystic' (1997:16). He goes on to set out *how* to make sense of data – and it is his approach to the analysis of data that I eventually adopted, after consideration of other approaches. I will return to this in considerable detail below.

(ix) Methods for Data Analysis

Because of the significant gap identified in the Moustakas approach, I had therefore to turn elsewhere to resolve this problem. I was keenly aware that any approach used would have to be congruent with my overarching methodology and I first turned to Amedeo Giorgi's (1997) approach as described in his paper entitled 'The Theory, Practice and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure'. Giorgi is a phenomenologist of the Husserlian school and at first sight his approach to data analysis looked attractive. He sets out a five-stage process which involves collecting the data via interview, reading it carefully, dividing it into parts or 'meaning units' and then transforming the raw language into 'disciplinary units' which in time 'express the structure of the phenomenon'. This has some similarities to the method that I eventually decided on (outlined in detail below) and yet I felt on reflection that there was something rather distant and formal about this approach. Much of this concern is about the language Giorgi uses, which did not for me match the vitality and warmth of the Moustakas approach or reflect or embody the emotion and richness of human experience.

I also looked at the data analysis method pioneered by Adrian van Kaam and discussed by Judith Anderson and Janet Eppard (1998) in the journal *Qualitative Health Research* in an article entitled 'van Kaam's Method Revisited'. This approach is described by van Kaam as 'psychophenomenological' and Anderson and Eppard describe his view of human experience as being 'a dynamic, complex, continually moving entity' (1998:399). This would, at first sight, appear to sit very well with the Moustakas approach. Van Kaam has evolved four stages of data analysis, namely Analysis, Translation, Transposition and Phenomenological Reflection. Twelve further detailed

steps guide the researcher through the process. As with the Giorgi method, there is much that is attractive and the steps are detailed and clear and provide a strong underpinning structure to data analysis. However, van Kaam's method has a strong quantitative element where the numerical incidence of repeated phrases and key words are carefully noted and form much of the evidence base upon which to draw conclusions. This makes his method much more applicable for large scale studies, and Anderson and Eppard summarise this point succinctly, commenting that this method is particularly suited for 'the researcher who is seeking a rigorous method for analysing large amounts of data' (1998:402). They also comment that – because of this – 'there is a less interactive role between the researcher and subject than is generally expected in qualitative enquiry' (1998:402). This led me to conclude that the van Kaam method would also not be appropriate for this research, as extended interaction with research respondents is central to the Moustakas approach.

After further thought I decided to employ the data analysis method set out by Max Van Manen in his 1997 book *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Van Manen describes his approach as 'hermeneutic phenomenology', in other words *describing* lived experience via the *interpretation* of texts. This is more pragmatic and less purist than the approach of 'the strict followers of Husserl's transcendental method' (1997:25). Such academics and researchers (and Van Manen names Giorgi as prominent amongst them) 'would insist that phenomenological research is pure description and that interpretation (hermeneutics) falls outside the bounds of phenomenological research' (1997:26). Such an evolved approach fits well with Moustakas's heuristic approach where the phases of research involve immersion,

incubation, illumination and explication: hermeneutic phenomenology by any other name.

(x) Chosen Method for Data Analysis and Methodological Fit

Using two approaches immediately of course raises the important question of methodological ‘fit’, as I have already mentioned. It was both important to me and vital to the internal coherence of this thesis that contrasting methodologies and their underpinning epistemologies were not stitched together in a syncretistic way with the ill-joining seams plain for all to see. I will therefore explain how I have integrated the approaches of Moustakas and Van Manen. In summary, Moustakas provides the underlying and broad methodology underpinning this research and Van Manen provides the approach to tackling the data that is in my view congruent with Moustakas’s overall framework.

Moustakas explains that ‘the focus in a heuristic quest is on recreation of the lived experience; full and complete depictions of experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person’ (1990:39). The interviews in my study provide this in two stages: the first set of interviews concentrated on the overall ‘story’ of the research participants and what brought them to the decision to set up an independent practice and the second set focused more on the actual heart of the experience of setting up an independent practice. The heuristic process of identifying with the focus of the enquiry – in other words the ability to ‘get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it’ (1990:15) is pivotal here. In the second set of interviews in particular I found myself asking, at times to myself and at times to participants, questions such as ‘But what was it actually *like* – explain the experience more clearly’.

The constant iteration and reiteration of the central question ‘What is the *experience* of....’ became an internal mantra that underpinned everything I did in those moments. Moustakas’s elegantly phrased concepts and processes have a natural ebb and flow to them which only became clear and alive to me as I undertook the research: identifying with the process of enquiry, self-dialogue, indwelling and onwards towards sense-making or illumination. This constant interplay continued throughout the analysis, discussion and creative synthesis phases of my research and was anything but a linear process. The ‘incubation’ Moustakas speaks of is an apt word as it is difficult to ‘force’ meaning from complex texts without letting subliminal and unconscious mental processes work on them over time.

Van Manen’s approach is very similar in terms of the ultimate aim of enlightenment. He states that ‘the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try and grasp the essential meaning of something’ (1997:37). I have acknowledged earlier in this chapter how the quest for essences and essentials is potentially problematic and has been strongly criticised for pushing in a positivist direction: indeed Van Manen agrees that the terms ‘essence’ and ‘essentialism’ have become the ‘ugly words’ (1997:xiv) of qualitative research for that very reason. This is the same issue that troubled Peter Martin. However, I believe that this issue is much less problematic if Van Manen’s own pragmatic definition of essence is borrowed. He uses the examples of a flower or a piece of poetry – and asks what the *unique qualities* of these phenomena are without which they could not be called a flower or a piece of poetry. I intend to use this definition of essence for this research, which means that I am looking for the unique qualities (in the plural) of the experience of establishing an independent practice. This certainly allows and invites discovery of a *range* of unique qualities, some of which might well be

commonly shared by both myself and my research respondents and some of which might only be seen as such by individuals. This is my way of responding to the valid point that Peter Martin makes about the neo-positivist single essence trap and will allow my research to use Moustakas's approach without any corresponding requirement to seek a single fundamental essence, or to define a 'single fixed property by which we know something' (1997:xv). In any case, as Martin points out, Moustakas himself (quoting Husserl) seems to accept the constructivist position of essential natures harbouring 'many meanings' (1994:29). There is also always a danger, which Van Manen explicitly accepts, of being too simplistic in conducting the search for essence and of confusing culture with nature by drawing moral conclusions from essentialist statements, such as that men are naturally rational, strong beings who make good leaders. This is of course an oversimplification but illustrates succinctly a definite danger.

Van Manen speaks directly to another concern I have by discussing the place of language in describing the elusive concepts of lived experience. How can we express and make clear our meanings in words, delicate, personal and unique as they often are? This is where thick description and the skill of the researcher come into play. There are many written accounts of situations, including vivid stories about real life encounters, where the skill of the writer and the language used propels us from being mere observers into another more intimate world of fascination, understanding and empathy. However, I have also to be aware that I am engaged in research here and am not writing a piece of dramatic fiction. This means that I will be looking to shape linguistically the important themes of my own account, and those of my research respondents, into something vital and full of life which tries to capture the many-layered and complex

experience we have all had. This has to be done without either over-dramatising matters or losing or subsuming the unique voices of the research respondents; for me these must remain vigorous and distinguishable throughout the entire research process. Language is in some ways inadequate, but will have to serve.

So, faced with this wealth of information, consisting of my own account and those of 6 others contained in 11 long interviews, how do I make sense of it? Van Manen describes his approach to the analysis of data as follows:

Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure: grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule bound process but a free act of seeing meaning.....theme gives control to our research and writing. (1997:79).

Therefore, I have looked for themes – or clusters of experience – in each interview conducted, and in the discussion chapter I will analyse the common themes across the interviews in considerable depth. Van Manen further considers the question of ‘what is a theme’ in some depth and detail and arrives at the following set of definitions (1997:87ff). His definitions are in italics and my comments on these are alongside in plain text:

- *Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point.* So, applied to a text, what is this text trying to convey?

- *Theme formulation is at best an oversimplification.* By this, Van Manen is indicating that it is likely that something will be lost in the translation and that mere language may not satisfactorily convey the full richness of the experience.
- *Themes are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in a text – themes are intransitive.* Considering this carefully, I think that this is a caution against too literal and concrete an interpretation of a text – so that to get to a theme, one is trying to decipher general **meaning** rather than concentrating on objects and tangibles: where people were, who said what to whom – and so on.
- *Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand.* This is the act of getting to the meaning or multiple meanings of the discourse.

In a wonderfully illuminating phrase, Van Manen describes themes as ‘the stars that make up the universes of meaning that we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes’ (1997:90).

Drilling down further, Van Manen turns to the hard work of uncovering thematic aspects and isolating thematic statements. On the former he gives the example of the phenomenology of reading a book, with (i) entering the narrative, (ii) beginning to care about the characters, and (iii) experiencing action (without in fact having to act) as three initial ‘themes’. In a similar way – and just thinking ad hoc – some thematic aspects that I have uncovered when reading accounts of the experience of setting up an independent practice have been a sense of changing identity over time, a sense of risks being taken, and certainty, insecurity and doubt. Van Manen outlines three practical approaches to isolating thematic material within a text: these are via a holistic, selective, or a line-by-line approach. These are definitely not mutually exclusive options: for instance, if the

‘line by line’ method is used, it does not mean that the text cannot also be commented on and analysed as a whole. Indeed, keeping a sense of the whole has been very important throughout the research.

After some consideration I eventually decided to use a combination of all three. I was at first minded to use only the ‘selective’ approach and my reasons for this were, principally, to do with the length of the texts I had to cover: 11 transcribed interviews of a total duration of more than 14 hours in length and running to many thousands of words. I thought initially that this would preclude a line by line approach which I felt would, to use a common metaphor, put me in the position of not seeing the wood for the trees. This was because I was looking for themes, rather than a line by line dissection of every word spoken. Similarly, I felt that merely seeing the text as a whole and formulating a phrase or phrases to summarise it (as in the holistic approach) was simply not going to be adequate by itself when the interviews undertaken had a depth and a richness and diversity which is beyond mere summary. When I actually started to read and re-read the interviews I found, despite my early provisional view that the selective approach should be exclusively employed, that I was actually dissecting the material line by line; not only once, but many times over in an iterative way which built up the thematic picture over time. I think that this added to the validity of my research – all texts were scrutinised carefully and methodically. Of course, this then led to a selective use of statements within the texts, for example I identified and pulled out the passages, sentences or phrases that illustrated and illuminated the moment of transition from paid employment to independence – and I repeated this process for many other themes. For these reasons, I would say that my overall approach is a combination of all three

approaches: a line by line approach to begin with, leading to selective use of parts of the texts to illustrate common themes. I also attempted to keep a clear sense of the whole.

Van Manen advises reading through a text several times and asking ‘What statements or phrases seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?’ (1997:93). These are then highlighted. As the themes build up they are described by the researcher in ‘phenomenologically sensitive’ paragraphs and this is envisaged to be an iterative and repeated process, so that the research text on the interview analysis builds up over time. Van Manen stresses that the aim here is ‘linguistic transformation’ which captures themes but also remains grounded in, and true to, the essential elements of the experience being described. This seems to me to be a good preparation for both the wider and in-depth discussion of the themes and also for Moustakas’s final research phase of creative synthesis, where everything should come together in a well crafted and considered depiction of the meanings of the experience.

(xi) The Interviewees and Initial Ethical Considerations

I worked with six research respondents and interviewed five of them twice in depth. The sixth respondent was only interviewed once in depth, and did not respond to my two requests for a subsequent interview. This person was the only one of my research respondents that I did not know personally beforehand, although I am not sure whether any significance can be attached to this fact.

I had originally contacted six potential respondents, and of these six, four became involved in the interviews. The other two declined for reasons principally of time and availability. Of the two additional respondents I then contacted, one came from my own

personal business network and the other – the person who was interviewed just once – was a business network contact of one of my original six respondents.

All six of the research respondents who were interviewed were people who have a strong background in the social care field. All are qualified social workers and all had been managers within Local Authority settings at one time or another. All my respondents were, at the time of the interviews at least, in independent practice, by which I mean that they were self-employed and not employed by a Local Authority or any other social care sector employer. All had, for various reasons, left paid employment to become independent within the last 15 or so years, in other words since 1995. In all these factors, each of my research respondents had the same background as myself.

I chose my respondents with the following criteria in mind – firstly, that all should share a similar background to myself in the way that I have described above. This would mean that all had undergone the experience, within the same broad spectrum of activity, of leaving paid employment and becoming an independent practitioner. Secondly, I chose people – with that one exception as described above – with whom I had had some business contact over the previous few years. I must emphasise that point: all were business contacts and none were personal friends. However, I knew enough of the background of each of them to realise that they were potential research respondents. I had formed a provisional view of all but one of my potential respondents that they were likely to be people with a rich story to tell. Four are men and two are women. In terms of ethnic background, one is white Australian, one is white Irish and four are white British. My research respondents will be known for the purposes of this research as

Sarah, Margaret, Nigel, Philip, Simon and Geoffrey. These names were chosen carefully with the aim of adding to anonymisation; none of the chosen names bears any relation at all to the individual's real name.

I have not altered the gender of the respondents. This is because some of the stories told to me involve experiences as a woman, or as a man, or as a mother or father of young children and to change genders seemed to me to be potentially distorting. Situational detail did emerge from time to time in the accounts of the respondents, such as working abroad, or for a particular employer. In these circumstances I have not specified the name of the individual employer or country, but have where possible or necessary kept the generic title accurate – for example, university, hospital, local authority or voluntary sector employer – as I believe that, once again, to alter these details would have been potentially distorting. I have also taken care not to be too specific, so I have not described previous employers in any more detail than was strictly necessary.

(xii) Ethical framework

To ensure that this research project was undertaken in accordance with established ethical principles and guidelines, I used three main sources for this purpose. They were:

- (1) The Department of Health publication *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care* Second Edition DH 2005.
- (2) Sussex Institute e-publication *Standards and Guidance on Research Ethics*
- (3) Sussex Institute e-publication *Standards and Guidelines on Research Ethics*
Annex: Checklist for proposed research

The Department of Health (DH) research governance framework set out two principles that have acted as a baseline for my research. These are, firstly, that *informed consent is at the heart of ethical research*. The second statement is that *the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of participants must be the primary consideration in any research study*.

Considering the key issues raised by the ethical guidance, my research did not involve any of the more contentious areas that are mentioned in much of the literature concerning ethical research. It did not involve, for example, interviewing children, or those with disabilities, and neither did it conduct research of a covert nature. This made the ethical task less complex than it otherwise might have been. However, my plan to interview other individuals who had established independent practices in the social care field did immediately raise one obvious issue – that of ‘trade secrets’ or competition. I have been involved in the independent field long enough to know that there is a measure of competitiveness and defending of personal contacts and intellectual property amongst most practitioners or organisations in this milieu. That is natural enough – we all compete for business and have our own contacts, networks and reputations to consider. This consideration had implications both for the way in which possible respondents were contacted and also in terms of being absolutely clear about what happens to the information gained. I certainly wished to avoid guarded conversations where the interviewee would have been more concerned about protecting their competitive edge than in freely and honestly exploring the meanings of the experience of setting up their practice or consultancy.

In my view three main factors mitigated against this: firstly, I was able to set out clearly in my letter of introduction (which I reinforced verbally at the beginning of each

interview) that what I wanted to do was to interview them *‘with the intention of exploring your experiences since commencing your business. Your views and insights into this would be extremely valuable. I would be seeking vivid, personal and comprehensive descriptions of your personal experience, concentrating on your thoughts, feelings and actions as your business took shape’*. This description clearly indicated that I was looking to focus mainly on their *personal* experiences, rather than on specific work that they had done and how commercially successful their venture had been and why. The second, less tangible, but still important factor was that – with that one exception – all the respondents were known to me, and me to them. This meant that it was easier to gain trust as I was already a known figure, and one with whom they had dealt in the past on business matters. I therefore perceived that I already had a bond of trust with my respondents. Thirdly and finally, I firmly believed and still believe now that the *process* of the interviews themselves provided an assurance that I was not seeking commercially sensitive information to use for my own ends. In the first set of interviews, I allowed my respondents to simply tell me their story in their words, at their pace and with their emphases, and my interventions and questions were really only those of encouragement, clarification and from time to time using prompts to ensure that we stayed on the topic. In the second set of interviews I focused more closely on the essentials or meanings of their experiences: as far away as possible from seeking or being interested in commercially sensitive material. I am therefore of the firm view that, because of the precautions taken, because a good measure of trust already existed, and because the content of the interviews themselves was about feelings and experiences, the trade secrets issue did not limit or distort the interviews in any significant way.

I also provided respondents in advance with a copy of the brief that I intended to use in the interviews. This was a summary of areas to be covered during the interview rather than a structured set of questions. It was also of great importance to be clear about what would happen to the information that emerged from the interviews. Respondents were advised in advance that the interviews would be tape recorded and transcribed in order that I had a clear and accurate recollection of all that had been said. After the interviews I sent each respondent the transcript of their interviews and asked them to comment on it for accuracy and interpretation. I also undertook to make changes as requested to correct (for example) any misinterpretation or factual or transcribing error. Only one respondent raised an issue with one of her transcribed interviews and this was connected solely with her concern that she had expressed herself at inordinate length. I was quickly able to reassure her that I would only be using relevant parts of the transcript and that her full account had been rich in relevant detail. This completely resolved the issue for her.

I considered briefly whether there was any way around the anonymisation of data generated from respondents. My instinct tends to be against presuming anonymisation is *always* the better course – I wondered whether some reality might be lost by so doing. However, I weighed this up against other considerations such as the protection of the research respondents and also honesty and authenticity – crucial factors in all research – and quickly made the unavoidable decision that information about individuals and their organisations would need to be anonymised. This is because in the final reckoning such anonymity would protect the identity of the respondents if they were (for example) to discuss contentious matters about employing organisations. Such anonymisation would be likely to help ensure that respondents were able to talk more freely.

Ethical approval was subsequently granted by the University of Sussex in 2008. The full text of the letter to the research respondents is contained as Appendix One of this thesis, the Interview Guide as Appendix Two and the accompanying annotated ethics checklist as Appendix Three. I also made it very clear, as I have mentioned, that research respondents' data would be anonymised and this was clearly stated in the letter. I also confirmed this verbally with each person before each interview. All were in agreement with this level of anonymity. I did consider whether I should obtain written consent from the research participants, but did not deem this to be necessary. All had freely given consent and were keen to be involved in the interviews.

(xiii) Process of the Interviews

Denscombe comments that 'the effect of the researcher's identity, of course, will depend on the nature of the topic being discussed' (2003:170) and suggests that the way to tackle this is to be open about the potential difficulties and also to be 'polite and punctual, receptive and neutral in order to encourage the right climate for an interviewee to feel comfortable and provide honest answers' (2003:170). I am confident that I observed these simple but important rules, and the prompts I created for myself at the top of the interview guide (Appendix Two) pointed to the importance I gave to ensuring the interview environment was right.

Literature on research methods also considers the potential issue of bias. Moustakas is clear that the heuristic researcher 'lives the question in waking, sleeping and even dream states' (1990:28). However, Denscombe comments that:

Conventional advice to researchers has been geared to minimising (their) impact on the outcome of the research by having them adopt a passive and neutral stance. (2003:171)

The issue for me as a researcher living with the question and working from the inside of it – so to speak – was how to ensure that my own views and feelings did not unduly influence the responses of the research respondents or prevent me from hearing what was said because of my own preconceived ideas. Undoubtedly this was sometimes difficult, because the ‘passive and neutral’ approach described by Denscombe does not sit easily with heuristic research. The approach I attempted to use has its roots in phenomenological research and is called ‘Epoche’ which is a Greek word meaning to ‘abstain’. Moustakas explains that ‘in the Epoche, we set aside our pre-judgements, biases and pre-conceived ideas about things’ (1994:85). This is not the same thing as saying that the researcher has to be neutral or passive, but rather that he or she has to ensure ‘a clearing of mind, space and time’ (1994:86) in order to focus solely on the experience as recounted by others. I do not think that I always achieved this, but it was constantly in my mind and did in large part enable me to keep in the background my own views, thoughts and created meanings of the experience under discussion. By doing so, I was able to concentrate on the meanings for the other person without instant and constant re-interpretation according to my own views.

The issue that I have already referred to above concerning commercial sensitivities was certainly an increasingly real and relevant one. The independent social care field is a competitive place, and by mid-2008 (when the first interviews occurred) it was tightening further as the threat of the credit crunch, as it was then called, overshadowed

our discussions. This was already becoming much more of a global issue than the original sub-prime mortgage trigger for the crisis in the USA. In the middle of 2008 it was starting to turn into the full blown recession that is still with us in 2012, and as will be seen from the accounts of the research respondents, the worsening economic circumstances were definitely starting to influence their thinking. This made it doubly important that my respondents did not perceive in any way that I was after trade secrets and commercially sensitive information that would potentially compromise their own business and its profitability.

The first set of interviews took place as mentioned above in the summer of 2008, except for the final one which took place in November 2008. All the interviews took place in a variety of different settings from homes to workplaces, but always in a private and confidential space. The interviews varied considerably in length, but this was not because of any time pressures; people express themselves in different ways and the interviews came to an end only when the respondent had finished telling and illuminating their own story. I never had to curtail interviews or bring them to an end owing to time pressures. In fact, looking back on them now in totality, they all seem to have a similar cadence, with a more or less exploratory start, a more intense middle and a gradual touch down as we both perceived that the issues had been explored to the greatest depth possible. I have described earlier how the first set mainly explored the past: what brought the research respondent to their independent practice. In some ways this was akin to simply asking them: Who are you? From where do you come? And what is your story? In fact when I reflect upon these three fundamental questions, I sometimes wonder why I did not simply ask these at the outset of the interview and just let the other person talk. Simplicity can often be distilled profundity. Van Manen speaks

powerfully of the four fundamental existential themes that all human beings experience in day to day living: Lived Space, Lived Body, Lived Time and Lived Other, and comments that all phenomenological research incorporates these factors as we explore human lifeworlds. The theme of Lived Time was important in both sets of interviews, but particularly so in this first set which was very much an exploration of time that had passed. Van Manen comments:

Whatever I have encountered in my past sticks to me as memories or as near forgotten experiences that somehow leave their traces on my being: the way I carry myself, the gestures that I have adopted and made my own, the words I speak and the language that ties me to my past. (1997:104)

The concept of Lived Other is also of fundamental importance: of firstly gaining an impression of the other person from their physical presence and then in understanding how conversation and discourse can transcend these physical factors as we search for meanings, for purpose in life and for common understandings.

I do not think on reflection that my failure to ask the simple but profound questions such as ‘Who are you?’ at the beginning of each interview really affected the conversations in an adverse way. What was discussed covered those points in any case. However, it is important to me to seek for simplicity and clarity and if I were to undertake such a process again, then asking those questions might well have been my first approach. Perhaps such an approach would have left the interviews too unstructured and subsequent questions would probably have been necessary, but simple

and direct questions of this kind have an elegance, profundity and simplicity that makes me wish that I had used them. I will return to this matter in the conclusion to this thesis.

What I did ask – once all the pleasantries and preliminaries had been completed at the outset of each interview – was always a variation of the following: ‘Tell me about your past and about your decision to go independent’. This then led into the discussion. For some time, and this feeling grew somewhat when first reading the transcripts, I was vaguely concerned that much of the substance of the first interviews concerned discussion about the past and the various experiences that my research respondents had had over the past 5, 10 or 20 years – sometimes longer. My worry about this was about how relevant such recollection was to the research question: what is the experience of establishing an independent practice? However, I do now feel strongly that such accounts, however far back in time that they go, are directly and profoundly relevant. People come to decisions gradually; individuals grow and change throughout their lives and when we first talk together it is not about a disembodied or a fragmented process or about the end point. It would be a little like asking a builder to describe the experience of putting a roof on a house – no doubt interesting in itself, but inseparable in a holistic sense from the tasks undertaken in shaping the building to bring it to the point of being able to fit the roof. I am once again reminded of Van Manen and *Lived Time* – that to get to know a person and understand their experiences, we must first understand the events of their past that are important to them – and their personal view of their past. So it is important to see that one major function of the first set of interviews was to allow the research respondents to make sense of and describe their own pasts and bring them to the point where they could actually describe the experience of establishing an independent practice. I also wanted to build their sense of confidence that they were

conversing with someone who was interested in their stories and could become fascinated by them and begin to fully understand them.

(xiv) Headings for Themes

It is important to understand that the first set of interviews did not simply concentrate on the past, although this was probably the principal element. We also discussed the moment of gaining independence and the experience of independence: that latter issue in particular would be discussed at greater depth in the second interviews. After reading and re-reading the 6 interviews, I have therefore clustered the themes that emerged under 3 main headings. These are (i) Motivation and Preparation, (ii) The Moment and (iii) The Experience of Being Independent. I had initially considered a fourth theme cluster category – that of Wider Experiential Issues – but after some thought I decided that virtually all of the issues from this category fitted easily enough into either heading (ii) or particularly heading (iii), so I kept it simple. Using the Van Manen approach to theme formulation via the reading of texts (1997:87) I went through all the transcripts in detail and mapped out themes and significant phrases from the 6 interviews on flipchart paper using one sheet for each respondent. I then went through each text again and highlighted passages and quotes relating to the three headings. This was an iterative process repeated several times. Both Moustakas and Van Manen demand that the researcher is truly involved in the research and Moustakas has coined a phrase ‘embodied practice’ where the researcher has a personal interest in the subject and a deep desire to discover the meanings. I feel that this describes my approach well.

The second set of interviews was simpler to deal with. Having re-read them several times, I came to see them much more naturally as the second part of a single

conversation with each research respondent. These interviews were all completed in summer 2009 at a venue of the respondent's choosing, approximately one year after the first interviews. During these second interviews I asked research respondents to really concentrate on the fundamentals and meanings of the experience of establishing their independent practice.

I have integrated the material from both sets of interviews under the last two thematic headings (The Moment and The Experience of Being Independent) and have not differentiated between interview one or two in the text as to do so felt artificial and unnecessary. However, in terms of preliminary work, as with the first interview set, I read through the transcripts in detail and mapped out themes and significant phrases from the 5 interviews on a flipchart. I then went through each text again and highlighted passages and quotes relating to the 2 headings. Once more, this was a repeated and iterative process.

A startlingly strong but timely warning is sounded by Van Manen to those who might be tempted to think that the process of 'human science' research and the associated analysis of data is not a rigorous exercise:

Unless the researcher remains strong in his or her orientation to the fundamental question or notion, there will be many temptations to get side-tracked or to wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for pre-conceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self indulgent preoccupations, or to fall back on taxonomic concepts

or abstracting theories.....to be strong in our orientation means that we will not settle for superficialities or falsities. (1997:33)

Thus warned and yet energised, I will turn to the data.

CHAPTER THREE

INITIAL FINDINGS FROM ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

(i) Introduction

I want to be very clear at the outset of this chapter as to what is contained within it. This chapter concerns letting my research respondents' individual and authentic voices be heard and therefore the in-depth and detailed analysis and discussion of these findings is principally in Chapter 4. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to set out the views of the research group in a direct way. My role here has consequently been concerned mainly with capturing the statements and sorting them into emerging themes in 'phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs' (1997:95), to use Van Manen's description. This is so that, as Moustakas comments, 'the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and continue to be portrayed as whole persons' (1990:39). It is very important to make this clear at the outset. Additionally, in line with the heuristic approach, my own experiences of becoming independent and of establishing my own independent practice are also contained in this chapter, side by side and integrated with those of the research respondents. I have tried to ensure that these personal views assume a similar profile to those of my respondents.

I should emphasise at this apposite point the importance of a reflexive approach to my own data and indeed this research generally. As Finlay and Gough (2003) point out, 'subjectivity in research can be transformed from problem to opportunity' (2003:ix) by the careful use of a reflexive approach. I have used such process of critical self-reflection continually throughout this research. I have also been aware, as discussed in the preceding chapter, of how the presence of myself as both the researcher and also, in effect, a research respondent (vital in the Moustakas approach) is an unusual one. Such

an approach demands a high level of transparency and care with one's own data. Finlay and Gough discuss the difficulties involved (which strongly echo Van Manen's warning to the researcher outlined at the end of the previous chapter) and comment:

Much commitment, care and time go into reflexive analysis [and] immersing oneself in one's data can prove a painful business. Personal insights, when they arise, can be uncomfortable.....as researchers, we need to strike some balance between self-awareness and undue navel gazing. (2003:116)

I think that I have done this by constantly checking, cross-checking and auditing whether I have achieved the balance that Finlay and Gough speak of. The first part of that process concerned ensuring that one's own experience was neither consistently foregrounded, nor conversely given a consistently lower profile than that of the research respondents. The second part of this process has been about being clear about the source of my own reflections and experience. I have already described above how I composed personal passages from time to time to capture intense personal experiences that occurred on my own journey to independence. These were written contemporaneously to the experience and some of them – particularly on later reading – do now seem raw and uncomfortable. Nonetheless they are authentic descriptions of my experience at a point in time. These and other more fragmentary ideas and reflections were captured in two ways: I would sit down and write up the longer personal passages – such as the early passage on leaving the local authority – into early drafts of this text. I also kept a handwritten record of my briefer thoughts and feelings in a notebook and some of these appear at various points in the text, often paraphrased rather than as direct quotes. However, others do not appear as on later reflection they either did not make sense, or

did not add any particular value. I describe in the final chapter of this research how I used to sometimes wake in the night with a bright or insightful idea and write this down. This was when I was in the immersion stage of processing my data. Very few of these notes made much sense when read the following day and this shows that what is discarded – because on reflection it is incomplete or does not accurately describe experience – is sometimes as important as what is kept.

This chapter therefore contains the true and authentic views of my research respondents (and indeed myself) and I have consciously created a distinct space where the respondents speak about their experiences. I will of course also seek to capture themes and to interpret and present what is said in line with my chosen method of data analysis.

(ii) Motivation and Preparation

In general, I am treating motivating factors as those that created the climate or condition where an individual started to consider the possibilities of independence, and it was often the case, as will be seen, that more than one factor came together to create a greater impetus for change. Preparatory factors were usually more conscious and considered – these typically followed the decision to become independent and might include (for example) the decision to set up a company or business bank accounts. Each respondent told me a story of clear motivating factors. For three of the group this led on to a more or less clearly defined period of preparation for independence; for the remaining three there was less of a discrete preparation period. However, with the benefit of hindsight all respondents could describe elements of preparation in their personal journey even if this was not always a conscious one at the time. The

motivating factors usually came before the period of preparation, but sometimes the boundaries between motivating and preparatory factors was less clear.

Table 1 summarises the themes of motivation and preparation:

Table 1 – Motivation and Preparation

Motivating Factors	Preparatory Factors
(a) Disillusion with paid employment	(f) Starting independent work prior to leaving paid employment
(b) Independence fits better with personality and skill-set	(g) Practical preparation
(c) More conducive social care environment	(h) Influence of significant others
(d) A particular post provided a window into the independent field	(i) Offered consultancy work
(e) Personal confidence	(j) Creating a network

(iii) Motivating Factors

(a) Disillusion with paid employment

There was for all respondents – in different ways – a clear sense of having come by degrees to the position where he or she began to seriously consider and actively prepare for leaving the embrace of an organisation where he or she had been a permanent member of staff in paid employment and launch into the unknown. For all respondents this embrace *in itself* was a strong motivating factor which increased over time. Growing disillusion with paid employment, usually but not always within a local authority setting, was a common theme. For some the embrace seems to have become more akin to a death grip. Geoffrey commented that:

Yeah, it was a question of: I don't want to be doing this shit anymore. It was the whole routine of local government, attending pointless meetings, things not happening, all the whole routine that we're all familiar with. I just didn't want to be there. I could see my contemporaries, the people that I was on the same level with, were talking about retirement and the whole bit, and I just did not want to be associated with this kind of slow death really.

I had had similar emotions, as a quote from my own first personal passage makes clear:

Above all, I had started to feel a creeping and gradually perceptible diminishment in my energies to tackle these issues. I put this down to having been around the same block too many times, along with a feeling that, in the end, the organisation simply takes all one has to give without much credit or recognition in return.

Others spoke of similar feelings. Nigel and Philip respectively told me that:

The state of the [local authority] and the feeling that I wasn't making any difference was a driver for me – wanting to change things and make a difference. I felt as though I was walking in treacle and not getting very far.

My buzz was about seeing services work and seeing change. I hated the political systems and member enquiries and reports. I think for me it was the political environment that alienated me big time.

What comes across from these accounts is the strength of feeling expressed and the clear impression that these negative feelings about being in paid employment and having to do things that felt pointless or compromising (or both) were growing over time and pushing individuals towards making a decision. Margaret commented that:

I needed to change – I had to move and I didn't know what to do. I had begun to think about being a consultant.

(b) Independence Fits Better With Personality and Skill-Set

This area of motivation has strong links with the first one above – namely, disillusion with paid employment, and might be seen as the motivating factor that immediately follows the acknowledgement of disillusion. Alternatively it could be seen as the trigger *for* disillusion; a feeling that one has outgrown the constraints of paid employment. All respondents acknowledged this to some extent. Simon was particularly clear:

I think that there were aspects of my personality, my approach, that wouldn't always have fitted with local authority statutory work.....I can now go in and say things to members that officers couldn't say....and would have found it very frustrating not to be able to say it.

This sense of freedom, of being able to say things 'as they are' and sense of enhanced personal integrity by so doing was a major theme. Philip spoke of being '*fed up with being accountable to the local authority, and the bureaucracy*'. He concluded that he '*had to get out of that environment to be able to do stuff that I believe in.*' Nigel put it slightly differently, speaking of '*wanting to have more flexibility and creativity and to*

be able to do things that I wanted to do, and I thought that I could add value to social work really’.

For myself this was a particularly strong factor. I described in my first personal passage how a creeping disillusion with life in the LA was gradually beginning to affect me and:

Spelt out that it was time to leave. It was very important to me to leave on equitable terms before I started to get too cynical about the possibilities for change. I had seen far too many people wander down this one-way street and become corrosively negative.

I was becoming concerned that I was outgrowing the LA and all its structures and needed a fresh challenge in the independent sector. I had the sense, as I developed as a professional and a manager, that my views and opinions were either not listened to, or were even unwelcome. Along with other respondents, I had a clear perception that I had something to say and contribute and that this could only be properly realised as an independent person unfettered by the constraints of organisations.

(c) More Conducive Social Care Environment

Three respondents in particular mentioned the shifting social care environment as being a factor in terms of motivation. For Sarah, who had found herself on the outside because of difficult personal circumstances and an LA re-organisation which did not provide her with a post she wanted, the advent of different ways of thinking and the use of external consultants was a major change. As she returned to work, she noticed:

I remember very, very clearly – that is, 10 years ago [in about 1998] being in this LA office and they'd got all these A4 ring binders on their shelves and there was all these consultants and leaflets and things.

This led Sarah to consider what she wanted to do next and started to open up her horizons. She realised that becoming independent was now more possible and was really '*about having the confidence and skills to be able to do it*'. She started to understand that the fast changing nature of the social care sector and her own growing self-confidence would stand her in good stead.

Nigel was also clear that the changing environment was a big element in his decision to go independent, saying that:

The other factor in the background is that I'm aware over the past four or five or six years that the government has been quite interested in outsourcing in relation to skilled work [within the social care sector] so that was one factor.

Geoffrey had a different angle on this, which at first sight appeared not to be congruent with the other respondents, saying '*to be honest I'm not that interested in the social care sector [and] in following all the various government initiatives and policy changes – they bore me stiff*'. Nonetheless, in response to my question about a shift in the social care environment he agreed, saying: '*yes there was, and....it was about that sort of time, in the mid to late 90's, that it suddenly became more possible to exist outside of the Local Authority*'. Geoffrey's succinct phrase here, as in other places, encapsulates something very important – 'it became more possible to exist outside the Local

Authority'. This points to the breaking down of a social care monopoly which, over time, created a climate in which the possibilities for independent practice would grow.

(d) A Particular Post Provided a Window into the Independent Field

Four respondents were able to clearly identify that a particular job, usually (but not always) towards the end of their time as paid employees, provided a glimpse of what working independently would be like and built up skills that would be later used more fully when working independently. Margaret commented that a position that she had taken as manager of a resource centre '*was a preliminary to consulting*' as she had staff, a budget and a wide ranging brief to consult with other professionals widely. She commented further that this post '*forced you to think laterally about what kind of activities, research and consulting*' would be provided and whether these products could be commercially sold. Geoffrey reflected that a number of different paid posts at a late stage in his employed career had shaped his thinking:

I think that one of the other triggers for me in my development was that I did leave the LA and come back a couple of times....I went off to [a voluntary organisation], much more entrepreneurial, much more 'can do'. And it was much more of a business than the LA ever was. I think – I hadn't thought of it before – but I think that this may also have influenced me.

Three other participants spoke more generally about how elements of their paid employment – particularly when they had the opportunity to facilitate events or offer training – enabled them to start to build and grow skills that at a later stage would be

useful. These participants enjoyed doing this and it is clear that the freedom such work provided served as a motivating factor for them.

For myself, I recall using the relative freedom of my final post in the local authority (LA) to become involved in projects that – at the time – I found very interesting and different from the day to day duties of my core post. These projects, which included assisting with the implementation of LA-wide practice and process change, gave me new sets of skills and assisted in stimulating my thinking about different ways of operating. This, combined with the subsequent only partial and compromised implementation of these project recommendations within the LA, was both a motivation and preparation for the independence that was to follow.

(e) Personal Confidence

Confidence – or sometimes the lack of it – played a part as a motivating factor. Nigel had few doubts and this served to provide a real impetus. I asked him if he had ever had moments of ‘great doubt’ and his answer was immediate:

No, I never had those doubts. I always knew it was going to work because I knew I had the skills to make it work. And I think that it was in the back of my mind that if it didn't work, that wasn't the end of the world.

Geoffrey was clear that ‘*confidence was a key issue for me*’ and cited gaining a particular academic qualification as pivotal in building that confidence before he felt he could consider the move to independence. He also stated emphatically that ‘*confidence is everything. It was the factor that in the end made me go off and start my own*

business'. Margaret put it in a different way and was clear at one stage that she *'didn't have the confidence'* when a group of child protection trainers were leaving LA work and asked her to join them. She then put her finger on an issue which will be important to consider further when changing identities are considered in the discussion chapter.

And that is one of the factors, you know, that we will be identifying. I think it is the mental change, the mind-set changes that occur for someone who naturally moves in that direction [towards independence]. I've come to it I think because I naturally got to that point in my time, really.

This points to the very important pre-requisite nature of confidence as a motivating factor. For myself there was a long period, perhaps lasting for about 2 years, where I turned over in my mind the possibility of leaving the LA to set up independently. A friend who works in a field entirely unrelated to social care suggested that what I had said to him made him feel that I should just 'jump', as I had clearly thought the whole matter through. I realised immediately that it was just confidence that was lacking; my motivation in other areas was very strong.

(iv) Preparatory Factors

As noted at the beginning of this section, for the respondents preparatory factors were usually more conscious and considered than those of motivation and typically followed a decision – sometimes provisional, sometimes irrevocable – to become independent.

(f) Starting Independent Work Prior to Leaving Paid Employment

Moving on to preparatory factors, 3 of my respondents specifically identified that they had started independent work 'on the side' as they moved towards making a final

decision about going independent. For Geoffrey and Nigel that decision was a clear one at a certain moment in time; for Sarah the actual ‘moment’ of independence was less sharply defined and this is something that I will discuss in detail in the next section of this chapter. Nigel started taking training work in the evening as he prepared to make the move to independence and noted how others (including myself) had gone before him. He also noted that another colleague had walked a similar path and that *‘it was almost like a cloud had been lifted from above her head’*. Taking on such work built up confidence and made the step less daunting. Sarah was less consciously preparing for independence, but for her, when faced with a choice of posts that she did not want, following a major re-organisation, she realised that:

I was still doing some of those training things that people had [given me], and was taking a day’s leave and doing a bit of that, so I had got some inkling that there was a world out there.

Geoffrey said that he started to take on private facilitation days for institutions such as colleges *‘while I was still in work....and I think I began to do some coaching at this stage.....and at about that time I’d begun to take on further training’*. There is a sense that taking on such work developed and honed skills that were likely to be needed in abundance later, tested out resolve and built confidence. It can be seen from a repeated reading of the interviews that moving towards independence was a different journey for us all, but that commonly there was an iterative but unsteady progression for most of us: two steps forward, one back, forward again. The shifting and changing factors involved in such an unsteady progression included matters such as confidence, chance, degrees of planning and life events.

(g) Practical Preparation

Most respondents could tell a story of practical preparation for independence. These included both preparation in terms of personal issues, for example finance and family matters and preparation in terms of where to pitch the business. For Nigel and Geoffrey, there were financial matters to be thought through. Nigel mentioned that these involved his particular stage of family life, saying:

My wife is very supportive of me and what I want to do. It's at a time where our three lads are now full time at school, so that frees her up to do more hours.....that was part of the thinking that there's a bit more flexibility in our income now we're freed up from the children.

Geoffrey, who was one of the clearest about his overt preparation, remembered that *'the gun was loaded – all I needed was the trigger and I'd been doing lots of preparation. I'd done my literature; I'd produced my business cards'*. He had also sorted out his office and *'got everything where it needed to be'*. Margaret decided to set up a consultancy organisation with a friend, but their preparation focused initially on what they did *not* want to do:

We decided that we wouldn't have an office and we wouldn't have money exchanges between us.....and not to have an infrastructure as such. What we decided to do was to have a network of people.

Simon, who had occupied senior positions in his previous LA posts was much more specific about his preparation in terms of what he thought he could offer:

[T]here were a number of areas where I could offer (LAs) support. One of them was around financial strategies and secondly around planning and commissioning strategies as we call them now. Possibly also work around practice issues, although I'd then been out of practice for several years.....so it was largely around those areas that I thought was the greatest likelihood.

For my business partner and myself, our preparation was very focused on practicalities, e.g. getting a business account and stationery, and creating a company identity. Only when we were finally outside the LA did we give serious thought to the shape and direction of the business and which areas of work we were going to pursue. This seems hopelessly naïve in retrospect, but the creation of the business as an entity in itself seemed to be the most important consideration at that stage.

(h) Influence of Significant Others

This was an important factor for most respondents and all mentioned that, in some way or another, the influence of other people had been important. What I am really concentrating on here, however, is the influence of others specifically in terms of preparation for independence, which narrows down the frame somewhat. Nigel cited a colleague who *'made the leap [three or four years ago] and seemed very much happier and brighter for it'*. This made him reflect deeply on his own position and was certainly a factor in his preparation for independence. For Sarah, the influence of a particular person she met a considerable time before becoming independent was really important. She recollects that this person:

Was all about doing added value, making things different, all that kind of stuff. A real person to lead. Very, very strong, very clear, enabling. She was the first person who began to talk to me about succession planning in [my] career and having a real kind of idea about what do I need to do to be onto the next stages and those sorts of things.

Sarah went on to say that this was pivotal for her and that this person allowed her thinking processes about what she wanted to do in the future to become much broader and less constrained. For Geoffrey, one significant person gave him some invaluable practical advice that he has utilised ever since:

I talked to a guy who I met [on a course]....and he just told me what he went through in terms of setting it all up. And he sent me, bless him, loads of templates which I still use for invoicing, even for doing proposals.

For myself I recall (a few months before leaving my LA post) contacting an established independent consultant who mainly worked in the NHS field and asking to go and speak to him. I remember that he told my business partner and myself some vital things that have stayed with us to this day. One of these was about cold-call selling. In his view one should never, ever attempt it. He was insistent that the point of contacting someone for the first time was simply to arrange to a face-to-face meeting and *never* to try and sell them services over the telephone. This advice was sound and we have followed it ever since and not without a considerable sense of relief, as I had originally imagined that we would have to try and work the phones and talk fast to try and gain a foothold in the independent market. He also impressed upon us that we should set our 'day rate' at a

reasonable level: not too high, or we would struggle to get work, but also not too low as this might appear to be either (a) desperate or (b) as if we were not confident in the quality of the service that we were offering. This too, has proved important advice.

(i) Offered Consultancy Work

Two respondents were actually offered consultancy work while still in employment and saw this a major preparation for independence. I would differentiate this from trying out independent work on the side (discussed in section (f) above). I would tentatively suggest that ‘consultancy work’ is generally viewed as more prestigious than mere ‘independent practice’. This is because consultancy tends to imply seniority in whatever part of the independent field you are in – an activity where others seek one’s opinion, expertise and advice. The word itself suggests this. Many independent practitioners in the social care field describe themselves as consultants whether they are involved in pure management consultancy or independent social work practice, or any stage in between. Therefore, for an organisation to offer an individual consultancy work, even though this would (at least for the present) mean that the individual would be *employed* as a consultant rather than practising independently is, I suggest, a sign that their skills are probably being recognised as highly developed and in demand. Philip commented that *‘I was offered the chance to go and do consultancy work, interim work rather, for one of the big organisations’*. This prompted a crisis for Philip, who eventually turned down this work because *‘I started having chronic back problems at the time, all physical pain. And basically I was going, I was on the cliff edge as you’d now understand, and I wasn’t able to jump off it’*. Although this particular opportunity came too early for Philip, it was certainly a stage in his preparation for going independent later. Margaret too initially had an adverse reaction when she was asked by a national

organisation to consider leaving her employment at the time to join them as a salaried consultant. She recalled that the organisation came to her and said: *'we want to attach you to a consultant of ours....we want you to be active in the operational side and we want the consultant to back you'*. Margaret described her reaction to this as follows:

So I again had the same terror, terrified....this is the leap into the purest consulting and I went away and thought about it again and I thought I'm very confident about my practice.

And so she accepted the commission. This once again suggests to me that 'consultancy' is indeed seen as both high profile and prestigious *and* as preparation for later independence, even when offered by an employer as distinct from setting up independently as a consultant.

(j) Creating a Network

The creation of networks were an emerging and growing theme of importance as I read through the data. Most respondents realised at an early stage that the building of such networks was likely to be an important element of independent existence and survival. There are several types of networks that can operate for independent people in a variety of different ways. These include networks of support and networks of individuals and organisations that can provide work. Therefore an element of preparation for most respondents was the creation of such networks and the maintenance and further development of these networks continued over time. The maintenance of such networks is also an important factor and I will discuss this matter further in the section on the experience of being independent. However, pinning down what a 'network' actually is

can be elusive. Thompson et al (1991) in *'Markets, Hierarchies and Networks: The Co-ordination of Social Life'* describe a network as a 'flat organisational form' with 'informal relationships between essentially equal social agents and agencies' (1991:14). This is helpful and describes the lack of hierarchal and associated complications that my research findings will show are generally absent when people in the independent sector interact with those in the employed sector. It became clear to my business partner and myself that the senior managers we interacted with once we were independent saw and treated us very differently to how senior managers in our own organisation had viewed us prior to independence. In the former instance we suddenly realised that we were being treated as equals and that our views were sought and respected. Dealing with a senior manager when one is in a subordinate position within the same hierarchy can structure the nature of the relationship in a very different way and can therefore also determine the nature of the interaction, at least in part. Simon immediately set to work creating his own network when he was on the very brink of independence and one of the first things that he did was to:

Think back to all the people I'd ever worked with who I knew were in positions of influence in different departments around the country. I actually spent some time just phoning these people up saying "Hi, how are you. This is what I'm doing, can I drop in and see you?" And in some cases these were people I'd not had any contact with for 10 or more years and all bar one said "yes, drop in and see me". And so I spent time travelling round the country, meeting up with those people and putting my CV round.

Simon was of the view that this was not only important in ensuring his name became more widely known (and remembered), it was also important in redefining himself and creating a new and different link with the individuals that he contacted. For my business partner and myself, a ready-made network was one of the advantages that we did not have as preparation for independence because we had not either operated at a senior level *or* made strong connections with individuals in other Local Authorities. We really struggled at times in the first two years while these networks were painstakingly created. I asked Nigel whether he had consciously started to create networks before becoming independent and he agreed that he had. He said *'I think it was a mixture of consciously and subconsciously making those links and making those networks'*. Geoffrey and Sarah were also clear that a preparatory stage for them was the building up of such contacts and networks.

(v) The Moment

It would be easy – and this is really a warning to myself – to become transfixed by the actual moment of independence. At times, both I and some of the research respondents have used phrases such as being ‘on the cliff edge’ or ‘jumping off the cliff’ to describe it. However, undertaking phenomenological research (and I am using this term broadly here to encompass the heuristic approach) requires that the researcher should attempt to put aside their own beliefs and assumptions when interviewing others and should be as open and responsive as possible to the unique accounts of the research respondents. This is a particularly difficult task when, as in heuristic research, the researcher is also required to have undergone the same experience.

I have, at all times, tried to stay strong and orientated to hearing the voices of my research respondents without imposing my own preconceptions. In that spirit, it became clear to me that ‘the moment’ was not a singular event for everyone that can be traced to a particular point in time; for some, becoming independent was a more gradual process and the point at which an individual could recognise that independence had been achieved was hazy and could only be described in retrospect and upon careful reflection. Nonetheless, for most respondents, even if the river had marshy and indistinct margins, there was a sense that the Rubicon had been crossed at some stage. I will describe here some of the various accounts of the moment of independence.

Sarah’s experience of the moment of independence was quite different from that of myself or some of the other respondents where there was certainly a clearly defined moment. Hard on the heels of being faced with a choice of jobs she did not want following a major re-organisation, came two serious family crises. This made Sarah postpone any thoughts about work for over a year. What remains with her is the memory of feeling not in control and of long held plans becoming suddenly unimportant, which she expresses thus:

Do you know what, you can have a bucketful of life, just have a couple of years of it, have a load of it. I was thinking, where’s that person gone? Where’s that person who was on this career path? Because I had....a very definite ambition. Director by the time I was 40, really very focused.

Following the gradual resolution of the second of the two crises, and as she started to think about work again, Sarah felt different:

Because by that time I'd stopped having any expectation that I was in charge of things. I'd dealt with that. And a phone call came through from a friend of mine who said "I've got a piece of work I would like to do in [a neighbouring LA] and you should do it"I'm convinced to this day that she sort of created it to give me something.

Although she did not fully realise it until later, this was the moment of independence for Sarah.

Geoffrey's experience of the moment of independence was different again. He had been planning the launch of his own business for some time and at one point had asked his then current employer if he could go part time and this was refused. Geoffrey therefore decided to force the issue:

It wasn't working, and the process was "How do I make this transition? Do I abandon ship?" Something had to give and so I had a major falling out with the Chief Executive and I basically walked. I didn't give any notice.

I commented that this was 'dramatic' and Geoffrey continued:

Oh yeah, it was very dramatic....on the Friday I went into work. I think I just drove home after work and thought "hmm, I'm not going back". Basically, it was "Sod you, up the wall". And I walked with nothing. I didn't have a role to go

to....I manoeuvred, manipulated my way out of [my job] and I was gone. I can remember coming back here with no job and no prospect of an income.

I asked what this was like:

A mixture of fear and excitement. The fear was “where the fuck am I going to get some money from?” And the excitement was I’d have to live by my own wits now, and I did, there were various things I actually did.

I asked Geoffrey what his ‘nearest and dearest’ thought about this situation:

I didn’t tell anybody. I told [my partner] but she was very laid back about it. I didn’t tell her that I had absolutely nothing; I kept that from her, because I didn’t want to worry her. I didn’t tell any friends and family until I was sure that I was OK.

For my business partner and myself, there was also a very clear moment. This occurred on a specific date at the end of 2003 when we finished work for the Local Authority and became independent. This was an extraordinary experience. For us it meant a profound and significant change that immediately impacted upon our lives in several ways. The following Monday we met and almost couldn’t believe what we had done – everyone else was going into work and we were not. Four things stand out in particular. The first of these was that this quickly seemed an irrevocable step. We had said to each other that if becoming independent did not work out, then we could ‘always go back’ into similar jobs with a Local Authority, but as soon as we had become independent this option

receded to almost complete invisibility. This was a bigger step than we had anticipated, and the thought that we could lightly give it all up and go back and work for an LA seemed almost sacrilegious. Having taken this huge step, we felt we just had to make it work.

The second thing that immediately pressed in on us was the daunting sense of open space and free time. On one level we had nothing to do. There were no immediate obligations on us, no deadlines to meet, no reports to write, no meetings to attend. This was both liberating and troubling and we immediately commenced enormous activity to try and generate work. This links to the third realisation that we had no income. The reality of this truly struck home in that moment of independence: no more monthly salary payments and instead the pressing need to regularly generate enough money to provide for two people and our families. I remember waking up in the night at around this time and the enormity of it all induced a sharp physical sensation of panic as the financial implications of independence hit home. What on earth were we doing? The fourth realisation, and this was my unique experience rather than that of my business partner, was of the instant cessation of conflict. As mentioned in my first personal passage, I had experienced my *'first taste of sustained and serious conflict'* with more senior managers in the year leading up to independence. I had not really realised how much that this had grown to dominate my thinking until the moment of independence. Suddenly it was no longer my battle. I had simply walked off the territory. The instant and irrevocably final end to this conflict *without the achievement of a resolution* was both a considerable relief and strangely disconcerting.

The themes for me so far in these contrasting accounts of ‘the moment’ are firstly the sheer significance for us all of making the move to independence, but also and most interestingly the varying levels of perceived control over the decision-making behind it. Sarah had ‘*stopped having any expectation*’ that she was in charge of events and seemed to bob around like a cork on a stormy sea of work and personal difficulties for a period before – almost by default – becoming independent. Geoffrey forced the issue. He had been planning for independence but then suddenly lost patience with paid employment and contrived a crisis that led to an immediate exit in the most dramatic fashion. My move was planned carefully, whatever the doubts had been along the way, and while my experiences at the time of the actual moment were unexpected, I had been thinking about and planning this step for several months, resigning and then working out my notice in a planned way. This theme of having difficulties with the boss shortly before ‘the moment’ is a very strong one and, in one way or another, was a very significant factor in the stories of Geoffrey, Philip, Simon, Margaret and, to a lesser extent, myself.

Of the other respondents, Philip jumped when the opportunity presented itself, although (as noted above) he had already almost taken up a consultancy post in a large organisation nearly 3 years earlier. This false start and increasing disillusion with the organisation that he was then working with started to create the conditions for the move to independence. Philip recalled that:

I then had quite a difficult relationship with the Chief Executive of the organisation, which probably did me a favour because it actually focused my mind on what I wanted to do.

Philip then started to look around for other opportunities and a close colleague who had already made the move to independence told him that a tendering process in a neighbouring LA had recently not worked out, thereby providing an opening:

So I came in for an interview in the week before Christmas and met the Chief Exec and he interviewed me, and.....I was taken on.

Philip commenced work as an independent practitioner on a temporary contract (rather than as an employee) and since that time has kept himself employed in this way on various temporary contracts of this nature. In some ways this could perhaps be seen as a halfway house between salaried employment and independence, but Philip very much viewed himself as independent. He had more to say about the experience of working independently than he did about the moment of independence, which happened very quickly on the offer of a relatively long temporary contract, and I will return to his account below.

Simon's experience of the moment of moving to independence had some similarities to those of Geoffrey and Philip inasmuch as his relationship with his immediate boss had turned sour. He told me that:

All four of the Assistant Directors [including Simon himself] despised the bloke and it got to the stage in the end that I was covering my own post and two others.....it got to the stage that my relationship had completely broken down....so one of us had to go and I agreed a package to leave.

Simon specifically requested that I keep the details of the package (which he described to me) confidential, but the relevant point was that it *'provided a lump sum'* for setting up independently. So, suddenly Simon found that he had become independent after a particularly difficult and fraught time. He was clear that this was not a planned move. It is more true to say that a particular set of circumstances had occurred and that one of the several consequences of those circumstances had been independence. Simon remembers that:

I suppose I had had some thoughts about working independently before then, but I couldn't have done it without [the package]. It was only because I knew I could afford not to have any income for several months, that I could afford to do it; and as it was I left [paid employment] at the end of August and got my first commission at the end of October.

Finance is a recurrent theme here and is mentioned by most people, although I do not think that it pertains exclusively to 'the moment' but comes up in all the stages – preparation, the moment and the experience. I will consider it further in the next section.

Margaret had edged gradually closer to independence by developing her skills in a variety of paid posts, but the actual moment came when she was diagnosed with a specific health problem resulting from a combination of work-related reasons, one of them involving working for a perfectionist boss. She took the plunge and resigned. She recalls:

You're going to become a consultant. And I thought "I'm an independent practitioner, will I get enough work to be an independent practitioner?" And one of the pushes for me was actually money.

I empathised that this had made her feel nervous and she went on:

Very nervous, and I thought "Well, shall I get a job? Will I go straight into a social work job?" And then suddenly in about October or November I get a phone call [from an LA] from someone I know and she says "Look, we've got, it's like a project, but actually it's a case.....and we wonder whether you could come and manage this case, this project. It would probably take about four days a week, but we think you would do it very well."

Margaret went on to tell me that she 'took a deep breath and thought that this is a magnificent opportunity and it'll give me four days work...I said "yes" and that was when I became a consultant.' For the first time she found herself outside an organisation and working independently. It is noteworthy that her reaction to being newly independent felt akin to 'being cast adrift' and she remembered that she had a lot of self doubt. She commented that she felt:

*Very unsure on a lot of levels, and they were, would I have the competence to actually do the casework involved in a case of this sort? How would I operate by myself in this organisation without being told what to do, and in fact **me** telling **them** what to do basically – and not within the structure of any system.*

Finally, Nigel's experience of the moment was a much more planned and less dramatic one. He remained on good terms with his employers and resigned on a certain pre-arranged day and worked his notice, becoming independent when this expired. He had also negotiated with his employer pre-resignation to take some discrete projects with him into independence, so that he had some initial paid work. For these reasons, he said he had no real fears about the moment because he was sure that he had *'the skills to make it work.'* He also told me *'and I think it was in the back of my mind anyway, if it didn't work, it wasn't the end of the world'*. Therefore, Nigel had not 'burned his boats' with his last employer in the way that many of the respondents (for example Simon and Geoffrey) had recounted in their own stories. Therefore the moment of independence for Nigel, while a very sharply defined one, was less dramatic for him. Nonetheless, he commented that it did feel exciting:

It felt OK, it felt exciting. I guess because of the constraints within local authorities, I felt I had the potential to be a lot freer, and so with that there was a sense of freedom, a sense of relief.....there was some, I guess, low level anxiety – will I make enough money to put bread and water on the table for the family, that sort of thing, but I felt fairly assured that I would be OK.

However, once Nigel had begun to experience independence, more dramatic feelings were to quickly follow, akin to those of Saul on the road to Damascus:

What I have found....is my eyes have suddenly opened, and the creative part of my brain has suddenly kicked in which has been quite interesting, you know, suddenly

it felt so buzzing and creative, lots of ideas buzzing. I hadn't had that for a long time, that's been really invigorating as well.

While it might be perhaps said that these feelings experienced by Nigel belong more properly in the next section on the experience of being independent, it is my view that they actually belong to both the 'moment' and the 'experience'. It is therefore timely to turn now to that experience of independence as recounted by my research respondents.

(vi) The Experience of Being Independent

Predictably enough this section, which is the absolute heart of this research, provided a wealth of material and I had to think very carefully about theme clusters. It took a long time to sift and sort the depth, complexity and richness of the material and to do it justice. Although not all of the theme clusters fit within a chronological framework, I have tried as far as possible to make the progression from the first cluster to the last as logical as possible, so that, for example, 'The First Piece of Work' and 'Skill Development and Areas of Expertise' come early on in the discussion of the findings and 'The Future' comes at the end. I decided on 8 separate theme clusters as set out in the following table.

Table 2 – The Experience of Being Independent

(a) Becoming an Independent Entity
(b) The First Piece of Work
(c) How Work is Obtained
(d) Skill Development and Areas of Expertise
(e) Isolation and Identity Issues
(f) Independence, Freedom and Controlling Own Destiny
(g) Values and Dilemmas
(h) The Future

(a) Becoming an Independent Entity

For some respondents, one of the first things that they felt they had to do was to make their independent practice a specific entity such as a Limited Company and while it would of course be accurate to say that some of this thinking and doing pre-dated the moment of independence, the key actions were usually undertaken in the weeks after independence. The underlying meaning of these activities seems to concern giving substance and tangibility to the new entity and I will return to this important consideration in the next chapter. To be able to say that one has now created a limited company, or a consultancy or even an independent practice gives shape and definition to the venture and puts some organisational clothes around the conspicuous nakedness that an individual can feel upon emerging alone from the close embrace of an organisation. Geoffrey recalled the activities of the first few weeks after leaving his employer, telling me:

I thought I might as well set up a company. So, by a month later [a month after independence] I'd set up the company. I found an accountant who I knew and I'm still with, and she did all the forms for me and suddenly this is all working, but I only had a month's work.

Simon had a similar experience, but this was in his second phase as an independent person:

So I went back as being self-employed, but at the same time set up a company for the first time. So I then became a Limited Company in January...not many people know that. The first time round it had never occurred to me.....but I think it was a

chance conversation with a friend who worked part time for himself and he said “Look, tax-wise it will pay you to become a Limited Company” because at that time if you set up as a Limited Company you could have your partner and children as shareholders and pay them dividends.

Although – as Simon went on to recount – this perk disappeared almost as soon as he had set himself up as a Limited Company, this was an important part of the experience. Margaret came at it from a slightly different angle, and when speaking to a friend who was also newly independent, she suddenly found herself propositioned:

So she says to me “what about joining me?” Because I hadn’t even remotely thought do I set up a consultancy or any of that sort of stuff....She said “Why don’t we set up a little consultancy?”

Margaret decided that she would do that, and while less active now, the loose consultancy that she and her colleague set up, complete with website and stationery, was the main vehicle and prop of her early years of independence.

For Sarah, creating an organisation came a little way down the line and was more of a response to her growing practice – *‘I began to employ, well, not employ, engage associates’* – rather than something she had planned to do at the beginning to give her independent practice corporeality and definition in the way that had been the experience for others.

For me, the creation of my own independent practice was a must. The entity involving obtaining a company number, VAT registration, shares, documents and other phenomena was a support in itself, and more than that, it created something that was uniquely mine and ours. I will return to this ground when considering issues of identity below.

(b) The First Piece of Work

All respondents remembered the coming of their first independent pieces of work vividly, although for some this happened more quickly than others. There are clearly a number of strong emotions involved here, from a sense of excitement or fear or disorientation to feelings of relief and surprise. Sometimes a combination of these emotions occurred. For Sarah, who had been catapulted out of employment following local government re-organisation and stayed out for a while because of two serious personal crises, it was quite anxiety provoking:

And so I was out of the loop, with just 12 months out of work, well, a little more than that: 18 months. People were talking a language that I didn't understand. The absolute anxiety around, I'd just lost so much ground, but read voraciously. And then within a very short period of time, somebody contacted me, would I...? I'm sure that the very first bit [of independent work] was an adoption inspection and most of the time I was, I don't know what I'm doing.

Geoffrey quickly got down to the business of finding work, although he too felt some fear. After abruptly ending his employment, he took instant action:

I just went on the phones, and I think I had, maybe I had two weeks without any work, and I rang a friend who is very senior in [a national organisation] and she said “fine, start with us next week” and I got two or three days a week for – it wasn’t long. It was probably a month at whatever the rate was; it was a decent rate and I thought “fuck, I’ll have some more of this”, but it was still scary.....(but) I needed that boost.

Philip’s experience was somewhat different because he was in regular employment and it was the actual *offer* of independent work that enabled him to make the shift to independence. Nevertheless, he soon found that the problems which occurred with this first piece of work were unique to the independent sector:

I had a bit of a jolt actually, because what happened was that...I found out that [the LA] was in dispute with the PCT [Primary Care Trust] about who was paying my bills...this was a jolt to the system.

Thankfully for Philip, this was eventually resolved. Simon spent a considerable amount of time preparing for independence – as has been described – by networking and re-establishing old contacts. He recalled that only one of these contacts ever led to any work (and that was at a later stage). He made some general observations about the independent social care world which he felt had always held true:

You can’t afford to offend too many authorities, because there are the authorities that never use consultants. There are authorities that geographically you don’t want to work for. There are the ones that are probably so chaotic you don’t want

to work for them[(although] maybe you might be able to do a lot of good. So you can't afford to offend too many.

Nonetheless, Simon soon found himself in considerable demand, perhaps at least in part because he had senior experience in his portfolio of skills:

I'm just racking my brains because there was all sorts of work I did in those initial years. I was working in [an LA] helping them set up their budgets, [did] stuff for the Institute of Health which is around information needs for community care managers.....two or three months later [an LA] needed an interim Head of Finance for their Social Services Department, so I had the best part of a year [in that LA].

Margaret had a crisis of confidence that did not come entirely from her first piece of independent work, although that was a factor. An LA who had heard of her reputation as being a skilled practitioner asked her to take on a project – which was basically a huge complex case. Margaret recounted that the LA workers had ‘*completely buggered it up*’:

And someone had said “for God’s sake, let’s find someone who can just take the whole thing and go away with it”. And they, and I went in, and I remember it as though it were yesterday and I thought “I can’t, I don’t think I know enough”. Now this is very interesting because it is often what we think when we go into a new job.

This was actually Margaret's first independent 'job' and she then shared her realisation that:

At that point there's no more organisation. And I think what are the characteristics of the consultant? You don't have regular pay, you don't have holiday pay, you don't have sick pay, you become independent financially.

For myself, it all started very slowly, as a personal passage recorded some time later reflects:

The early days seemed endless – filling time with frenetic activity – making calls, designing courses, writing letters and emails, and waiting, waiting, waiting, for the phone to ring. We would get enormously excited by the merest flicker of interest. Only gradually did work start to come through: the odd request for a training course, or a complaint investigation and we would throw heaven and earth at it, almost desperate that the magical consultancy formula that everyone talked about which says 'one piece of work leads on to another' would begin to work for us. Our first big contract [which came some 8 months into our independent lives] was greeted with huge elation, and any threat to it, such as a sudden proposed reduction in the number of days we were to be contracted to work, threw us into turmoil and deep depression. Only more recently did we realise that such negotiations were entirely typical and an integral part of life in the independent field.

No experience since can quite match the excitement and roller coaster emotions of those first few months for me.

That somewhat unstable mix of factors, such as confidence to make the move to independence in the first place (which was picked up earlier in preparatory and motivating factors), sudden moments of self doubt and the will to just get on with it and make it work, emerges again as a strong theme in these discussions. Perhaps the strongest theme is the interlinking of these conflicting emotions because – suddenly – the stakes seem so high. This is perhaps owing to the realisation that both the risks *and* the possibility of success hitherto undreamed of are, all of a sudden, much greater and more real.

(c) How Work is Obtained

How work comes to independent practitioners, or alternatively how it is sought or pursued is central to the experience of independence. Work (or perhaps more accurately *payment* for work) is the fuel that runs the business and without it the whole edifice would – sooner or later – collapse. All the research respondents were keenly aware of this. This need to generate business and income constitutes a profound, possibly one of the most profound, differences from being in paid employment. However, there is definitely also a marked element here of one thing leading on to another, and to a consequent sense of building momentum, and most independent practitioners recognise this pattern. As Geoffrey said:

But fortunately, while I was working [on the first independent project], I had a call from one of the agencies....and they said “we’ve got 6 months for you in [an

LA] at three days a week” and I thought, yes, I’ll do that. And that 6 months turned into 18 months and so that was my first [long contract] and I couldn’t ask for more than that.

Somewhat to his surprise, this went very well:

I was working with a bunch of good people and I was able to stay one step ahead of the game, even though I hadn’t really a clue – but it all went well and.....I was able to walk away from that, job done, everyone was delighted.

He reflected further on how he obtained work and the image of a relay race came to mind:

So the sustained periods of work over a period of time have largely come through agencies.....and when I come to the end of a contract, a couple of months beforehand, I’m on the phone to the agencies to see what’s going...and then the work usually comes.

The agencies to which Geoffrey was referring are employment and consultancy agencies that act as clearing houses for work for those in the independent and interim management fields. Nigel also indicated that momentum was important:

So from that strong base of Child Protection training, basic Child Protection training, other training opportunities have arisen, you know, partly through [an LA that Nigel had recently worked in] and also through [a neighbouring LA].

Work begets work. This has also been my strong experience and this can happen in one of three ways – firstly, the independent person is asked by the contracting organisation – sometimes via an agency – to carry on with existing work, or related work that subsequently flows from it. Secondly, the independent person, when coming towards the end of a piece of work, puts out the message to his or her network that they will soon be available for future assignments. The third way is that successful projects become more widely known (for instance, via networks of senior managers) and offers of similar work come in from other sources. The latter route corresponds more with Sarah's experiences:

So I never advertised, just one thing came after another, in that kind of way. And then about three or four years ago, I suppose, I began to get more work than I could manage myself.

This led eventually to the expansion of Sarah's business and she reflected further and in more detail on the concept of momentum.

Momentum does matter, it does not take long before you start to lose momentum yourself, you start to lose momentum in the circuit, so you have got to do that, and I think that if I see anyone where they've kind of fallen by the wayside, in a sense it's because they haven't valued the momentum.

Many of the respondents recognised this feature of independent work as self-evident and in my opinion it is bound up with two main things – firstly, the confidence of the

independent person and secondly, the perception of others. If one has work, then one tends to negotiate from a position of strength and confidence – if one does not, and especially if work has been in short supply for some time, then confidence can ooze away and one can appear a little too desperate – perhaps even to the point of pursuing work for which one is unsuited. Such a move can do damage to reputations. Simon also told me of an experience of getting on a roll with successive projects for a period of several years:

And a mate who was then a Director put me in contact with [the senior consultant in a new agency], and subsequently really until last year, probably 85% of my work was coming through [that agency], largely because they were coming with interesting projects.

Margaret too had this experience of building momentum in the wake of her first independent project referred to above:

So I came in and did that, but what then began to happen was that expertise began to be picked up by a range of other people. And I was being picked up then and I was, I mean within two years at least, or maybe even earlier, I was doing a bit of work for [a voluntary organisation]. They provide advocates and so on, but they were also providing responses to complaints. And they began to shove me into some of that.

Once again, one can see here the importance of the networks which were created in preparation for independence, particularly in the light of an increasingly difficult environment. Geoffrey put this clearly:

A year ago, I don't think we fully appreciated the nature of this recession.....and I suppose what I've learned is that you need to nurture your long term relationships, just like you nurture your long term relationships with customers or whatever in any business.

Simon had a similar view:

Whereas this time last year I'd been actively involved with three agencies, now it's probably five or six which maybe reflects the market as well (that there are more agencies around), but equally there is not quite so much work around, so I need to be networking more with people in that way.

Networks and networking remain a major theme in the experience of the independent person. The networks that were created by most respondents in the preparation phase (as described in that section above) are a consistently important theme to which I shall return in the next chapter. This is regardless of whether they were for the purposes of obtaining work or for mutual support and assistance – or indeed both.

(d) Skill Development and Area of Expertise

All of the research respondents felt that they had, over time, developed particular areas of expertise. This expertise came from two sources; firstly as set out in the previous

chapter, all were very experienced practitioners and managers in the social care field prior to independence. Secondly, this expertise stemmed partly from being asked – as described above – to continue with and develop existing projects which the respondents felt had allowed them to develop further expertise. At other times, the development of particular skill sets or areas of interest may be more to do with perceptions of how the market is moving and where future demand will come from – an example of this might be the conscious development of skills in personalisation in the adult care field or in conducting mock OFSTED inspections. Sometimes, however, building expertise in a particular area and becoming a ‘subject expert’ might also be a way of consciously differentiating one’s own practice from that of others, of creating a specialist area that the independent person becomes known for. This can lead to becoming known and sought after for a specific set of skills or area of knowledge. The development of an area of expertise is usually a positive thing, as Margaret made clear from her comments about developing a high level of expertise in social care duty systems where she is an acknowledged expert, having written a book on the subject and given many seminars on it:

We were able to engage everybody from top to bottom as we wanted to do it...we did it just by logic really. Saying we need to identify what it is they actually want, what the outcomes should be, what it is that they want to achieve. And then we sat and talked about how we ought to go about it...and really, it hasn’t basically changed. I work with the managers, we get it all sorted first, then I’ll do the development work with the team that’s required. And that’s the model, that’s how I operate. And I guess everybody develops a style and you know, that’s my style.

Simon's area of expertise is concerned with finance and, in his words, as someone:

Who can come in and deal with the finance side, talk enough accountancy, accountant-ese, to keep the finance people happy, but [with] sufficient understanding of the services that could keep the care managers happy, and do the things in between. I think it's given me a bit of a unique niche...I think it's probably only something I've come to appreciate five or six years ago, and if anything it's developed further.

Nigel's area of growing expertise is in training and facilitation skills. He described to me – perhaps a little tentatively – how these had developed:

Yeah, there's been a number of training opportunities....so that's been really good and that's given me a level of confidence in facilitating training. From that I've been quite interested in actually using different mediums for training, and how I can make training more interesting, so that's been quite good, and I've obviously been able to do that a little bit more within the fairly safe environment that I'm fairly confident in, so that's been a positive. So developing I guess those facilitation skills in training.

Sarah's way of building up expertise is via learning on the job in an intensive way:

The beginning of a contract, say, I wouldn't know how I was going to do it. Wonder how I'm going to get to do this? But by the end, and if the matter was inspection, I absolutely knew. And knowing, really knowing and really spending

the time drilling down, it was really important to me. Really important to me. So that also stood me in good stead, and again, has been the bit that I say to people – “Get to know your business”

Sarah additionally put a strong emphasis on the building of relationships and her own skill and expertise in doing this. She felt strongly that her role in each assignment she does was to be present for one key individual, often the sponsor of the project, or alternatively someone of particular seniority in the host organisation:

Yes, to be there to support that individual. And that does bring real benefits, so I suppose for me the luck there is in having the ability to relate to people....it's the skill of having the ability to relate to people.

Geoffrey had a slightly different take on expertise, and one that also had a dash of self-deprecation about it. Geoffrey said:

Where I start to get interested is when a particular assignment comes my way, and then I'll research it. So, for example [one particular assignment], wanted me to set up some sort of commissioning project for people with long term neurological conditions. And I had no idea about care pathways, and I still don't really, but I managed to maintain a convincing façade that I do know something about it.

This also speaks to my experience that the knowledge and expertise of the independent consultant can sometimes feel like a dangerously thin veneer. I wish in hindsight that I

had further explored the fear of being ‘found out’ which I perceive lies not far beneath the surface for all of us, and will return to this thought in the concluding section of this research. It should also be mentioned that developing expertise in specific areas can be double edged, as my business partner and myself have experienced. Two of our principal pieces of work in our first year or two involved a great deal of training and for a long time afterwards we had to fight off the ‘trainer’ label as we quickly became aware that this was potentially limiting and shaped how others saw us in ways that were difficult to shift. In the end we had to spell out categorically that we would not become involved in training unless we had participated in consultancy activity first (this obviously excluded the local and specific training contract that we held for several years).

Considering the areas of expertise discussed above, a strong underpinning theme that emerges is of *choice*, the choice to specialise in an area that the independent person is interested in, or where that person has already developed a strong skill set. For most of the respondents there came across a feeling of satisfaction, at times approaching the strong emotion of joy, of being able to develop and refine skills that matched pre-existing areas of interest and to become subject experts in such fields. Margaret summed this up well:

Enjoying something is half the game I guess....if you can recognise what it is that you want to do, and have got a tiny bit of ability at whatever level you want to do it.....you get a fantastic life.

(e) Isolation and Identity Issues

This theme cluster brings together a number of closely related matters. Most respondents had a powerful sense from time to time of being alone, and this was sometimes perceived as something positive as well as a problem for different people. More commonly though, the sense of isolation and loneliness and the fear of not being needed was a troubling one for the research respondents and for some (although not others) this was closely linked to something still more profound: a sense of fragile personal and professional identity, particularly early on in an individual's independent career. The link between these two issues is a subtle one and I will explore issues of identity in much more depth in the next chapter.

Geoffrey was both very conscious of his own identity and the need not to be cast in too powerful a position, sensing perhaps that this could lead to trouble:

I struggle with the notion of consultants, because people introduce me when I'm in the office: "Oh, this is Geoffrey, a consultant" and I'm thinking what do I know? I'm just a bog standard social care manager with a few years' experience. But somehow I'm a consultant, and what I've said to people is "No, I'm not a consultant, I'm a contractor." I'm brought in to do a particular job.

This view of himself as a contractor has worked for Geoffrey, as evidenced by his response when I asked him whether such a definition had changed him:

Oh yeah, yeah, given me loads more self confidence. I think I'm also much tougher, much more conscious of what I'm worth. I don't just mean in financial terms, but I think worth and value is very important.

Geoffrey pondered further on identity issues and remembered back to a time when work was short:

I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable when I was without work for three months. And I remember sitting around the house, there were plenty of things to do, but I did feel a loss of identity...so when I am in work, which thankfully is most of the time, my identity comes from "I'm Geoffrey, I'm director of this particular company and this is what I do."

This relates to another crucial and linked issue – professional and to some extent personal identity is bound up with the work that we do as individuals. Who are we? I will look at this in more depth in the discussion chapter that follows this one.

For other respondents it was the isolation side of the identity issue that had more resonance for them. This was possibly because – particularly in Nigel's case – their identity (in his case as an independent practitioner and advisor) was something that was more fixed from the beginning and there was less need to re-create something new from scratch. He did, however, immediately feel the change from paid employment and from managing a team:

What I think I've had to do is compensate for the lack of contact with colleagues, so obviously coming from a team, a large organisation where I knew lots of people and on a daily basis would have lots of interactions with people on a minute by minute basis, to go into sitting in my office on my own, having a cup of tea with [my wife] occasionally, seeing the kids and then going out for an occasional visit – that was quite a change, and I think that's probably the thing that I found hardest to adjust to.

This prompted Nigel to form his own informal network:

So what I have got is meeting up with other people who are in a similar situation, and just having chats about things and sounding people out...time will tell as to whether [isolation] does become an issue or not, and if it does I'll have to come up with a strategy to manage that.

Philip's view had a different nuance again. For him, the isolation of the independent role has also had a distinct upside and that was concerned with the freedom from office politics and competitiveness. He did also acknowledge that his identity was different from that of paid employees and was not conditional on what he had done previously.

Consultancy has been very good, it got me out of the mentality of the ego thing and the need to climb the pole. You know in [a named LA] I go in, I see people fighting over a bit of turf and you feel sorry for them...I'm probably more healthy in myself, my own mind set. So it's like my identity is not defined by leaving [a previous LA], so that's healthy.

For Simon, who (with the exception of Margaret) had had been working independently the longest of all the respondents, a feeling of isolation and independence fatigue was starting to set in, accompanied by a somewhat wistful desire to work in a ‘proper job’ again:

I had the initial four years...and now it's six or seven years I've been on my own again. And I think there is a degree of wear and tear in that, whether that's just about intellectually keeping yourself up to speed or [never seeing the outcomes of the work that one has started].

He went on:

Maybe I'm coming to the conclusion I want to do something that's a bit more settled without it being a proper job. I'm probably asking for the impossible...What am I going to do? I don't know; I think I may perhaps consider going back into a more normal job.

Later on in this conversation Simon mused further about doing something ‘completely different’ such as working as a EuroCamp rep and it was clear that, at the time of the interviews at least, Simon was feeling increasingly weary with the jack-of-all-trades style shifting identity, short-termism and isolation of independent life.

To take an example concerning myself, when I was part of an organisation and employed as a professional this bestowed a strong sense of identity – I would introduce

myself as a Service Manager for Children's Social Care working for a specific local authority (which I would name). These three things were all powerful identifiers. When I became independent, for a long time I felt as if my identity was much less defined. Who was I? The practical question for my business partner and myself was about how should we describe ourselves. Of equal importance was how we were viewed by others. Firstly, we did not want to be over-defined in our new roles by constant reference to our previous posts in the local authority and used to go to considerable lengths to avoid discussing these. 'I'm John and I used to be a Service Manager' seems both rather confessional and narrowly definitional, as if one was at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. 'Management Consultant' felt both too general and too elevated, particularly in our early days, and did not allude to our area of specialism with children's social care. 'Independent Practitioner' felt as if we were setting ourselves up as independent social workers, which was not the case. As I have already mentioned in the section on specialism above, there were problems with words such as 'trainer' which felt far too limiting and additionally carried with it dangers of pigeonholing. We finally, and at first uneasily, settled on the descriptor 'Social Care Consultant' as the best compromise and with repeated use over time and with the acquisition of further experience became increasingly comfortable with this. Gradually, we reshaped and re-created our identity.

Margaret recalled the unique feeling of her first extended period without any work and the impact that it had on her and her view of herself. She had been negotiating with two big consultancies about the bids that they were both making for the same huge piece of work and had eventually agreed to be part of the team for one of these consultancies. At the very last minute she was asked to jump ship by the other consultancy and to join their bid. She refused to do so, with serious consequences:

And blow me down, [the other consultancy] got it. And I went for the first time in my life without three months of work, and that was my first experience of no work and I was devastated, devastated, devastated.

I asked whether such experiences had an impact on self-image and value:

That's another part of it, yes it does. It is a shocking experience and one that in a way needs to be written about as well...the one side of getting it and building on it and doing it and the other side of...the nervousness about actually getting it and the feeling of where is the next job going to come from?

As well as keenly sensing this sharp contrast between obtaining and not obtaining work and the personal impact that this can have, Margaret (like Philip) missed the experience of working within a large organisation:

I guess running parallel with that – always, always – I've enjoyed organisations, so again, being cut off from that, in that spot, was quite severe as well. I mean I missed it, I was anxious, missed it, worried about it.

This illustrates well a number of important themes: the fragility of independent existence; the strong connection between work and positive identity and indeed the immediate negative impact that lack of work can have on the identity and confidence of the independent practitioner. For most respondents there was also a sense of loss – sometimes as strong as being cut off – from not having an immediate team or

organisation around them. This was less of an issue for myself, principally because I had a business partner who was also a close friend and confidante.

(f) Independence, Freedom and Controlling Own Destiny

For all respondents this was the cluster of themes that encapsulated one of the most deeply felt and important experiences of being independent and for all respondents the sense of freedom and having some control back was at the root of why the independent path was chosen. This was sometimes measured against the constraints that operate when one is directly employed by a large organisation and at other times simply celebrated for its own sake. However, independence meant subtly different things for different people, as the following accounts make clear.

Sarah's satisfaction came principally from being able to be true to her own set of values. She had observed the workings of a large consultancy practice at close hand during the early stages of her independent career and had been appalled:

They were bumping up their hours, days, weeks and then creating the reason behind this. It just felt wrong, it really did and I just felt, you know, I can't stomach this...and I couldn't stand it. I couldn't be part of it.

Sarah then consciously set about creating her own organisation based on 'a different set of values' and which did not directly employ people, but engaged them on a project by project basis. Having the freedom to set a framework of values that bound everyone together was the most important thing in this:

And I think what [the associates] feel is that there's something around an integrity that they get from working with each other that allows them to set themselves apart from the standard interims or the standard kind of consultancy.

For Sarah this meant creating an environment and taking on people who were comfortable with thinking for themselves and operating independently:

Because these people are all experienced. I've never felt that it's for me to say, this is what you are....so I'd much rather kind of let things develop, let people have a free hand in how they do their stuff.

This is the joy of independence for Sarah – creating a learning environment based upon strong values where experienced people could operate with a large degree of autonomy. Self sufficiency is also a factor:

But it [independence] probably....has made me incredibly self-sufficient which I always had a tendency to, but I know that now I pretty much consume all my own smoke....I think that's part of how that's changed for me.

Philip interspersed his conversation with me with short, sharp references to independence and freedom, and taken together these provided a powerful affirmation of his decision to take the independent route. It also sums up two of the major themes in this section. Four short quotes, widely spaced throughout the interview and listed below in the chronological order in which they occurred, effectively make this point:

You don't mind your Ps and Qs so much...I know as an employee, I'd be worrying about what the councillors think, and I would be, you know, pulling my forelock.

I know a lot of consultants and they've all said the same. I think it's more to the point that you become unmanageable.

I had to get out of that environment to be able to do stuff that I believe in, and actually I had to be able to have that freedom to express myself.

The bottom line; I feel that I'm alive.

The freedom to say things which otherwise could not be said was a theme of independence for Simon as well, in addition to a feeling which I have explored earlier in this chapter (in section (e) above) of being or becoming difficult to manage:

But I think there were aspects of my personality, my approach, that wouldn't always have fitted with local authority statutory sector work, so probably on some levels I was done a favour, in that I can now go in and take a more, a different approach – that I can go in and say things to members that officers couldn't say.

He expanded on this further at a later point:

You can make the sort of comment that a colleague can't because you are not a permanent part of the organisation and you don't have to preserve a long term relationship with a member, or director, or whoever. And just being able to say,

because I'm not permanent, I can be more brutal with you than a colleague would and you can accept it or reject it.

For Geoffrey, although he had similar feelings to this, a central feature of independence was simply in not being part of a larger organisation with all its complexities and psychological entrapments. He was clear that he wanted a much simpler and more straightforward relationship, explaining that, as an independent person:

I don't want to become part of an organisation. And the beauty of what I do is that I'm not psychologically part of it: I go in, do the job and come out. I've really no interest in the organisation other than my part in it...I just go in and take the money and go and do something else, which I love. I love that lack of commitment....I feel free of all that, I feel free of the relationships, I feel free of having to think long term with this organisation, I am free of having to plan a career which is incredibly tedious.

Later on in the interview, he spelled this out even further in response to my suggestion that organisations might want to own people who work for them:

You're also right about the organisation wanting to own a piece of you, and I think that's more and more the case that they want to own you and it's an insidious sort of thing. I, probably like you, don't want to be owned.

This indeed was also a large motivation for me, as was being seen, being heard and finding my voice. A personal passage from my recorded recollections makes this abundantly clear:

*But nonetheless, to feel so free, so unconstrained, recognised as an individual and not merely as an obedient representative of some gigantic organisation – **that's** what it is all about. People now hear my voice. I can say what I believe to be true. I was saying the same things when I worked for the Local Authority and no-one listened or heard. Becoming independent is like moving from the silent movies to being the star of the show.*

The notion of interdependence rather than independence was also a theme for Geoffrey, and his views on this added a further dimension to the matter:

The notion of independence doesn't really exist; actually when you think about it the notion of interdependence works much better – that's much more a real way of describing the nature of relationships and how you conduct yourself in business, as well as in life anyway, right across the board. So, where am I coming from? So, that's why it's an illusion....and I've discovered that as you go through business, no-one's ever independent, truly independent; you depend on the networks and everything else.

This is an important observation and brings to mind the idea of a continuum of independence rather than a totality – so that when a person moves from being a part of an organisation to becoming an independent practitioner he or she simply moves several

places along the continuum towards greater independence, which can never really be achieved in full.

Nigel can have the last word on this – two brief phrases encapsulates much of what has already been said:

For me the biggest thing has been the freedom, the autonomy, the ability to be creative and to map out my own future in a way that I want to do it.

You're now in charge of your destiny as it were, so you can pretty much do what you want, you can choose the training that you do and can be a lot more creative, and there was that freedom that came with it: the feeling that suddenly the world's a big place, the social work world is a big place....

(g) Values and Dilemmas

Some respondents were clear that values were important, and often, as described above in the section on identity, these values were linked with creating something that paid employment, or indeed other businesses, were not. All respondents had trained as social workers, as had I, and had come from social care settings and it is possible that values are particularly important to those who are steeped in that sector, as social work is a profession with strong values. Sometimes this can make for on the spot practice dilemmas as recounted below under my own and also Simon's experience. Sarah and Margaret were very clear about the importance of values to their independent practice and business after seeing how large consultancy businesses operate. Sarah had encountered the practices of one such large consultancy early in her independent career,

as discussed previously, and had been shocked to the core by what she had seen and heard. She decided, on account of these experiences, that her own business would be very different and that she and her associates would operate in a more ethical way. She told me:

We have four or five absolute behaviours and the first one is, everything we do must add value. If it's not adding value, we don't do it. Everything we touch...must follow through to a good end. The inverse of that is, if you can't do that, don't bloody touch it.

For Sarah 'adding value' also meant not taking on work just for the money when there was a strong possibility of either failure or her recommendations being ignored. She continued to speak of her dislike of the model of consultancy that tells the client that they have a problem and then moves on before helping to resolve it:

Don't just hand it back and go "there you are", because I find that, for me, it's a completely moral thing about the value consultants bring or not. You've identified the problem. Help them identify the solution.

Margaret had a similar experience and had been even more directly affected by the dubious practices of a large consultancy organisation:

The [named large consultancy] crowd had been working with [a regional authority] and were doing them in, left right and centre. You wouldn't believe the money that they were making and had been for years and years and years and

years...they said to us “you come in with us, we’ll take over your money and we’ll run it with you” ...and we said yes to that.

Margaret and her colleagues had said ‘yes’ before they had understood the way in which this large organisation was operating. At a later point she and her colleagues became:

Very, very angry with [this organisation], we felt that they were real, I mean I am sure that they made money off our backs as well...and flats were being bought and sold up there and they were living off the backs. It was our first experience of that side of consulting.

All this led Margaret to set up her own loosely structured organisation with other like-minded experienced independent people to offer an alternative approach:

We decided we wouldn’t have money exchanges between us in terms of employment of secretaries, we decided not to have an infrastructure as such. What we decided to do was to have a network of people, and simply really just say “look, you know, if people just ask us, if they want workers we can say yes, here are some workers we know of.

This less formal arrangement worked for a number of years for Margaret, and she and her associates formed a website and worked together more closely for a time, although they have now gradually moved on from this arrangement. Nonetheless, this allowed Margaret and her colleagues to practise in the way that they wanted to, according to

their values and in a way that did not make ethical compromises or exploit or make money ‘on the backs’ of others.

A further potential dilemma and value conflict concerns ‘box ticking’ exercises. I have experienced elements of this and it typically might occur when an LA wish for an external view for purposes of their own, (for instance,. because they have an OFSTED inspection coming up) and one strongly suspects that they have little intention of putting the conclusions and recommendations of the independent work into action. This can be picked up by the astute independent person in one of two main ways – firstly, via an obvious lack of interest being expressed by the LA in the progress or probable outcomes of the work right from the outset, or secondly because other people within the LA hint to you that this is the case. More rarely, lack of commitment by the LA can come over as naked hostility to the emerging (and possibly unexpected) findings. This can be very frustrating and, in extreme circumstances, professionally compromising. On one occasion, my business partner and I were working with an LA where we began to uncover very significant issues with both casework and more importantly still, management culture and practice. We started to raise these issues, and managers within the LA immediately tried to close the discussion down, using phrases such as ‘this is beyond your remit’. We would not accept this and pushed the matter further, which resulted in a completely unexpected and emotively charged level of criticism of our approach from a senior manager. We began to understand (in retrospect) that our comments had been deeply unwelcome, as our role – as seen by that particular LA – had been to rubber stamp the improvements they considered that they had made. Our learning from this, because we did leave this piece of work feeling professionally

compromised, was to be persistent, clear and calm in any such circumstances in the future – and to stand one's ground.

Simon had similar experiences and dilemmas over box ticking exercises, although he did not encounter hostility as such:

The other great frustration is, the authority calls you in to do a project and you know within a day they're not going to do anything with it. They're doing it merely to tick a box with the inspectors that they have considered X or Y...I have actually once or twice actually said to the authority after two or three days "Look, my view of the situation is what I've just explained: do you really want me to do this?" and in every case they've said "yes, we need the box ticked" and I've taken the money.

Perhaps that also shows that independent practitioners have sometimes to put their own survival at the apex of the hierarchy of considerations.

A third dilemma that surfaced frequently were the compromises that the nature of independent work forces upon family life. All respondents acknowledged, at one time or another, that an integral part of independent work is travel and staying away from home; as Simon put aptly it, *'living life out of a suitcase'* in various hotel rooms. Although some respondents were not prepared to travel extensively, all agreed – up to a point at least – that you have to follow the work. This can lead to problems, as Simon recounted:

My youngest child was only two when I started doing this, so she's never really known anything different. The older onedoes comment on my being away more often. And I think my partner accepts that that's the way the work is, but it does throw up really powerful issues and there are the occasions when you get home....feeling absolutely shattered and then with a whole list of issues that people want to deal with and it's the last thing you feel like doing...particularly if it's been a long drive up on a Friday night.

I was keenly aware of similar pressures at the point where my independent practice began to become really busy. We became involved in some work in a distant setting which meant regularly staying away 3 nights a week. This was important work, because it would potentially have a very positive impact on our reputation if the work were deemed to be successful. At that stage family life was particularly active: my partner had a new job and my younger son, then aged 10, felt my growing absences particularly strongly. I still remember with a sharp pang of regret and guilt the upset that this caused and which I could not make better.

However, as with so many issues, this is two edged. Working independently can also provide opportunities that do not exist in permanent employment, for contact and interaction with family members and children. Sarah recalled that at one stage her career plan had been to become a Director of Children's Services. I asked her why she did not eventually go down that route:

I could see that I would have to minimise my family choices. I watched so many and thought, I can't do that. I don't want to do that. I can't get to Sports Day...I

never understand why they didn't make their own choices. I remember thinking, you're the bloody boss, you choose to go to Sports Day. I do understand why they don't on one level, but at another level I still don't understand.

Simon too, alongside his musing on the stresses, strains and dilemmas of independent life, emphasised that its freedoms in terms of family life were considerable. I asked him if he would consider a secure well paid job in an organisation:

Probably not, partly because I've got used to the way I work now. It's perhaps not so important now that the kids are 17 and 14, but certainly in the intervening years it just meant that, most summers, I've basically taken 5 weeks off....so it's partly about being able to take four or five weeks off in the summer, generally the half terms off, a week at Easter and maybe more, and a couple of weeks at Christmas.

Whatever the dilemmas, the sense of freedom and choice remained important for all the respondents.

(h) The Future

A really important factor in considerations of the future was that, by the time of my interviews in 2008 and 2009, the financial and economic skies were darkening. However, most respondents were only a little uneasy about what the future might hold for them although they were acutely aware that, in becoming independent, they had traded a job and financial security for a more unpredictable and unstable, if more

exciting, life. The external climate was seen as a threat, but really one to be considered only when it started to have a direct impact. Geoffrey said:

And I suppose I'm thinking about the economic situation and whether that's going to affect the business in any way. But in a sense I'm quite happy just to go with it and see what happens.

More generally he felt that *'I want to continue to be useful and God willing and if my health lasts out, I could be doing this in my seventies'*.

Simon also had some unease about the future owing to the deteriorating financial environment. He was quite clear:

I think it is going to get tougher....I think it's inevitable that to begin with people will think, in terms of reducing expenditure, about getting rid of consultants – and doing it all internally is an obvious way of doing it....I think the next year is going to be challenging, there is no doubt about that. Certainly my feeling is if I'm working in an authority where I feel I'm doing a good job, I'm likely to stay in one place for significantly longer than I might have done a few years ago.

In addition to this, as previously noted, Simon had intimated that the independent life was generally starting to take its toll on him and he clearly linked how long he would have to work with the number of years he might need to continue to support his children financially:

But say it's another eight years; that's going to take me through to 62 and at that point I want to retire. And I suppose I have to be frank about it, [I have] some doubts whether I can do this sort of work for another eight years.

Nigel felt reasonably sanguine about the future, musing that *'in a year's time, I think I will be still pretty much doing what I'm doing now.'* Nonetheless he also anticipated the coming squeeze, but felt that having a specialist offering would help him survive it:

I think when the tightening of the local authority belt does come and they are then more savvy and a bit more careful in what they are doing in relation to commissioning independent work....hopefully having the niche will be positive, so that's how I was thinking as well.

Sarah thought about the future more in terms of family commitments and balancing these against the nature of independent work which she saw as *'terribly addictive.'* She admitted feeling nervous about the commitments that taking on more work produces as *'I have an aging mother, my children, and basically I'm thinking, oh...'* In the final analysis, she believed that the future had to be a balance between work, life and the likelihood of chance events:

And there's something about how you moderate success. I believe it isn't about having everything. I mean the turnover of the company is very good, only I know I could double it if I want to...do I want to do that?

While not quite a completely rhetorical question, Sarah concluded in the end that this would upset the carefully constructed balance. The last word goes to Margaret, who neatly put into words a thought that many independent people can instantly relate to, particularly in the straitened circumstances of the current economic climate:

....but just surviving, that is enough for all of us really.

(vii) End Note

This chapter has brought the experiences of the research respondents, including myself, to the fore. I have attempted to ensure that they come across clearly and are not obscured or eclipsed by too much analysis at this stage. My role here has principally been to structure the material in a chronological way and to highlight and illustrate the emerging themes.

It is important that the voices and views of the respondents continue to be heard in the following chapter. However, this will primarily concern the in-depth discussion of the emerging themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

(i) Introduction

As I have made clear, my intention in the last chapter was to let my interviewees speak and let their experiences come across as clearly and directly as possible. The task in writing up that chapter was to cluster the different experiences and to act as the mortar between the bricks of recollection and the recounting of the experience of my research respondents; to make the links between the recollections and to begin the process of identifying the emergent findings. As I stated at the beginning of Chapter 3, my task was to compose ‘phenomenologically sensitive’ paragraphs, in line with the Van Manen approach (1997:95), with the intention of both framing and amplifying the experiences of my research respondents. My aim was for the different voices to come through clearly and strongly because they are – in many different ways – authentically describing their experiences of establishing their own independent practices.

I now turn to the detailed discussion of these experiences and what they mean in terms of the fundamental question, ‘What is the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field?’ I will do this by firstly exploring the characteristics of modern social care organisations drawing on the literature on organisational theory and particularly perspectives and insights offered by Frederick Taylor (1911) and Gareth Morgan. The series of metaphors provided by Morgan (1997) are highly illustrative and I will combine his insights with the experience of the research respondents as they began to become dissatisfied with the organisations that they worked for. This discussion will logically lead in to a consideration of factors within organisations which have been shown by research to cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction. I will draw on the

work of Pettinger (2000) and others in considering the issues of motivation and discussing whether the research group shared a motivational profile that, over time, helped to shape individual decision-making concerning independence.

The next section of this chapter will consider the creation of individual identities and how these might be partially linked to and shaped by organisation structures. I will discuss the extent to which individuals are free agents who can make choices about their own lives and futures. This consideration is highly relevant to the experiences and journeys of myself and my research respondents – to what extent are we free to choose our own paths? I will conclude this chapter by considering the importance of networks in the independent experience and will suggest that networks have replaced formal hierarchies as the co-ordinating mechanism of relationships and, to some extent, the structure within which the independent practitioner works.

My aim, by the end of this chapter, is to be in a position to approach the stage of creative synthesis as envisaged by Moustakas as the culmination of all research projects, using a broadly heuristic methodology.

This research has broadly followed the passage of time as discussed and explained in Chapter 2. When one asks the question ‘What is the experience?’ then a chronological or sequential response is one logical way of unpacking and describing whatever experience is under discussion. I have covered the first stirrings of the idea of establishing my own independent practice and recounted my evolving ideas on the appropriate methodology. My research interviews also broadly followed the emergent process for my research respondents over time; this occurred more or less

spontaneously and meant that the interviews were effectively the chronological stories of the respondents. Roberts states that:

Lives have to be understood.....as lived within time and time is experienced according to narrative. Narratives – of past, present or future – are the means by which by which biographical experience is given an understandable shape.
(2002:123)

This ‘understandable shape’ is important, and when I came to write up my findings I therefore looked first at motivating and preparatory factors before moving on in time to the moment of independence and then finally to the experience of being independent. Using the same approach, I will now use a similar chronological frame to explore the major findings from my research in a similar more or less sequential order.

(ii) Defining Characteristics of the Modern Social Care Organisation

I shall therefore begin this discussion chapter by exploring the impact of organisations on people: the first major finding is that all the research respondents felt – in some way, shape or form – limited, constrained or sometimes even oppressed by the organisational structures in which they had been working as paid employees. I will draw on organisational theory to illustrate this account. The amalgamated quote below, containing comment fragments from two research respondents and myself, conjures up a powerful image of disillusion with a working environment.

‘Walking in Treacle’... ‘Around the Same Block’... to a ‘Slow Death’

The experience of establishing an independent practice usually started with such feelings, sometimes strongly expressed and sometimes more subtly. None of my respondents were happy with the working environment provided by their previous organisations and sought, in one way or another, the greater freedom of independence. What is it about organisations in general and social care organisations in particular that can have such an impact on people?

There is a strong consensus amongst writers and academics that the study of organisations is both complex and a work in progress and that no definitive conclusions can be reached, as no explanatory model of the working of organisations is adequate on its own. Typically, Richard Pettinger observes that the study of organisations is not an ‘natural or absolute science’ (2000:1) and that what is known about the impact of organisations on people is both developing and incomplete. Logically, that has to be the case when organisations themselves continue to change and develop on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis. It is not as if the literature is reflecting on a phenomenon that has had a definite beginning and end and on which the book is now closed.

The first issue to discuss therefore concerns the particular characteristics of social care organisations. To begin to define and capture these might start to give a clue as to why people may feel pressured, constrained or trapped in such an environment. Social care organisations are often spoken of as bureaucracies and the word ‘bureaucracy’ will certainly occur and recur within these considerations, so I will use Hafford-Letchfield’s (2006:7) definition of bureaucracy for my purposes here because it is a helpful and clear one. She notes that the concept was first developed by the organisational theorist Max Weber:

To articulate a form of organisational design defined by a number of characteristics. These include centralised power and control held by a small executive group which establishes formal relations between people of authority. A hierarchy of ascending authority attaches to certain positions, rights, responsibilities and entitlements with mechanisms in place to monitor and control. (2006:7)

Hafford-Letchfield argues that the ‘three inter-related elements of strategy, structure and culture’ (2006:2) should be considered together when attempting to theorise organisational models within social care. Interestingly, her contention is that the first of these elements – that of strategy – has only really come to the fore since social care organisations started to change from the 1980s onwards. She locates strategic theory as springing from ‘ideas of competition in relation to quality, performance, product, cost and price’ (2006:3) and makes the clear case that social care organisations have had to become more strategically focused because of the adoption of market (or quasi-market) ideas and mechanisms within the sector. This hypothesis fits well with the pattern described in the first part of the literature review above, where I argued strongly that the rise of the internal market, a more management driven culture, and increasing emphasis on the importance of measuring performance were three of the most fundamental changes in the sector over the past 20 or 25 years. Therefore senior managers and leaders within social care have had to become strategists as the role and remit of their organisations have become steadily more complex and ever more driven by policy and legislative changes from central government, backed up by enforcement of various kinds. This has perhaps served to reinforce the presence of a rigid hierarchy within

social care organisations organised along bureaucratic lines. The setting of strategic direction and goals is very much seen as a task reserved to the most senior echelon of managers, as evidenced by posts such as ‘strategic director’ and others which are common in social care settings where the division between senior ‘strategic’ posts and more junior ‘operational’ posts is widespread. Therefore, it is likely that the creative ideas and thoughts of those who are close to social work practice do not often permeate far enough upwards to find themselves represented in strategic policy. Nigel was the research respondent who was possibly the closest to practice and this following recollection makes his frustration very clear:

I was...frustrated by the limitations within the local authority and that lack of flexibility and ability to think creatively and very much felt that I was being bogged down.

Q - Was that a straightjacket that you could see?

‘Yeah, definitely a straightjacket, yeah, a ball and chain round the neck.’

This conversation really captured the perceived gulf that exists between those close to practice (although nonetheless in management positions) and the focus of those at the top of the organisation who have their gaze turned elsewhere and who have a radically different set of priorities. In an article for the journal *Professional Social Work* in August 2004, I reflected on the widening gap between senior managers and the rest of the organisation. I made this point by quoting from the Gospel of St Luke:

And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. Anyone who wanted to cross over to you from here is stopped at its edge, and no-one there can cross over to us. (2004:9)

Leaders and strategists within social care have had to concentrate on the changing and insistent demands of those in central government and its enforcement apparatus represented by such organisations as OFSTED or the Care Standards Commission. I discussed this matter in more detail in Chapter 1 in the section on increased emphasis on performance measures. One can understand the necessity for so doing: as was noted in Chapter 1, jobs and careers are on the line. However, it might be argued that one consequence of the concentration on strategic thinking, planning and external matters has been to compartmentalise social care organisations and to cut off senior managers and leaders from the rest of the organisation. This has the capacity to create the alienation experienced by some research respondents and this is a theme to which I shall return.

The second of Hafford-Letchfield's three interconnected elements is organisational structure, and her view is that the structure of a given organisation plays 'a significant part in shaping people's relationships to it, for example in their attitude and behaviour' (2006:3). Most empirical evidence and experience suggests that social care organisations are hierarchical bureaucracies with senior managers setting the strategy and the goals of the organisation, middle and more junior managers making day-to-day decisions (and ensuring that these are carried out) and front line workers doing the face-to-face work with service users. That being the case, it seems to me possible that one source of conflict in social care organisations might be that a formal structure of this

nature has an inbuilt tension (unlike at Tesco or Kwik Fit for example) because those at the front line and in junior management positions have an alternative, powerful and sometimes conflicting gravitational pull of loyalty to their profession and its associated values. Hafford-Letchfield notes that some academics have pointed out that present-day social care organisations are structured in a formal and rigid way that is not dissimilar to the organisational structures that classical management theorists put forward as archetypes at the turn of the twentieth century. Frederick Taylor (1911) put forward five principles of scientific management theory (SMT), as reproduced in the table below. I give examples of how these are commonly used by social care organisations to this day.

Table 3 – Principles of Scientific Management Theory (from Taylor 1911)

Taylor SMT Principle	Example of current and common social care organisation usage of principle
(1) Clear division of tasks and responsibilities between management and workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior and strategic managers set direction of organisation • Middle/junior managers manage • Practitioners work with service users
(2) Use of scientific methods to determine the best way of doing the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical models (e.g. care management models, risk assessment models, systems and psychodynamic theories) in wide use. These are often reduced to checklist or tick box formats
(3) Scientific selection of the person to do the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competency based selection interviewing against pre-set criteria with scoring grids
(4) Training of the selected worker to perform the job in the way specified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training in use of computer systems (e.g. SWIFT or CareFirst or similar) and ICS training • Training in use of professional assessment or risk assessment frameworks
(5) Surveillance of workers through the use of hierarchies and close supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management supervision • Mandatory management authorisation for specific tasks • Mandatory attendance at panels for various permissions • Regular formal inspection

The direct links and connections are, to my mind, striking. Hafford-Letchfield also argues that the way the organisation is structured can determine how people within it feel and behave. Musing on the impact of organisations on him personally, Geoffrey commented:

I don't want to become part of an organisation (again). And the beauty of what I do is that I'm not psychologically part of it; I go in, do the job and come out. I've really no interest in the organisation other than my part in it. I've no interest in their restructuring...you've seen the restructuring going on around you, you see the pain on everybody's faces and I'm thinking, "Yeah, I'm not part of this", I just go in and I take the money and go and do something else, which I love, I love that lack of commitment.

The third and final interlocking element in Hafford-Letchfield's analysis of the modern day social care organisation is that of organisational culture. Schein (1992) defines organisational culture as being composed of 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions' (1992:12). Hafford-Letchfield expands on Schein's work and defines organisational culture as 'the deep basic assumptions that are shared by members of an organisation which are often hidden or unconscious and represent the way in which an organisation perceives itself and its environment' (2006:10). There are likely therefore to be similarities in how organisations 'feel' both because of shared views and assumptions across similar organisations and also because of the way that organisations performing the same functions within the social care milieu have to adapt to their common external environment. Schein comments that 'the key to long-range growth or survival is to keep the needs (of external stakeholders) in some kind of balance and the mission of the

organisation....is usually a reflection of this balance' (1992:53). As discussed in Chapter 1, there has been a lot of debate in the social work world over the last few years about the rise and impact of managerialism, the increasing importance of performance indicators and other phenomena such as the reaction to serious child or adult protection incidents (such as the death of Peter Connelly in 2007 or the Bristol Winterbourne View care home scandal in 2009). Future research might usefully address the full effect of these matters on the culture of social care organisations and their adaptation to their common external environment.

Eileen Munro, in her final report into the child protection system in May 2011, accurately identified the problem when she commented that organisational cultures had been shaped by the following powerful factors:

A commonly held belief that the complexity and associated uncertainty of child protection work can be eradicated; a readiness, in high profile public inquiries into the death of a child, to focus on professional error without looking deeply enough into its causes; and the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets which provide only part of the picture of practice, and which have skewed attention to process over the quality and effectiveness of help given. (2011:6)

She went on to conclude that:

These forces have come together to create a defensive system that puts so much emphasis on procedures and recording that insufficient attention is given to

developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families. (2011:6)

Munro was of course focusing on children's social care organisations, but many in adult care might recognise similar organisational traits in their own settings. As a well researched summary of the dominant culture across social care organisations, her report would take some surpassing, and it appears to have been generally well received by the Government (who have indicated that they will implement most of her recommendations) and professionals in the social care field.

I have attempted here to create a working archetype of a social care organisation which I would contend that my research respondents and others would recognise: an organisation which is likely to have a large chasm separating front line practitioners and managers from senior strategic managers, with a formal and bureaucratic structure and a clear tendency towards a defensive, 'belt and braces' risk-averse organisational culture. I am of course aware that this is, by necessity, a considerable reduction and that there are many complexities here which I have not explored. However, I am only concerned at this stage with the bigger picture and with establishing some defining characteristics which might be recognisable to those who wished to understand the way social care organisations operate and the pressures that shape and influence the organisational cultures of such organisations. One might conclude, if that picture has some accuracy, that there is little wonder that some people become motivated to leave such organisations.

(iii) Organisations as Machines

I consider it unlikely that any organisation would be structured deliberately in a way that set out to alienate employees and ensure their ill will and enmity towards the organisation, although others may disagree on this point. It would seem to me that it is generally in the interests of the organisation to try to maintain good relationships with those who work for them, not necessarily for any altruistic reason, but rather to ensure organisational health, strength and effectiveness. In this matter I will take as a working assumption Morgan's (1997) assertion that most organisations have absorbed some of the core thinking of the human relations school of organisational theory. Morgan summarises such thinking thus: 'Employees are people with complex needs that must be satisfied if they are to lead full and healthy lives and to perform effectively in the workplace' (1997:35). This then poses the question of why organisations sometimes act in a way that does alienate those who work for them – I am thinking of my research group here – and which therefore also undermines the functioning and effectiveness of the organisation.

Morgan (1997) makes extensive use of metaphor to illuminate the complexity of organisations and to illustrate the various theoretical models that have been created and which have subsequently held influence over the last 100 years. Drawing on the work of the classical management theorists of the early 20th Century (such as Mooney and Urwick), Morgan looks first at 'organisations as machines' (1997:11) and notes that the influence of such theoretical models of organisations is still widespread today. One would also include Frederick Taylor (1911) and his distinct vision of organisations within the broad classical theorist tradition. Classical management theorist principles such as a structured hierarchy, clear lines of authority, defined spans of control, regular

supervision of staff to ensure compliance and the subordination of individual interest to the general interest remain visible and tangible elements of many organisations today, including those delivering social care services. I would argue that such principles have become embedded to such an extent that they have become synonymous with common knowledge – namely, the existence of a shared and unanalytical view that this is simply how organisations *are*. Organisations with widely different functions and purposes are structured in this way from social care organisations to those making cars or selling groceries. Morgan notes that:

The whole thrust of classical management theory and its modern applications is to suggest that organisations can or should be rational systems that operate in an efficient a manner as possible. While many will endorse this as an ideal, it is easier said than done, because we are dealing with people, not inanimate cogs and wheels. (1997:21)

This is exactly the issue, to which I will shortly return.

I have already suggested above that one can make a case for seeing direct connections between Taylor's vision of an organisation and the way that social care organisations work in the early 21st Century. Morgan argues cogently that management principles that can be traced directly back to the classical theorists in general and Taylor in particular 'often lie at the basis of many modern organisational problems' (1997:27). This is because seeing the organisation as a logical, functioning machine is fundamentally a narrow perspective and does not really allow for the many complexities that human activity and behaviours can unexpectedly throw up. Therefore organisations

with logical, hierarchical, bureaucratic and fixed structures find it difficult to cope with changing circumstances, because as Morgan says ‘they are designed to achieve pre-determined goals’ (1997:28) and not for innovation. Geoffrey’s comment about the *‘whole routine of local government, attending pointless meetings, things not happening, all the whole routine that we’re all familiar with’* is highly relevant here with its implication of disorientation and wasted time. When faced with rapidly changing circumstances, such organisations will sometimes at first ignore what is happening or simply deny that circumstances are changing. Alternatively, Morgan argues, changes are dealt with via existing organisational frameworks (such as committees, policies and procedures) which generally prove unequal to the task as they were designed and constituted for different purposes and sets of circumstances. This often means that the organisation begins to become paralysed or prone to backlogs of work as normal working becomes disrupted while people try and grapple with a set of new issues. Nigel recalled this as *‘so many people with different thoughts coming together and no-one really taking a lead or direction’*. In three concise sentences, Morgan describes what usually happens next:

Complex issues (then) float up the organisational hierarchy as members at each level find in turn that they are unable to solve them. On the way, information often gets distorted as people hide errors and the true nature and magnitude of problems for fear of being held responsible for them. Those in command of the organisation thus frequently find themselves facing issues that are inappropriately defined and which they have no real idea of how to approach. (1997:29)

He concludes that the organisational response to such intractable problems is often to delegate them to 'teams of staff experts or consultants' (1997:29) whose remoteness from the organisational coal face often just serves to make matters worse. That is a sobering thought for those of us in the independent consultancy field who make a living from marketing our own expertise in solving such problems. Nonetheless, as Philip put it, such independent practitioners are themselves in a particularly vulnerable position, being only:

'As good as your last piece of work...so it's about being seen to deliver'.

However, as has been discussed, what it is that we are actually delivering is a complex matter. It might be more bound up with serving an urgent organisational need to be seen to be doing something than we might care to admit. The machine must be maintained and external stakeholders satisfied.

Morgan's description of the rather inflexible and static organisation that has somehow lost its way and which can become frozen as new circumstances bear down upon it is a compelling one. It also has some resonance with the archetype of the organisation that was created earlier where senior leaders have to focus on trying to satisfy powerful external stakeholders, rather than on the internal workings of the organisation and its internal integration. Issues arising from within might then be seen as both perplexing and irrelevant. Most of my research respondents would see this as being at least partially true, as Nigel vividly recounted when describing how the LA he had worked for tried to solve problems:

[We were] trying to come up with some idea about how we were going to move various things forward, and still going to the meetings sort of three, four, five, six months later, having got nowhere. There was a lack of structure around that and a lack of clarity in relation to what sort of strategy was going to move that forward. You know, really frustrating.

Such organisational inertia and disorientation was certainly a significant motivating factor for some research respondents as they started to contemplate a possible life outside the Local Authority.

(iv) Adding the Human Dimension

Morgan (1997) uses many metaphors for organisational functioning, and while he is clear that any metaphor offers, at best, only a partial explanation, some further consideration of his work is illuminating. As organisational theory developed in the twentieth century, the deficits of designing and conceptualising organisations as machines became clearer for some of the reasons discussed above – for instance, little account was taken, in these discourses, of rapidly changing circumstances or unforeseen events and the unpredictability of human agency. To remedy this deficit, various strands of thought emerged that placed a much greater emphasis on individual needs and behaviours within the workplace and which additionally focused on the phenomenon of motivation. Organisations were seen much more as complex organisms than machines, and Morgan cites the Hawthorne Studies in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s as the first manifestation of this thinking. These concluded that ‘work activities are influenced as much by the nature of human beings as by formal design and that organisational theorists must pay close attention to this human side of organisation’ (1997:35) and that

individuals or groups of workers function much better when their own needs are satisfied. This at once sounds rather obvious, but is also (as many of my research respondents have so clearly indicated) not always easy to achieve. Morgan comments that, despite this development in understanding, there is still a tendency for managers to quickly revert to seeing organisations as machines. This is evidenced by the passion for business process re-engineering (BPR) a few years ago, which focused on the design of workflow processes and the achievement of greater efficiency with little consideration of the human dimension. One can see that this BPR approach had a very significant impact on social care organisations as clearly evidenced by (for example) the restless design and redesign of workflow processes to achieve the efficient reception of contacts and referrals into the system or to ensure that strict timescales for assessments was met. The Integrated Children's System adopted in 2005 within children's social care reflects this approach, as does the guidance document *Working Together* (2010) which states that 'The initial assessment should be completed by local authority children's social care, working with colleagues, within a maximum of 10 working days of the date of referral' (2010:145). Quite often, external consultants with a BPR or similar background have been commissioned to implement these processes, or alternatively to investigate why such embedded processes have not produced the necessary results.

The question here, therefore, is about whether or not the more employee-focused thinking on the importance of ensuring that the wider needs of the workforce are met has become a feature of modern social care organisations, as experienced by my research respondents. Pettinger (2000:58ff) considers the work of Frederick Herzberg, who conducted research in the early 1960s into what caused people either extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their jobs. The results were as follows:

Table 4 - Herzburg's Motivational Factors (from Pettinger 2000:58)

Factors leading to extreme dissatisfaction	Factors leading to extreme satisfaction
(i) Company Policy	(i) Achievement
(ii) Poor management style	(ii) Recognition
(iii) Poor relationship with supervisor	(iii) Work itself
(iv) Poor work conditions	(iv) Responsibility
(v) Low salary	(v) Advancement
(vi) Difficult relationship with peers	(vi) Growth

Pettinger explains that the factors causing dissatisfaction will only be ameliorated when they are deemed by employees to have reached an 'adequate' level (2010:57). Even then, they will not create satisfaction in themselves; rather just an absence of dissatisfaction in these areas.

These factors identified that lead to employee satisfaction suggest to me that organisations that pay close attention to this (for example, where achievement is recognised and opportunities are provided for advancement) are more likely to have a positive motivating impact on people than organisations that do not. The issue of motivation will be discussed further below. To return briefly to possible reasons for leaving an organisation, the following four comments from myself and my research respondents match closely to the reasons for dissatisfaction in Herzberg's list above:

Relationship with peers:

There was something else that when I was with [the LA] towards the end of my stay there, and it again helped me to find the motivation to leave. I got caught up

in instant conflicts, where I was caught up in somebody else's war and I thought, "hmm, this is not happening to me again." (Geoffrey)

Work conditions:

And when I had been in a full time, permanent, senior management post, I do remember thinking, this is a bit of a lark really, because there were these parts of the day or these parts of the week when I'm actually very busy, then these other parts when I'm not really doing anything at all, and it used to irritate me because I'd think, it's a waste of my time being here, there is really not very much for me to do. (Sarah)

Company policy:

A bruising battle with senior managers over the establishment of an admission panel also gave me my first taste of sustained and serious conflict, and it was not to my liking. I began to question whether we were as different as I had thought, when reflecting more deeply on matters that I had not been able to put right. (Myself)

Relationship with supervisor:

So it got to the stage that my relationship [Simon's relationship with his boss] had completely broken down. The Chief Executive tried to redeploy me, but ...one of us had to go, and I agreed a package to leave...and just to conclude the story, another one of the Assistant Directors fell out with him a couple of months later, and at that point the Chief Executive decided he had to get rid of him and duly did. But, for a long time the department didn't recover from that. (Simon)

It is important to emphasise here that these were not simply some passing irritations expressed by my respondents or myself: these were examples of the important issues that led directly to either independence or to urgent planning for independence.

(v) Reframing Motivation

I have already set out in Chapter 3 the range of motivating factors experienced by my research respondents and myself and which contributed to the decisions that we made to begin our long, short, convoluted or direct moves towards independence. This, however does not even begin to explain why *these particular* individuals decided to make the major step of leaving secure and well-paid jobs within social care organisations when many others, who might freely have admitted to sharing some of the same experiences, did not.

Huczynski and Buchanan (2001: 244-245) consider a motivation profile developed by Ritchie and Martin in 1999 from the literature on motivation and also from their own experiences as management consultants. This looks at 12 motivational factors and then considers them individually in terms of what they mean for people with a stated 'high need' for the individual motivating factor and those with a stated 'low need' for such a motivator. I summarise their findings in the table below:

Table 5 – Motivation: High and Low Needs: adapted from Ritchie and Martin (1999)

Motivating factor	High needs individuals	Low needs individuals
(1) Interest	Need to feel that work is intrinsically interesting and useful	Will do work regardless of its intrinsic interest or usefulness
(2) Achievement	Need to set self-challenging goals. Unhappy if not achieving; requires constant stimulation	Little motivation for achievement
(3) Recognition	Need constant recognition and appreciation	Indifferent about people's views about them
(4) Self-development	Need to grow and develop; assess work in terms of its contribution to personal growth	Do what is required; do not assess work in terms of contribution to professional development
(5) Variety and change	Need constant variety, change and stimulation	Happy to tolerate the mundane and boring
(6) Creativity	Explorative and open minded; curious and think divergently	Little need for creative thinking; lack curiosity
(7) Power and influence	Strong impulse to influence others, competitive power drives dominant personality	Little wish to attempt to exercise influence
(8) Social Contract	Need light social contract with wide range of people	Feel no compelling need for company but can work with others as necessary
(9) Money and tangible rewards	Need high salary and tangible rewards	Spend little energy thinking about reward
(10) Structure	Need rules and structure, feedback and information	Find rules and structures restrictive; want freedom
(11) Relationships	Need to form and sustain stable long-term relationships with a small number of people	Feel no need to maintain deep relationships
(12) Physical conditions	Need good working conditions	Mainly indifferent to physical surroundings

Huczynski and Buchanan comment importantly that the tool is not meant to crudely define a set of 'high needs' individuals and a set of 'low needs' individuals but rather to create an individual profile of motivating factors, to which managers in organisations can then respond.

Using these factors to reflect on my own experience and also as a lens when once more reading through the interviews with my research respondents, there is a remarkable similarity in our profiles when the motivating factors in this tool are considered. I have identified five of these as pivotal, as follows, although one could make the case for congruence in some of the other factors as well. The areas of similarity are separate, but do overlap in some respects:

(1) **Interest:** there was a strong need for all the research respondents to feel that what they did was interesting and useful and could really make a difference – and a corresponding feeling that the work previously done for paid employers was often none of these things. This would put all of us in the high needs category:

I don't want to lead or direct, it's just lovely to watch that person be able to say what they want to be able to say...and that's what I love doing [in other words, facilitating] and I know that sometimes in contracts that's what I'll get to do and that's what keeps me going personally. (Sarah)

That's the real change. What's exciting about...consulting, call it what you like, but independent work of this sort, is that you can actually, I think, bring in meaningful change if it's done properly. That's what I think. That's the essence of it. (Margaret)

(2) **Recognition:** Once again, most of the respondents had a strong need for additional recognition of their skills, abilities and contributions which would again strongly suggest high needs:

And actually [independence] is about getting in touch with your positive visions which is about I've got a good track record, I've got a good CV, I've got talent, I've got skills and if you can go out there in that mindset, you're going to attract.
(Philip)

But nonetheless, to feel so free, so unconstrained, recognised as an individual and not merely as an obedient representative of some gigantic organisation – that's what it is all about. People now hear my voice. I can say what I believe to be true. I was saying the same things when I worked for the Local Authority and no-one listened or heard. Becoming independent is like moving from the silent movies to being the star of the show. (myself)

(3) **Structures:** most of the respondent group, including myself, felt very strongly that the rules and structures of paid employment, particularly in a social care setting, were restrictive and constraining. As has been discussed previously (particularly in the previous chapter concerning independence fitting more with individual skill sets), there was a sense of having outgrown the organisation and of needing freedom and release. This suggests low needs in this area:

I feel free of all that, I feel free of the relationships, I feel free of having to think long term with this organisation, I am free of having to plan a career which is incredibly tedious. It's now much more straightforward. (Geoffrey)

'I guess with it [independence] also comes freedom, so going back to the frustrations from before, you're now in charge of your own destiny as it were, so you can do pretty much what you want...you can be a lot more creative and there was that freedom that came with it and the feeling that suddenly the world's a big place. (Nigel)

(4) **Achievement:** all the respondents were focused on achievement and set themselves stretching goals to do this which had sometimes been absent within paid employment. Additionally, a drive to achieve – and to achieve highly – is arguably absolutely essential to survive in the independent sector and for that reason becomes more of a focus than it was in paid employment. This would suggest high needs in this area:

So you don't under-promise, but you definitely over-deliver. And part of that over-delivery is that you work long days. You would have a presence in the organisation. But it's all about over-delivery...there are some guys who would say "I do my seven-and-a-half hours and that's it". That's going to be a problem. We are going to have to struggle through this, because that isn't the way we work. (Sarah)

Only gradually did work start to come through: the odd request for a training course, or a complaint investigation and we would throw heaven and earth at it, almost desperate that the magical consultancy formula that everyone talked about which says 'one piece of work leads on to another' would begin to work for us. (myself).

(5) **Self-development:** Work was seen by the research respondents very much in terms of being synonymous with personal growth. There was indeed a clear sense with all respondents that the move to independence had a strong personal growth element, which had become stunted or was otherwise lacking in paid employment. This strongly suggests high needs here:

There's lots of new and interesting theories and fields out there, that I hadn't really tapped into before because there weren't the opportunities but also the time and the space – so that ability to breath [and] time to reflect on practice which in reality you don't get time to do – but you do when you're your own boss, so that's been quite refreshing. (Nigel)

And I've embarked on a constant process of updating and educating myself [and] I spend a lot of my income investing in my own development. And I've lately started to do something on workplace mediation, because I see that as a possible growth area. So I have taken money out of the business to invest in training... I will continue to do that. (Geoffrey)

Therefore, my research respondents and myself had a particular and similar profile when using the Ritchie and Martin tool (1999) and I would further argue that it was this pattern of motivation – at least in part – that produced the impetus and drive to break the mould of the previous patterns of behaviour concerning paid employment and carry on through to independence. This helps to explain why this group of people were motivated to leave permanent employment with an organisation that was not meeting their needs in some crucial areas. It might have been interesting to have discussed this

motivational profile with the research respondents after I had applied it to their experiences and to have gained their views on my conclusions. However, I only discovered it well after the second set of interviews. In terms of my own experience, I have always known that acting in this way (in other words, to leave a well-paid job for a highly uncertain future) was somehow out of character and different to anything I had ever done before. I used to wonder why I had taken this step: why at all? Why *now*? Looking at clusters of motivators in this way helps me to understand why I acted in the way that I did. One could also begin to understand the confluence of factors and motivators that led Geoffrey to suddenly decide to jump ship one Friday afternoon:

And I walked with nothing. I didn't have a role to go to.....I manoeuvred, manipulated my way out of [my job] and I was gone. I can remember coming back here with no job and no prospect of an income.

For some of the research respondents these were startling events, as described above in the section on 'the moment' in Chapter 3, while for others the transition was a more gradual one. Another way of looking at why people might be motivated to change their circumstances is provided by Victor Vroom (1964) who looked at motivation as being linked to the *expectation* of good outcomes – that is, the rewards that will be received from work. Pettinger (2000:62) notes that this theory of motivation is specifically linked to the individual and how that person perceives their environment. As he puts it:

The individual may have no particular regard for the job that s/he is currently doing, but will nevertheless work productively and effectively at it and be committed to it because it is a stepping stone to greater things; these are the

expectations s/he has of it and so these constitute the basis of his or her efforts and the quality of these efforts. (2000:60)

I have given examples of how my respondents and I came to view the organisations that we worked for, and the gradual withering of expectations in terms of reward or advancement was, as has been demonstrated, a key feature for many. This was certainly an important motivator for independence.

Using another powerful metaphor, Morgan suggests that organisations can become 'psychic prisons', arguing that 'human beings have a knack for getting trapped in webs of their own creation' (1997:215). Geoffrey's escape from his own prison was a dramatic one, perhaps similar to pole vaulting over the wall in broad daylight; others inched their way almost imperceptibly past their guards step-by-step, or negotiated their release, or carefully tunnelled out. In whatever way we all escaped, the image of the organisation as a psychic prison does resonate strongly with the experiences described. Morgan uses the analogy of the cave from Plato's *The Republic* where the people imprisoned in the cave saw the distorted shadows on the walls as reality, whereas the person who was able to leave would begin to understand that it was not so; this person would realise that the shadows were just 'reflections of a more complex reality and that the knowledge and perceptions of his fellow cave dwellers [were] distorted and flawed' (1997:216). However, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get the cave dwellers to accept this were the escapee to come back to try and give a sense of what he had seen outside the cave. They might also be fearful of any attempt to change their reality. Morgan argues that, like the cave dwellers, those who inhabit organisations have their

own structures, rules, perceptions and behaviours which are not just organisational but are also ‘personal in the most profound sense’ (1997:245). He goes on to observe:

Any attempt to change these aspects of the organisational world can thus mobilise all kinds of opposition as individuals and groups defend the status quo in an attempt to defend their very selves...structures and rules may be crucial in *creating* boundaries and rigidities that help to symbolise a manager’s sense of who he or she really is. (1997:245)

This ties in with my earlier observation that my research respondents and I all had low needs in the Ritchie and Martin motivation profile framework under the ‘structures’ category – namely, that we found organisational rules and structures restrictive and wanted freedom from these. Perhaps we could sense the distortions thrown by the light outside the cave before we had even escaped. Perhaps we could sense the real danger (as Morgan says) of ‘the groupthink and cognitive traps that [can] lock us into ineffective and undesirable patterns of behaviour. (1997:244).

(vi) Identities – free, shaped or entrapped?

So far throughout this thesis, the view that individuals are able, at least to some extent, to make rational choices about their own situations and are free, again to some extent, to act to change them has been a central tenet of my argument. However, Janette Webb (2006) explores a range of perspectives on agency and structure within sociology and social theory. She firstly defines the concept of ‘self’ in the modernist perspective as being:

The experience of a singular, embodied and mortal being, with the creative capacities to act reflexively and purposively in relation to themselves and others, to consider alternative courses of action and exercise some control over actions, and to strive deliberately to change circumstances. (2006:16)

This more or less describes how I have viewed and presented the research respondents and myself up to this point: as individuals who are reasonably free to make their own choices and who can act with a purpose to change their own circumstances. Nonetheless I also agree with Webb when she observes that much of selfhood is tacit and ‘not readily available to conscious thought’ (2006:16). She goes on to suggest that ideas of *social identity* are helpful as they provide a strong link between structure and agency – in any one day we can conceivably be (for example) consumers, parents, employees, cricket supporters, patients and managers. These identities have both personal and public dimensions to them and a current fundamental debate in modernist and postmodernist thinking is, as Webb puts it, about whether identity is ‘entirely determined by social forces or is entirely individual and self-willed’ (2006:17). When considering a statement such as this, describing the opposite ends of a spectrum of thought, my tendency would be to suspect that the reality may lie somewhere between these two points, but a further exploration of this territory is called for before coming to any such instant judgement. It has much relevance to any explanation of the experiences of the research group.

Postmodern strands of thought would tend to emphasise the dissolution of the boundaries between agency and structure and would also argue that shifting identities ‘perpetually reassembled around new, discontinuous narratives’ (Webb 2006:18) reflect

human activity and behaviour better than any notion of a core selfhood. This argument has some force when it is considered in terms of identity issues for myself and my research respondents. When a person says (for example) that he or she is a ‘service manager with the local authority’ this provides a clear and reasonably stable element to one’s individual identity, although it is time limited and linked specifically and indissolubly to a particular post and a particular organisation. However, as an independent person, such things are much more transient. One day an individual can be an associate consultant working with Deloitte (a large multi-national management consultancy), but this is not necessarily what the same person ‘is’ the next day; at that point they might be a trainer working for a local authority. In the early days of my own business, before my business partner and I adopted the lighter and more overarching identity of ‘social care consultant’ and attached it to all that we did professionally, this lack of a fixed identity felt disorientating and, at times, struck hard at our sense of who we were. I have described earlier the strange feeling that I experienced a day or two after I had left my paid job:

This was an extraordinary experience. For us it meant a profound and significant change that immediately impacted upon our lives in several ways. The following Monday we met and almost couldn’t believe what we had done – everyone else was going into work and we were not...the second thing that immediately pressed in on us was the daunting sense of open space and free time. On one level we had nothing to do. There were no immediate obligations on us, no deadlines to meet, no reports to write, no meetings to attend. This was both liberating and troubling.

(Myself)

This certainly points to a very strong connection between notions of selfhood and identity being linked to organisational structures. Indeed, as illustrated in Chapter 3, most of the respondents were left with a sense of bereftness after leaving large organisations, and all of us have, in some shape or form, gone on to create a looser organisation around us defined more by shifting networks than fixed hierarchies. It is from these looser but still visible structures that we have remade our work identities, and I will return to this line of analysis in due course.

Whilst I am wary of most forms of determinism as I have said at times elsewhere in this thesis, I would accept that how we think and act as individuals is shaped and influenced by all sorts of considerations and factors, including our background and upbringing, our education, who we know, the organisation that we work for and many others. It is difficult to sustain an argument that we are entirely free agents operating rationally and purposively in all that we do. In any event, much of our thinking and doing comes from unconscious roots and is difficult to explain. However, the denial – or near denial – of some form of free agency and selfhood is not something to which I can subscribe. Webb argues that ‘both modernist and postmodernist analysts of identity and organisations have...reproduced a deterministic account of identity’ (2006:26) where organisations colonise the self. I now want to explore how this analysis compares with the experiences of myself and my research respondents.

In the moment of transition from an employing organisation to one created by the independent practitioner, it is important to recall the feelings of some of the respondents. The sense of bonds being released is palpable, although this was

experienced in different ways by different people. For some, this release was a result of the individual's personal action, whilst others felt less in control.

Margaret simply said: *'I am cast adrift actually.'*

I detected some, perhaps sub-conscious, nervousness from Nigel: *'It felt OK, it felt exciting...I had the potential to be a lot freer and so with that it was a sense of freedom...there was no anxiety really. There was some, I guess, low level anxiety...but I felt fairly sure that I would be OK.'*

Geoffrey had forced the issue because of: *'Disillusion with organisations in general, feeling that I wasn't in control, being re-organised just that one too many times, I suppose'.* He recalled his definite feelings as he became independent: *'I feel free of all of that. I feel free of the relationships....I feel free of having to think long term with this organisation'.*

Writing over a century ago, Max Weber came to the conclusion that, in the modern age, organisations would shape individual identity as never before and that the growth of bureaucracies would see an increasing emphasis on the use of instrumental reason to guide organisational thinking and actions. Webb explains that this way of thinking 'entails the calculation of the most expedient means to achieve pre-determined goals' (2006:21). Weber's view was that other forms of thinking and judgement, for example those based on ethics or politics, would become secondary or even eclipsed by this way of thinking which simply looked at ways of maximising output. The result of this would be that 'instrumental reason would come to be valued as an end in itself, dominating all

forms of organisation, and resulting in a new sort of identity: that of the expert without spirit, psychically imprisoned by techniques of rational calculation' (2006:22). This is Weber's iron cage of rationality in which human agency would be imprisoned and where the freedom of people to act in an autonomous way would become ever more constrained in a world increasingly dominated by large bureaucratic organisations and their ways of thinking. There has been much comment of both an academic and a more polemical nature concerning the domination of many aspects of life by multi-national companies and the reach of these into our conscious and unconscious worlds. To take just one example, Law (2006) argues strongly that modern pharmaceutical companies routinely determine which health care problems are researched (and which research is published) on the basis of their own market considerations, rather than medical need. In this way, they contribute to the definition of what is a health care problem and what is not. On a much smaller scale, the experience of the research respondents and myself demonstrates a considerable yearning to escape from the hold of bureaucratic organisations where much of what one does serves the interest of the organisation and is aimed principally at satisfying its objectives. One cannot push this analogy too far or it breaks down – I doubt that it can be stated that social care organisations ignore ethical or political considerations; indeed one could argue that ethical considerations emanating from the professional base of social work have the potential to create considerable tensions within organisations. Nonetheless, one can argue the case that, for example, the recent extreme emphasis on inspections, targets, measures and getting the job done efficiently has contributed to a general decline in morale and job satisfaction. Humphreys (2003) paints a graphic picture of the aftermath of an inspection where the LA in question had been deemed not to be performing adequately:

It was clear that their morale had been severely damaged. Several interviewees were planning to 'jump the sinking ship' with some commenting on the tragedy or irony whereby the best staff would be the first to obtain good positions elsewhere, and one senior manager whose position was untenable told us that suicide might be the only way out. (2003:732)

The need to remove oneself from a situation where an individual does not feel good about the job that he or she is in and the identity that goes along with it was one of the key motivators for my group of respondents.

Modernist ideas, including as they do an evolving and yet linear pattern of organisational development that can be somehow quantified are for the most part rejected by post-modern thinkers such as Michel Foucault. His perspective emphasises discontinuity, as Sarup (1993) explains: 'Foucault is against any kind of global theorizing. He wants to avoid totalizing forms of analysis and is critical of systematicity' (1993:58). This undermines and problematises traditional historical analysis and, for me, demands careful consideration. Sarup continues:

Whereas traditional or "total" history inserts events in grand explanatory systems and linear processes, celebrates great moments and individuals and seeks to document a point of origin, genealogical analysis attempts to establish and preserve the singularity of events, turns away from the spectacular in favour of the discredited, the neglected and a whole range of phenomena that have been denied a history. (1993:59)

Foucault develops a vision and an explanation of power and modern society that is very different to the modernist, continuous progressive narrative approach of many historians. He locates – for example – an important disconnection in the nineteenth century when ways of thinking about and dealing with madness changed within a few decades as the rational and increasingly influential disciplines of law and medicine developed rapidly in the newly industrialised world. Sarup states that, at that point, ‘the dialogue between reason and unreason was broken. There is now only the monologue of reason *on* madness’ (1993:63). In the same time period, the brutal but inconsistent punishments that occurred in pre-industrial society were quickly replaced by regimes of discipline and control as governments ‘understood that it was more efficient and profitable to place people under surveillance than to subject them to some exemplary penalty’ (1993:67). Foucault argues that modern society has evolved from such roots and that the development of organisational power and its shaping of individual identity have to be seen in that context. He uses the striking and sinister image of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon to describe how such disciplinary power has become internalised with individuals policing their own actions. The all-seeing nature of the panopticon ‘allows for the efficient exercise of power...according to a diagram of visibility so as to ensure that at each and every moment any subject might be exposed to invisible observation’ (Smart 1985:89). Foucault believes that such disciplinary surveillance has become deeply rooted in modern societies and a strong case could be made that social care organisations are part of this apparatus of power and that the experience of their service users bears this out. Organisations such as social care, the NHS, the benefits agency, probation and the police, sometimes working together in co-operation, could be argued to be constantly scrutinising the actions of such people in most aspects of their lives and enforcing disciplinary sanctions when the correct standards (as defined by

them) are not maintained. In the meantime, serious structural inequalities remain rooted in society. Dominelli (1996) laments that the competency approach to social work practice has had an oppressive effect on service users and concludes that:

In abstracting individuals....from their social context and the political realities of life, competency based approaches perpetuate a postmodernist trap – the inability to recognise and deal with structural inequalities – a prime concern of social work. (1996:173)

It can also be argued that the research respondents and I experienced a different sense of oppression when working in our own organisations and that our own self-discipline in the pursuit of obviously irrational or inconsequential objectives eventually became too much to bear. As Philip commented: *'I think for me it was the political environment that alienated me big time...I had to get out of that environment to be able to do stuff that I believe in'*.

However, to argue this point in this way strongly implies, once more, that we as individuals are in some ways in charge of our own destinies. Opinions on this vary, but authors such as Webb and Sarup suggest strongly that post-modern thinkers such as Foucault (particularly in his earlier work) believe that resistance of this kind in fact only serves to further define the source of power and confirm its authority. Webb comments that:

Weber's vision of pervasive rationalisation has it seems been outflanked by an iron cage reinforced by the surveillance and disciplinary power/knowledge

discourses of government and corporate organisations, which are invisible and totalising because they are in the soul of their subjects. (2006:25)

This is to suggest that regimes of power have such a hold over us as individuals that not only do they shape our thinking and determine our identities, but also they can never be escaped from, not even when one tries to be critical of their workings. Such acts of resistance only serve to refine this disciplinary power further and increase its hold over individuals. Such thinking has led to the view, expressed by Hochschild (1983) and others that organisations colonise identities by managing all aspects of working life including, for example, self-evaluation, appraisal and teamwork processes as well as the actual work and the work environment. Gabriel (2005) comments pithily on this issue as follows:

Today's organizations resort to far subtler, yet deeper, controls, controls that are pervasive and invasive, that do not merely constrain a person but define a person. These include cultural and ideological controls (emphasising the importance of customer service, quality and image), structural controls (continuous measurements and benchmarking, flatter organisational hierarchies), technological controls (electronic surveillance of unimaginable sophistication) and spatial controls (open plan offices, controlled access) (2005:17)

Dissent is dealt with by absorbing potential troublemakers into corporately managed processes for resolution or by disciplining and marginalising malcontents. In this way, one's identity becomes largely shaped by organisational requirements and demands. Webb argues that the result of this is 'a normalised, docile and disciplined self, with a

malleable identity: the humanist Enlightenment idea of a rational, autonomous moral agent becomes an invention of power, rather than an achievement of modernity' (2006:25). If one accepts this argument then the iron cage has once again closed upon us; who we are, all that we do and perhaps even our every waking thought is contained within – is indeed a product of – a discourse of power from which we cannot escape, not even to criticise it. However, this poses the question of how an individual can begin to describe something that he or she is unaware of, and surely to begin to understand that one might be trapped within such a discourse is akin to awakening, still perhaps feeling some oppression, but also being aware of increasing freedom. In this way, an individual may begin to differentiate their core identity from such a totalising and oppressive force. In some small way, I would argue that the awakening of consciousness that my research respondents and I have experienced – that they were free to act to change their circumstances – might be akin to such an awakening. However, I strongly contend that this process was a considerable struggle.

Margaret Archer (2000) strongly counters and challenges the anti-humanist conclusions which are implicit in both the Foucault and the Weber writings. She comments on postmodernism:

Humanity is besieged on all sides by those who want the new millennium to open as the aftermath of the Death of Man...humanity itself was next to be evacuated of all its powers which were then to be accredited to disembodied texts, the abstract interplay of signs and the vacuity of eternally deferred meanings. (2000:315)

Archer mounts an impassioned defence of human agency, criticising ‘sociological imperialism’ for sucking the life out of humankind ‘to leave a void behind to be filled with social forces’ (2000:316) and equally levelling a charge at ‘Modernity’s Man’ who is left with ‘instrumental rationality alone, that is the purely mechanical ability to fit means to ends, at which we are probably less proficient than the current generation of computers’ (2000:316). However, most of Archer’s criticism is reserved for those ‘in the Academy’ who would reduce human agency to the point of near invisibility. She notes that postmodernism does, in the end, baulk at the absolute demolition of ‘man’ and that Foucault – for example – returned to the position in his later works that human agency was capable of some resistance. Archer sees this as a rather grudging concession, commenting rather caustically that the postmodern project had decided, after all, that ‘human beings were necessary, but they were not necessary very much’ (2000:3).

When I consider the choices facing my research respondents and myself, and the options that we considered and agonised over and the actions that we then took (in contrast to others who were in similar positions but who did not take similar actions), I have to conclude that human agency played a significant part. However, the evidence from the interviews that independence – whether in the anticipation, moment or retrospect, or all three – was for all of us a defining and major step to take, reminds me also of the power of organisations to shape our identities and to hold us close to them.

Ultimately therefore, after considering these matters in greater depth, my own view on whether identity is, in Webb’s words ‘entirely determined by social forces or is entirely individual and self-willed’ (2006:17) lies somewhere between the two opposite end-of-

spectrum positions outlined at the beginning of this section. My position is a pragmatic one. I do not see human agency as completely free and unfettered, but I equally cannot accept the postmodernist position of a shadowplay of shifting identities rooted in little other than organisational or other sources of power.

These considerations are important ones for this research and will, to some extent, begin to shape my conclusions. It has been important to consider other and radically different perspectives on the matters of human agency and identity. I have used these to test and challenge my own emerging findings from the interviews with my research respondents. My conclusion is that I do consider that individuals have multiple social and work identities and that some of these do indeed fluctuate and shift and are also shaped by external phenomena such as organisations. However, I also believe, in line with Archer (2000) that there is a core of selfhood that is immutable, free to act consciously and purposively, and which is, to some extent, an essential element of existence which can act independently of organisational, societal or any other structure.

(vii) From Hierarchy to Networks

Moustakas (1990) demands that the researcher periodically reflects on his or her emerging findings through the research phases of immersion, incubation and illumination and reproduces these as a 'narrative depiction' (1990:32). Such activity will, over time, become part of the creative synthesis. I therefore offer the following interim narrative to try and gather together some of the common experiences of the research respondents and myself over the period of transition to independence. One of the main features of this is a move from operating within a hierarchical structure to

operating within a network and I will explore this in more detail following this summarising passage.

As partially free agents, at times unaware, more often dimly aware or sometimes acutely aware of pressures and motivations coming from all sorts of sources pushing us in various directions, we have planned our way out of organisations, or stumbled almost accidentally out of them, or some of us have ejected ourselves from them in a more dramatic fashion. When we find ourselves outside, we sense that we are in a large, echoing and empty hall. We feel different levels of disorientation and at times are unsure of who and what we are. Relationships now feel different. The limited and reversible step that we have taken seems for most to take on an almost irrevocable quality. We miss the teamwork and the friendships and the maddening but reassuring comfort blanket of the organisation in varying degrees, but all of us relish the sense of freedom and lack of constriction. Most of us feel a sense of relief, but also an acute loss of identity and we look to fixed points in the spaces around us to reorientate ourselves. With this comes a sense of equalisation that tends to grow over time; a sense of shedding previous skins and growing new ones which give us less rigidly ascribed identities, and this in turn allows us access to people and channels of communication that have either been invisible or not available to us in the past. Organisational and hierarchical systems and boundaries feel less powerful and daunting when viewed from the outside and when one's own work identity is no longer regulated, determined and dominated by such structures. What is happening?

What is happening is that this group of independent practitioners has moved from operating almost entirely within an organisational hierarchy to operating and co-

ordinating activities within a far less determinate or rigid structure; chiefly that of the informal network. All of the research group have continued to work closely and regularly with such organisational hierarchies, but are now not truly part of them, nor are they nearly so subject to those organisation's rules or view of the world. The way in which the research group as individual independent practitioners perceive and interact with organisations and the way in which organisations perceive and interact with us as individuals has permanently changed. This in large measure explains the feeling of irrevocability about the step that has been taken by each one of us. However, before the nature of the networks in which my research respondents and I operate is considered in more detail, it is important to point out that each individual had first to establish some corporeality. There is undoubtedly a vivid feeling of nakedness when the newly independent practitioner finds themselves outside an organisation by moving through the portal into the independent world. Significantly, none of the research group felt able or perhaps comfortable enough to simply market themselves as (for example) 'Margaret Jones', full stop. There is little corporeality to such a title and it consequently has little meaning in the world of organisations. Even when the name of the person was used and the new business was effectively just that single person, the business was *always* listed and described as 'AB associates' or 'XY consultancy' or some other descriptor that gave the simple name more substance or embodiment.

This is important in two ways. Firstly, such a title begins to recreate a professional identity that has some substance and which starts to define the individual in a different way from that person's previous identity, as in 'I'm no longer a performance manager with the local authority, I'm an independent consultant' (the type of mantra I repeated to myself at least 50 times a day in the early years until I felt comfortable with it). It also

creates a solid and recognisable entity that others – colleagues, competitors and buyers – can perceive from a distance in the large and less populated space that one now inhabits. However uncomfortable, faintly exotic or ill-fitting such new clothes seemed at first, all members of the research group grew into them in time and were thankful from the very beginning for both the cover and the substance that they provided.

(viii) A Structure of Networks

I explained at some length in the previous chapter how the research group began to prepare for independence by consciously creating networks, and subsequently all have used these networks throughout our independent careers for a variety of purposes; perhaps principally for mutual support, for gaining information and for gaining work. They have become the co-ordinating mechanisms for all these activities and the looser but broader structures within which our newly changed and expanded identities are positioned and situated. All the individuals have re-created structures around themselves, albeit looser ones with a much reduced sense of hierarchy and a much expanded sense of space – but structures nonetheless. It would be close to impossible, if not completely impossible, to operate alone with only entirely random and one-off contacts with others and it seems to me therefore that the development of networks is an absolutely inevitable element of the experience of establishing an independent business. Knoke and Kuklinski (1991) writing in *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks* (1991) comment that:

Network analysis incorporates two significant assumptions about social behaviour. Its first essential insight is that any actor typically participates in a

social system involving many other actors, who are significant reference points in one another's decisions. (1991:173)

The many other actors in the social systems of my research group are other independent people and practices, known individuals within social care organisations, agencies that provide work to independent individuals and organisations, and a range of other players including (for example) people who are initially unknown but who have heard of the reputation of one's organisation from those one does know – and the list can go on.

It is worth emphasising continuity and change at this point; networks are not static. Some network contacts may be more or less permanent, but others evolve over time according to a range of phenomena including the changing orientation and skill base of the independent practice, meeting new people, working with new organisations, ceasing to work for others, disputes and successes – once again, this is not an exhaustive list. Knoke and Kuklinski explain further that:

The set of persons, objects or events on which a network is defined may be called the *actors* or *nodes*. These elements possess some attribute(s) that identify them as members of the same equivalence class for purposes of determining the network of relations among them. (1991:175)

Therefore the network may be constituted for the purposes of information sharing, or for providing employment opportunities, or for mutual support, or for the joining of forces in terms of individuals having the different but complementary skills needed to accomplish a complex task. Typically, in independent social care settings we operate

within several networks of this nature, some of which overlap and some of which have a dual purpose; for example my own business keeps in close touch with a small number of senior managers in organisations where we have worked previously. This network provides us with opportunities for further work, but also operates in an information-sharing capacity with us as the central node – a manager will often approach us to ask if we have experience in a particular area of practice and we can then assist either directly or by putting people in touch with one another. A comment from Simon illustrates how he and another independent practitioner with different but complementary skills have worked together:

One of the options that we pursued was that we'd do some work jointly as she was based in London. We just hit it off and we had complementary skills. I had the social care background and hers was very much accountancy and health service and we did put in a number of joint proposals together.

Powell (1991) puts the nature of such transactions into context by explaining that:

Networks are “lighter on their feet” than hierarchies. In network modes...transactions occur neither through discrete exchanges nor by administrative fiat, but through networks of individuals engaged in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions. (1991:271)

This describes well the new structure of networks that surround my research respondents and myself. Powell then states that ‘a basic assumption of network relationships is that one party is dependent on resources controlled by another and that

there are gains to be had by the pooling of resources' (1991:272). This is true, as the quote from Simon above helps to make clear, and points to something else as well – the establishment of trust. Establishing a business in the social care sector means placing oneself in a network of relationships with others with mutual dependencies. We have the skills and knowledge to do a job for someone and they have the funds to ensure that we can continue to do this job and the connection with others in the field that will assist our reputation to grow further. Furthermore, as independent practitioners together working in the same field we also have to establish a way of working co-operatively with each other. The mortar between the bricks of such transactions and relationships, and certainly for any repeated transactions and ongoing relationships is trust. However, trust itself is not an easy concept to define. Smith (2001) suggests that it becomes active under conditions of 'uncertainty or ambiguity' and furthermore that 'trust serves to guide ethical relations that are not subject to external controls' (2001:291). Both these stipulations would certainly apply to the position of my research respondents and myself. Smith goes on to state that the nature of trust between individuals:

Involves vulnerability since we cannot know that we will not be disappointed and we must surrender something of ourselves – material goods, emotional energy, faith in our judgements, self-respect – to the care of another (2001:291).

This describes succinctly the nature of the ideal relationship that exists between independent practitioner and their customers, and also between individual independent practitioners. I would contend that it is often achieved as self-interest (as much as anything else) renders such trust important. A very good example of this was the trust my own research respondents showed in me through the interview process for this

research. Perhaps their trust in me came so easily partly because it the accepted way of operating between individuals in independent practice.

Trust is therefore a powerful force and explains why so many of us place such a strong value on it. Without trust, networks corrode and decay or become mere conduits for destructive innuendo and gossip.

(ix) Summary of Discussion

This chapter has been pivotal in making a much deeper sense of the research findings. What comes through most of all is a sense of *struggle* and of an ever-ongoing, elemental and fundamental battle between structure and free agency; a struggle that operates on several levels and which can be conceptualised in different ways. I wrote of the tremendous sense of frustration experienced by individuals at the limitations imposed by organisational structures and in particular the unique configuration of organisational characteristics that is common in the modern social care organisation. I posed the question as to why social care organisations had evolved like this and suggested that there were several roots to this phenomenon. These included the distorting impact of a high level of pressure and scrutiny on senior managers so that they were – in an almost literal fashion – turned away from their organisations. There was a real sense in which this created alienation and a deep dissatisfaction for the individual research participants and which directly led to the conviction that they had to escape from underneath the organisation to become heard and to reclaim some autonomy. I created a working archetype of a social care organisation and argued that there were strong parallels between Taylor's scientific management theory principles and the modern day organisation. These seem to me to be particularly apparent in the

clear division of tasks within the organisation and how workers are placed under surveillance by hierarchical and supervisory structures. There is a strong congruence here with Foucault's work – discussed later in the chapter – and with his image of an all-seeing panopticon that enforces compliance and self-regulation and discipline.

I was able to borrow from Gareth Morgan a series of powerful metaphors for organisations and organisational functioning which helped to frame and explain some important research findings. His metaphor of the organisation as a machine – which can be seen, at least partially, in modern social care organisations which are structured in a bureaucratic way and based on logical principles – has considerable resonance when the research findings of an inflexible organisation struggling with complex issues and failing to deal with them are considered. Many people have a sense of organisations struggling and failing to come to grips with their complex internal environments because not enough attention (or not enough of the right kind of attention) is being paid to changing circumstances, problems arising within the organisation and the views of individuals within on how to tackle these. The individual once again can feel as if he or she is invisible and unheard.

Other factors too led to dissatisfaction amongst the research participants, and Herzberg's work on factors that cause satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the workplace was helpful and very much correlated with some of my findings. There was plenty of strong evidence that factors such as company policy, relationship with supervisors and conditions at work had a negative bearing on myself and the research participants, whereas some key 'satisfaction' factors were absent – and in particular achievement, recognition and advancement. I was however aware that an increasingly insistent

question was being posed at this point, as to why *this* group of individuals left paid employment for independence when many others who had experienced similar problems and frustrations did not. My conclusion here was that the research group shared a particular motivational profile, and using the work of Ritchie and Martin in this area, allied to the voices of my research respondents, I was able to demonstrate what this profile consisted of. Particularly important were the research participants' 'high needs' in the motivational areas of interest, achievement and self-development and their 'low needs' in terms of requiring a surrounding structure. It is my view that this particular configuration or constellation of factors differentiated my research group from others with a range of similar experiences.

The subsequent discussion on identities continued the theme of struggle and took this to a new level, using the classical structure and agency dichotomy and debate – which posed the issue as to what extent we can be free agents, or whether much of what we do is determined by the power of organisations and the structures and surveillance of modern society. Even further than that, the question was posed as to whether individuals have become colonised by the organisations in which they work in and interact with. There was evidence given in support of such an argument. I also explored the linked issue regarding to what extent individual identities were shaped by the organisations within which people work or have worked. This was counterbalanced by arguments that insist that there is at least partial freedom to act as individuals, and not just in terms of resisting organisational power. We are all clearly shaped and influenced by all manner of structural artefacts, but in the end I have agreed with those who have strongly argued that there is a core of selfhood which is free to act independently of such phenomena.

My conclusion is that networks have replaced hierarchy as the dominant form of organisation in the independent world of my research participants. This has both changed their view of the social care world and that world's view of them and also accounts for my experience. Nonetheless, none of us can meet the world unclothed and alone and therefore have all of us have created a corporeal body (our own organisation) to serve as the garment of legitimacy. In this way, we have re-created a structure, albeit much looser and less hierarchical and based on different values (such as trust), but a structure nonetheless.

These considerations will inform the concluding section of this research project – that of the creative synthesis and where I summarise the elements of what I believe is my original contribution to the knowledge in this field.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

(i) Introduction

This concluding chapter will undertake three main tasks. I will firstly and briefly reaffirm my own positioning as a researcher and then the first task will be to relate and link my research back to the framework of the Moustakas phases of research. Through this process I hope and intend to achieve the creative synthesis that Moustakas puts forward as the conclusion of all research projects using his methodology.

The second task will be to critique my own research, both in terms of the methodology that I have used and also in terms of what – in hindsight and in retrospect – I might have done differently. I have signposted some of these issues throughout the research text (for instance, how it would have been helpful to have shared the conclusions of my discussion on the motivational profile with the research respondents) and will pull the threads of these issues together in this section.

The third and final task will be to identify what I see as my original contribution to knowledge that has emerged from completing this research. Once again, there has been some discussion of this matter in the text and particularly in Chapter 4. I will bring these themes together in this final section.

(ii) A Reaffirmation on Positioning

I have, at various points throughout this research project, sought to position myself as a pragmatist, not believing in an immutable and knowable external reality, yet being convinced that that many aspects of experience can be known and at least partially

shared by individuals. Crotty's definition of the interpretivist approach is very close to my position, where the researcher 'look(s) for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (1998:67).

I want to re-state this again, right at the beginning of this concluding section. If I did not believe this, it seems to me that there would have been little point in conducting and completing this research. I am aware that many in the academic and research community do not share this positioning and indeed, would be critical of it. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) comment on issues of positioning and consider the views of the 'trouble-makers' (2009:3) whose ranks include postmodernists, post-structuralists, and discourse analysts. They see as trouble-makers those who problematise quantitative and mainstream qualitative research methods and who 'explicitly or implicitly leave their readers despairing or irresolute vis-a-vis empirical research' (2009:3). I have experienced some of this feeling of near-despair at times throughout the process of this research and have indeed, at various times, considered the views of those (such as Foucault) who do not really subscribe to a notion of a knowable external reality or, in a closely linked matter, the existence of a 'self', other than as a fragile construct governed by and dependent on external forces. In fact, and as so often, exploring these difficult frontiers eventually expanded my thinking and added to the depth and richness of the matters that I was considering and despair was left behind. Nonetheless, my defining view on this for the purposes of this research project is summed up well by Alvesson and Skoldberg's comments on this matter:

We stubbornly claim that it is pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a reality beyond the researcher's egocentricity and the ethnocentricity of the

research community (paradigms, consciousness, text, rhetorical manoeuvring) and that we as researchers should be able to say something insightful about this reality. (2009:3)

I do believe that there is a reality beyond simply my own thoughts on the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field and that this reality is, at least partially, shared by my research respondents. My aim is indeed to understand subjective knowledge within a unifying context.

(iii) Returning to Moustakas

At the outset of this research project, I used a quote from Moustakas describing heuristic research as:

A process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. (1990:9)

He adds most critically that:

The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge. (1990:9)

Reflecting back on this now, I think that this accurately describes the process I have been through while conducting and writing up this research. As the project comes to an

end, one main task left to do is to pull the threads together into a creative synthesis, as Moustakas describes:

The researcher....put(s) the components and core themes into a creative synthesis. This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or some other creative form. (1990:32)

Fleetingly tempting though it might be to contemplate simply writing a poem or painting a picture to sum up and crystallise the meanings of my research project, I have decided to concentrate on narrative depiction in this conclusion. However, I intend to, once more, employ the passage of time as I draw the threads together. Moustakas's first five temporal phases of research – Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination and Explication – will become my vehicle and structure for exposition and sense-making throughout this concluding section, in pursuit of the achievement of the sixth: that of the concluding Creative Synthesis. Moustakas intends the creative synthesis to be the culmination of any heuristic research project, as the researcher comes to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of his or her material. He observes that:

Knowledge of the data and a period of solitude and meditation focusing on the topic and question are the essential preparatory steps for the inspiration that eventually enables a creative synthesis. (1990:32)

This indwelling is absolutely necessary because:

The researcher must move beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that a comprehensive expression of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realised. (1990:32)

Throughout this conclusion, I intend to demonstrate the gradually deepening and widening understanding that I have gained of the meanings attached to my research question as this research process matured. To accomplish this I will reflect on my journey over time using the structure of the Moustakas phases of research. This will remain true to Moustakas's fundamental intention that:

Heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery; the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration....I begin the heuristic investigation with my own self-awareness and explicate that awareness with reference to a question or problem until an essential insight is achieved, one that will throw a beginning light onto a critical human experience. (1990:11)

In this way, and by externalising my self-dialogue, I also hope to avoid the trap which Sandy Sela-Smith identified when she reviewed 28 pieces of research that had claimed to use the Moustakas approach, and commented that:

The majority did not report personal, subjective experience. Instead of having the process determine the phases, nearly all seem to have been conducted by a time

clock, a calendar and by procedural rules.....the self-search within an experience is replaced by what I interpret as the phenomenological explication of the definition of an experience. (2002:71)

She explains this by suggesting that Moustakas pulls his punches at the critical moment in his own depiction of loneliness by almost imperceptibly moving from the question ‘What is *my* experience?’ to ‘What is *the* experience?’ and as discussed in Chapter 3, I do not accept that criticism. I would suggest that Moustakas’s intention is that the heuristic approach incorporates both, and that its strength is exactly that: it *is* autobiographical and yet is *not* narcissistic or self-indulgent. I do wonder whether the 28 researchers identified by Sela-Smith concentrated on ‘procedural rules’ because that is expected within more traditional research methodology and is therefore a more widely accepted and safer option than Moustakas’s excursion into subjective experience; and particularly the subjective experience of the primary researcher.

The conclusion of the heuristic research process is an account of the experience and its many meanings – the meanings that the researcher as an involved individual comes to, from the synthesis of his or her own experience *and* that of others. The many meanings discovered in this research project have a richness and depth and reflect the subjective experiences and realities of myself and the research respondents, but also have a unifying thread – that is, there were many aspects of the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England that, as identified earlier in this thesis, were common and shared amongst the research group. I will not attempt to define a single ‘essence’ of the experience, as the act of creating such a statement or depiction would reduce the voices to one monophonic note and detract

from the chorus of views and expressions that has both harmony and dissonance, and which is far greater than the sum of its parts.

(iv) Creative Synthesis – Initial Engagement

The genesis of this research lies back in what feels for me now almost the mists of time. Actually in chronological terms, my very first thoughts about undertaking such a project occurred less than ten years ago, and if I look at photographs of myself taken at that time I notice little difference between then and how I look now – a little more hair perhaps back then, or a maybe a few less wrinkles here and there – but fundamentally the same. It's not like looking at pictures of myself dating back 20 or 25 years. Nonetheless, the process of this research has changed me enormously. When I reflect back now on my earliest personal passages written some years ago, I marvel at what I thought I had achieved, most of which vanished like a puff of smoke as soon as I left my paid post. I think I had vastly overstated to myself the impact that I thought I had made in my last paid post with an LA. I say this in no spirit of bitterness or even particular self-criticism – I simply have a more sophisticated perspective now about how organisations work and their impact on people. In other ways I have gained hugely in confidence and understanding, although the words of the Paul Weller song *The Changingman* which say 'the more I see, the more I know; the more I know, the less I understand' trouble me sometimes. Nonetheless, I can still get in touch with the sense of doubt that I felt back then, about who I was and what I was doing, and the awakening of a real urge to change my experience and to do something different. The evolution of my business and of this research project has in some ways been inseparable and indissoluble; almost one and the same thing. This is partly because they have followed

almost exactly the same time continuum, but mainly because the latter is the evolving expression of the experience of the former – two sides of the same coin.

Moustakas says that:

Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem or question that represents a critical interest and area of search. The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications. (1990:27)

This is why I chose the heuristic approach as my methodology of choice. I *did* have existing within me a topic that represented a critical interest and I *did* have an overwhelming desire to answer it: why was I planning to leave a secure and well paid job for the vagaries and unpredictability of life in the independent field? What were the motivators? This was out of character for me up until that point and, almost literally, I did not know why I was doing it. I sensed also, even at that stage, that these questions had wider social meanings that might be shared by others and be significant to others as well as just having personal implications. My initial engagement grew to the point where I did leave my post and (almost simultaneously) commenced this research project to try and answer that question. I did not just want to understand why I had acted as I had – I also wished to hear and understand the experiences of other people, in order to add context and depth to my own evolving thoughts on this matter. Out of this came the research question and out of the research question came the desire to start to ask questions of others – for instance: ‘Tell me of your first thoughts about independence.’ By that time, my initial engagement in the subject had deepened my thinking and I had

started to form some tentative (and then gradually stronger) views on the changing nature of organisations and on the social care sector generally.

One thing that still remains a puzzle for me is why there was such a strong pre-existing urge for me to understand and research these matters, well before I had ever heard of Moustakas, but once again he seems to address this thought directly:

The initial engagement invites self-dialogue, an inner search to discover the topic and question. During this process one encounters the self, one's autobiography, and significant relationships within a social context. (1990:27)

Such statements illustrate the reasons why the Moustakas heuristic approach was the methodology that seemed to fit with what I wanted to do. I sensed right at the beginning that there was a need to explain to myself why I had acted in the way that I did and that I was being driven by forces that I could glimpse, but which I did not properly understand. I also sensed that there was likely to be a connected common experience (or as Moustakas puts it, a 'social meaning') with a much wider significance than just my own internal promptings and intuitions. I truly did want to:

Discover from within the spectrum of life, experiences that will clarify and expand knowledge of the topic and illuminate the terms of the question. (1990:27)

(v) Creative Synthesis – Immersion

The immersion stage is where 'everything becomes crystallised around the question' and the researcher is able to 'live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it'

(1990:28). For me, this was a long process and occurred mainly in the early years of my independent practice. The early part of the immersion process was synonymous with what I was doing on a day to day basis. I was, quite literally, living ‘the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England’. As time went by, but before I started to select and interview my research respondents, my understanding began to deepen and I was able to use the concepts and processes of heuristic research to do this, particularly self-dialogue and tacit knowing. At this point I began to make notes of those sudden fleeting shafts of insight that one gets (and which signify tacit knowledge) when a connection lights up. An example of this was when I went to a meeting of senior managers in an authority where I was working and could see how influenced they were by short term tactical and political concerns. All their considerable talents and energies were being used on what I felt were distracting and irrelevant trivia. This started to make me think much more deeply about the power of organisations and how they shape, influence and control people’s thinking. I remember feeling a sense of unease about this, but also immediately understanding that they were trapped in what Foucault (1995) would call a discourse of power where the organisation determines how these intelligent people think and act, without there being much conscious awareness of this process. I knew that my perspectives, from an external point of view, were beginning to change and that insights such as these were an increasingly important part of the experience of being independent.

I recall clearly that over time, such immersion in these matters on a simply personal level gradually grew frustrating and I felt there was even the possibility of becoming sterile. I needed some input and thinking other than my own. Moustakas rightly reminds the researcher that an important part of the immersion phase is being:

Alert to all possibilities for meaning and enter[ing] fully into life with others wherever the theme is being expressed or talked about: in public settings, in social contexts, or in professional meetings. (1990:28)

The time had come to think about making connections with some research respondents. As I write this, I am aware of something else. I do not want to give the impression that all was seamless, methodical and planned, because that was not the experience. Moustakas reminds us that the ‘dawning of awareness may be refreshing or peaceful, or it may be disturbing or even jarring’ (1990:13). My experience of immersion was generally more in the disturbing and jarring category, and I am reminded of Carl Jung’s entreaty ‘not out, but through’ made to one of his patients who was experiencing a series of difficult life events that was threatening her sanity. What he was saying was that the only way to fulfilment, inner peace and understanding was to experience the pain and to work through it, rather than running away from it. This for me describes the whole process of research from beginning to end, but perhaps particularly this immersion period. Rather like one of Shostakovich’s early symphonies, themes and thoughts would emerge, disappear, become lost in a cacophony of sound, be forgotten, be remembered again, vie and compete against one another, seem crucially important only to become trivial again a moment later, and the whole cycle would be repeated endlessly, sometimes driving me to distraction or even close to despair. Moustakas comments that the researcher may even be immersed in the material while sleeping and dreaming, and that was certainly true: I would sometimes wake with a bright idea (which I sometimes took to immediately jotting down on a piece of paper) that somehow seemed to make sense, as if my unconscious processes while I was asleep had

been continuing to mull over an issue from the previous day or week. Interestingly, my memory of the usefulness of these nocturnal perambulations and accompanying notes is that they were in fact less than helpful and that, with the dawning of the day and full consciousness, I would either find that I could not make sense of what I had written or that, if I could, that there was not much that was original or useful in these jottings. However, I do remember clearly that this was definitely a stage or phase, and that when I started to interview my respondents and to record, sift and sort the data, this frenetic and slightly disturbing semi-conscious processing largely faded away. I would say in retrospect that it was probably a transitional stage from self-immersion to immersion in a wider set of experiences and it did help me to start to identify and focus on what I wanted to know from others.

The second part of the immersion phase was more structured and (if this is possible with immersion) turned outwards. I knew that to deepen my own understanding I had to talk to others, and that the interplay of conversations and experiences would start to give me a more sophisticated understanding of the experience of becoming independent. I have described towards the end of Chapter 2 how I selected my research respondents and the terms on which I engaged them, so will not repeat unnecessary detail here.

However, by the middle of 2008, that is by the time of my first set of interviews, I knew methodologically, personally and tacitly that I could not simply ask my respondents ‘What is the experience of establishing an independent practice?’ I also had to really *understand* their own stories and what had brought them to that point. Any discussion of the experience that became detached from an understanding of my respondents as individuals would be moving me in the direction of a much purer, more disembodied

phenomenological approach which would focus on trying to define the essence of the experience (singular) itself, rather than understanding the meanings of the experiences (plural) within the context of real lives.

Initially, I was frustrated and a little concerned, as I made clear at the end of Chapter 2, that so much time in all of the first set of interviews was taken up with the research respondents describing their histories and what had brought them to the point of independence. I wonder now why I was so concerned by this, particularly when I had always intended to conduct a further set of interviews. In terms of the process of immersion in the question, I realised over time that the stories of the respondents added enormously to this, as I began to understand why others had been drawn towards independence by a whole range of motivating factors, many of them similar to my own. Something else occurred to me at this point. I knew right from the outset of this research project that I would not really be able to claim that any conclusions I drew from the research question – in terms of the multiple meanings of the experience – would be generalisable to situations outside the experiences of this particular research group. Nonetheless, I also started to understand that the depth and richness of the insights of the research group were producing a whole wealth of meanings concerning the experience of setting up an independent practice – some of which were clearly shared by most or all of the respondents. As I found in the later theorisation, many of these matters (for example on identity change or clusters of motivating factors) later found clear resonances within the academic literature.

Immersion in the question therefore took place in deepening stages – firstly my own immersion in the question and its meanings, followed by the interviews with others that

added perspective, congruence, dissonance, detail and a multiplicity of voices to my growing understanding of the question in all its multi-faceted glory. I was coming to understand the subjective, unique and yet shared experiences of others and how much this was starting to change my own understanding. I could sense and feel that the experiences of others was starting to change me personally in terms of deepening my own understanding and perspective on the matter of establishing an independent practice in the social care field.

(vi) Creative Synthesis – Incubation

I remember thinking and commenting earlier in the research process that the stage of incubation was not really a sequential stage somewhere in between immersion and illumination, but was rather a process that ran from the beginning to the end of the research; in other words, from the first moment that I-as-researcher started thinking about the question to the moment when the research project was deemed complete. A strong case could even be made for this process to continue after the conclusion of the project – why should insights bubbling up from unconscious thought stop or be turned off at that artificial point? This is, of course, true to an extent, but a reading of Moustakas's description of this phase throws further light upon it:

Incubation is the process in which the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question....nevertheless growth is taking place. The period of incubation allows the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness. (1990:29)

The phase culminates ‘in a creative integration’ (1990:29) of the information that has been gathered and incubated and is closely linked with the illumination stage where sense can be made of it and meanings defined.

I had long periods of pausing and reflecting throughout this research project and although I do not think that I was consciously ‘incubating’ (in fact such a conscious process is perhaps inimical to what should be a tacit, internal and unforced occurrence) I do recognise, by looking back and reflecting on it, when this phase of the research mainly took place. I have already mentioned that, after the gathering of all the data from the research respondents, I had a real sense of falling silent and of my conscious processing fading away into the background. This, surely, was my incubation phase. This was the time when I was involved in having the conversations of my research respondents transcribed and reading through them, time after time. At first I could not make much sense of what I was reading, almost as if I was bouncing off the words, although I remember that some phrases stood out and remained in my consciousness, sometimes because of their sheer vividness and starkness. I remember Geoffrey recounting his first moments of independence as being:

A mixture of fear and excitement. The fear was “where the fuck am I going to get some money from?”

Margaret’s phrase ‘*I am cast adrift actually*’ was another sentence that held my attention as I sought, both consciously and unconsciously, to decipher its meaning.

I had a clear sense that I had asked a fundamental philosophical question ‘What is the experience of...’ and that I had gathered a mass of material about this. I read through it again and again. I knew I was not yet at the stage of starting to extract any themes and had to let the information seep into my consciousness and act on me over time. A good analogy would be to liken this process to walking around a dark room where there is initially very little light. One is aware of dim shapes in the darkness and of the large size of the room, having just entered it from a well lit antechamber (that of my own personal experience in the question and its evolving meanings) but at present these shapes have no pattern or definition. One knows that it will take some time to understand what is in the room, and as the light grows, generated by this incubation process, one’s eyes adjust and the shapes begin to gain definition and focus. The incubation phase which led to eventual illumination proceeded in this way and came in two parts – a longer phase after the first set of interviews and a shorter phase after the second set. Gradually, themes emerged and illumination grew. As Van Manen comments:

By the light of such themes we can navigate and explore such universes.
(1997:90)

The physical space – be it universe or room – is perhaps unimportant. What matters is that such themes throw light and that out of this light of understanding emerge the many meanings of the experience. From incubation comes illumination.

(vii) Creative Synthesis – Illumination

Once I had completed both sets of interviews and allowed the contents of them to work on my unconscious and conscious thinking over time, I started to become aware that

themes were beginning to emerge. These eventually and after much thought became captured in the various sub-headings of Chapter 3 under the four main categories: (i) Motivating Factors, (ii) Preparatory Factors, (iii) The Moment and (iv) The Experience of Being Independent.

Moustakas comments that the illumination phase involves:

A breakthrough into conscious awareness of qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question. The illumination process may be an awakening to new constituents of the experience, thus adding new dimensions of knowledge. Or, the illumination may involve corrections of distorted understandings or disclosure of hidden meanings. (1990:29)

For my research journey, the illumination phase was where the meanings of the experience, for each person in the research group, started to become clear. The *meaning* of these meanings – if I may use such a phrase – came later and emerged during the explication process. The stage of illumination is where one discovers and creates ‘a synthesis of fragmented knowledge...or a new discovery of something that has been present for some time, yet beyond immediate awareness’ (Moustakas 1990:30).

As has been my pattern throughout this study, I looked to make sense of what I was uncovering in a more or less chronological order. Van Manen was of great assistance here in distinguishing between incidental and essential themes, and advises researchers that:

In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is. (1997:107)

In some ways this takes the debate back to the ground covered in Chapter 3 concerning the potential reductiveness of searching for essential qualities, but I must re-state again here Van Manen's use of the plural – namely, aspects or qualities of a phenomenon. In fact, it is immediately reductive to have to use language at all, as it does not and perhaps cannot always express the meanings that individuals are trying to convey. The heuristic and phenomenological concept of tacit knowing, of 'knowing more than we can tell' is significant here and Van Manen aptly comments that 'we may have knowledge on one level and yet this knowledge is not available to our linguistic competency' (1997:113). I had this sense sometimes when thinking on my own about the emerging themes and meanings of this research, or sometimes also when speaking to research respondents – it was as if we knew that there was another elusive truth beyond our grasp, but that we could not, literally, put it into words. It is important to me to be able to express my ideas and views clearly and elegantly in language and I have worked hard at the craft of producing the 'phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs' of which Van Manen speaks as a vehicle for the exposition of the meanings of whatever is under discussion. It is frustrating when language cannot be alchemised and wrought into gold and remains stubbornly leaden and earthbound.

Themes and meanings (I see themes as collections of related individual meanings), however, did emerge in abundance during this illumination phase and many of them did indeed constitute the essential aspects or qualities that made the phenomenon of

establishing an independent practice what it was and is. The first emerging facet of illumination concerned the common motivational factors experienced by the research group that pushed them in the direction of independence. Two major and common themes here were a deep and growing sense of disillusion with previous paid employment and a sense, sometimes urgent and sometimes slow burning, of needing to self-actualise by doing something different. Although some of this detail did not emerge until the second set of interviews, when we discussed the experience of being independent, this theme underpinned and lay at the foundation of the experience of establishing an independent practice. A further theme, once these motivators had started to work on people, was the sometimes open and conscious and sometimes subliminal preparation for independence that all of us undertook. The experiences here ranged from avidly reading up on new and interesting subjects (Sarah), contriving a departure from an oppressive organisation (Simon, Geoffrey and Philip), finding like-minded people to support a journey into independence (Margaret), to executing a much more methodically planned and open exit from paid employment (Nigel and myself). No-one became independent completely by accident without any sense of preparation (perhaps Sarah was the closest to this), although the routes out of organisations varied. Moving further through the process, further illumination occurred for me concerning the ‘moment of independence’. As mentioned above, Moustakas cautions that illumination might involve ‘corrections of distorted meanings’ (1990:29) and I think that for me this did occur here. My sense – and for some reason this did not fully change until I had read, re-read and internalised all eleven of the interview transcripts – was that we had all had a defined and clear moment of independence and that this was somehow, to all of the research group, a very significant moment. This view followed on from my feeling that taking a step of this magnitude had to contain a dramatic and memorable ‘moment’

of throwing oneself into the unknown, perhaps akin to performing a parachute jump in front of all one's family, friends and previous colleagues. This, I think, was partly the case, as the first respondent I interviewed (Geoffrey) had indeed, in a metaphorical way, done just this. However, the moment of independence was not always so dramatic, and while I could still always identify motivation and preparation as common themes, sometimes this moment was a quiet and almost imperceptible one and – as in Sarah's and Margaret's accounts – did not involve any drama. Nonetheless, and sometimes only with hindsight, all the research respondents could identify that a major step had been taken.

A further theme – and a very important one – that emerged during the illumination phase was that of the irrevocability of the step taken. None of the research respondents, with the possible exception of Simon, would ever really contemplate going back into paid employment (and in fact Simon has never actually done so). It is as if the very act of becoming independent had, for most of us, closed the door behind us very firmly. Why this was so would become much more clear in the final explication phase of the research.

The most important meanings and themes to emerge from the experiences of the research group of actually being independent concerned the sometimes excruciating balance between the almost wholly positive freedom of independence and the more troubling sense of a fragile and deconstructed identity, particularly strong in the early stages of independence. It became clear to me, during this illumination phase, that this was a fundamental finding of this research project and that I was going to need to

explore it in considerable depth, as evidenced by the in-depth discussion on this matter in Chapter 4.

(viii) Creative Synthesis – Explication

This is the stage of true meaning-making – of drawing out and making sense of the unique qualities and meanings of the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field in England. When these meanings were shared, or partially shared by research respondents, it added depth and weight to them. The first stage of explication is to identify the core themes and meanings identified in the illumination process as described above. It is then necessary to deepen one's own understanding of these (as I have done) by reading into the wider literature that relates to these emergent meanings and themes and then to use each to inform the other. Moustakas states that the purpose of the explication phase is to:

Fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning.....in explication a more complete apprehension of the key ingredients is discovered. (1990:31)

In the spirit of the creative synthesis of which Moustakas speaks, I have composed a narrative description of the meanings of the experience that draws on this deeper explication process. This account is certainly not intended to create a single essence of the experience of establishing an independent practice within the social care field in England. It is rather to illustrate the unique qualities and meanings of that experience that encompass both the common and shared experiences of the research group and the significant findings created by the discussion and theorisation of the data:

I am an individual who has been shaped by social forces and I have many social identities – two of which are as a person who used to work for a social care organisation and, more importantly, as a person who has now become independent. In a moment I will explain why this has happened. I have many other public, semi-public and private identities which might relate to my personal life as a parent of children, a friend and a partner and as someone who has interests and pursuits. I feel very strongly that I retain a core of selfhood (I am ‘known to myself’ and do not dissolve when I am myself, alone) and I also believe that I have the freedom and autonomy to act as I choose, although I also recognise that my decisions are influenced by a range of factors, some of which I may not always be aware of. I left my old job working for a social care organisation for a mixture of mundane and more transcendental factors: at times I had grown bored and frustrated, sometimes I argued with my boss and sometimes life events pushed me away from a chosen career path. Underneath all these immediate reasons was something else: a need to be heard, a need to do something I want to do, a need to do it well and a need to be free. My confidence used to go up and down and sometimes I did not think I would be able to make the move into independence, but for whatever reason, I got there. At times I never thought I would, and wondered whether such a step was for ‘people like me’. I did prepare in my own way for the move from working as a paid employee to being independent. I talked to others who had done the same thing and I thought about what I might need. Sometimes I tried out things in my old job that helped me to understand that I was becoming ready for such a move. I sense that others in a similar position feel the same as me about becoming independent and that there are common – and different – experiences for all of us. I am interested in this.

When I finally became independent the world changed completely. I knew that it would change, but I did not know how much. I used to think that I could go back to working for a big organisation if it did not work out, but I really don't think that this is a possibility now, unless I was on the breadline. The experience has transformed me. I sometimes used to feel scared but I have gradually grown in confidence and feel a new sense of energy. In the early days I sometimes did not really know who I was, but as I have grown in knowledge and experience, that has started to change. I wasn't really prepared for that crisis of identity. I did not realise how much of my previous 'self' had been defined by what I did before, and by who I was in my old organisation. I felt quite naked for some time after this, although creating a new organisation that was mine helped with this and gave me a platform on which to build. Over time, as my organisation has become known, and as I have started to build up a network of relationships with others, I have experienced the slow creation of a new identity. I have exchanged one organisation and my identity within that organisation for a new organisation and an identity with which I feel increasingly comfortable. My relationships with others – both other independent people and colleagues in organisations – are built on trust and a feeling that we stand or fall together.

It is only by becoming independent that I fully realise why I needed to leave my old organisation. Not only had I become stale and jaded, but in retrospect there were other things that were really getting me down about working as an employee. I had to mind what I said to whom and sometimes got caught up in other people's wars. My creative powers had become dull with under-use. I realise now that social care organisations are probably the same as other organisations and are not really responsive to change

from below. Senior managers are remote, have other agendas, and do not listen. I could probably have told them what was wrong with the organisation and indeed I tried to, but no-one would listen. One of the big differences now, and it is about being independent, is that people do listen to what I have to say. I no longer feel stifled and trapped by a hierarchy that rises above me and muffles my voice. People on the upper floor can't see or hear much from those in a closed room directly below them. I am now outside and looking in on that upper floor through an open window and my voice is being heard.

Finally, I have often wondered why some of us made the profound and fundamental move to establish our own independent practices while others, who would recognise and share many of our experiences, did not. I think I now know. I understand that motivation is a complex matter, but that by studying what others have written I am also starting to understand that the same experiences will have a different impact on different individuals and what matters to one individual will matter less to another. There are many reasons for this. I think that those of us who have become independent are kindred spirits and have many of the same instincts and reactions to circumstances. I also think that some of the factors that motivated the group of people I know who have become independent are common ones, and that because of who we are, and what we find important, these have produced a similar impulse and motivation for independence that does not exist in others who may have had similar experiences but who remain in paid employment.

(ix) Critique

My critique of this research falls into two areas. The first of these concerns the methodological framework I have used and its limitations. The second area concerns my evaluation of what I might have done differently within the course of this research project, and by doing so, might have added to the quality of this thesis.

(a) Critique of Moustakas's Heuristic Methodology

I have enjoyed using the heuristic approach as pioneered and set out by Clark Moustakas (1990). As I have become closely acquainted with it over time, its strengths and weaknesses have also become much more apparent to me. I believe that it is strong as a methodology which, as Crotty comments, contains the phenomenological insistence of going 'back to the things themselves' (1998:78) in order to create possibilities for new meanings to emerge. It is also strong on its insistence that the researcher and his or her research respondents also have to remain clearly visible and foregrounded throughout the research. This seems to me to bring the research to life and makes it human and personal. As the researcher, this also allows one to maintain an intense focus and interest in the research. However, this factor also makes the heuristic approach (and therefore the researcher who uses this approach) vulnerable to some criticism. The required extensive and autobiographical usage of one's own story and experience, alongside the stories of the respondents, brings with it potential problems of subjectivity and of striking the right balance between one's own account and those of the research respondents. There is a further complex and linked issue here and it relates principally to Sela-Smith's (2002) criticism of Moustakas for sliding almost imperceptibly away from a consideration of 'my' experience to a consideration of 'the' experience in his methodological guidance and her conclusion that other researchers using this approach

have done likewise because of this ambiguity. I have outlined in Chapter 2 why I do not really agree with Sela-Smith's conclusions on this and that a careful use of the heuristic approach by the researcher can encompass elements of both. However, there is a very fine balance to achieve here and I have found myself constantly checking my own work in this regard. I am still somewhat unsure as to whether the balance between my own account and those of the research respondents has always been achieved.

These considerations relate closely in turn to notions of research validity. As discussed in Chapter 2, Moustakas sees validity in heuristic research as being one of meaning:

The heuristic researcher returns again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience to determine whether the qualities or constituents that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings. (1990:33)

This makes validation essentially a private task (as acknowledged by Moustakas) and throws additional responsibility onto the researcher to ensure that this process is rigorous.

A further criticism of the heuristic approach is that the approach to the analysis of the data gathered – the 'Outline Guide of Procedures for Analysis of Data' (1990:51) – is extremely brief and broad brush, almost as if Moustakas intended to come back and add to it at some stage. In this outline guide, Moustakas restates that the data should be analysed via the use of his research phases (immersion, incubation and so on) 'until the universal qualities and themes of the experience are thoroughly internalised and understood' (1990:52). He also suggests checking the emerging findings with the

research respondents (1990:51) before the final phase of creative synthesis takes place (this is something that I did not do and will come back to later in this chapter). I did not find these suggestions on data analysis particularly helpful, owing to their brevity and lack of specific guidance. This is why I used the Van Manen (1997) approach to data analysis for all the reasons I set out in Chapter 2 and its use enabled me to take a much more methodical and systematic approach when handling the extensive and detailed material from my interviews. This then raises in turn the further question of congruence between methodology and method of data analysis, which was also addressed at length in Chapter 2. I think, however, that in the end I was able to overcome these problems.

The final issue with using the heuristic approach, which is more of an observation on the process of research than a criticism of the methodology *per se*, is that the researcher does have to work hard to avoid the essentialist trap. Martin's (2005) observations on this are useful, and while I do not agree with Martin's assertion that the heuristic approach is intrinsically an essentialist one, I do now better understand that it could be easily be interpreted and used in this way, particularly in the creative synthesis phase. I have tried to avoid this by structuring my explication and creative synthesis in accordance with the conclusions drawn from the analysis and discussion of the data in combination with the important commonly held and shared meanings of the experience of establishing an independent practice, as described by the research participants and myself.

(b) Critique of Own Approach

I think that, in retrospect, I commenced this research project too early in my independent career. This meant that the process of the research was very slow for a considerable period of time as I had little experience to work on, and as seen, there was additionally virtually no existing literature to review. In terms of the Moustakas phases of research, I remained in the ‘initial engagement’ phase for a very long time. If I had started the research later when I had begun to gain more experience of independence, I would certainly have built momentum (and confidence) much more quickly. The connections I have now with the very beginning of the research process are shaky: as recounted above in the section of this conclusion on initial engagement, it all feels an age ago. I have also had to discard much of my early material which was too personal and not well enough informed by either my own experience of independence or the experience of others. This led to a period at the end of the early stage of my research where a crisis of confidence occurred, and where I felt (for a short time) that I might not be able to continue with the project.

I think that I would also have benefitted from some structured and taught input at an early stage in the research process, concerning research methodologies and methods, literature searching and other matters pertinent to writing a PhD. Instead, I have had to learn on the job, and on reading through my research I feel that this perhaps shows at times, although my learning has in the end been quite extensive. Nevertheless, I did not feel confident with the outcome of my literature search for this reason and for a very long time was concerned that the paucity of the material gained was perhaps, at least in part, a reflection of my own inexperience in formal research methods. This feeling only

abated when I used professional assistance in this matter, and my learning from this is that I should have done that at an earlier stage.

At the conclusion of the research interviews, I had a persistent thought that I could have asked simpler and more philosophical questions such as ‘Who are you?’ and ‘How did you arrive at where you are now?’ I remain intrigued as to whether such questions would have worked, and my thought at the time was that the use of such questions might take us to a deeper level of meaning and understanding. I am not so sure now, and as I reviewed the interview findings in greater and greater depth and extracted an enormous wealth of data and meanings, I do not really believe that I could have gleaned any more from such an approach.

I could also have usefully discussed and checked out my emerging findings and conclusions with my research respondents and this might well have added to the validation of this research project. Moustakas (1990:51) suggests that this can be helpful. I would have been particularly interested to have discussed the motivational profile created from the use of the tool adapted by Huczynski and Buchanan (2001) with a view to exploring what resonance this profile might have had for the research group. Nonetheless, I am reasonably confident that most individuals would have been in general agreement with the conclusions that I drew, as these correlate well with what respondents told me of themselves and their motivations during the interviews. Nonetheless, such a further set of discussions would probably have added to the depth and richness of this research project. I did not consider undertaking these principally for reasons of time – not only my time but also theirs.

This is because I believe that to have attempted to set up a third set of interviews (which could only have taken place when I had started to shape my conclusions) would have been highly problematic owing to (i) the long gap between the second and third set of interviews, which would have been likely to create a sense of discontinuity, (ii) the further (and quite possibly unwelcome) demand that this would have made on the time of the individuals involved, and (iii) the demands of further data generation and analysis, which would have placed a large amount of additional pressure on the scope and therefore the length of this research project. Any of these factors on their own would have been difficult to manage yet it is quite possible that more than one of them would have been pertinent. For me, factor (iii) at least would certainly have applied.

Finally, I would have to say that this research has been a difficult process, not only because of the considerable academic rigour required, but also because I have had a full time job throughout the entire span of the project and have also been engaged in building a business at the same time. The demands of this have led to me putting aside the research from time to time for much longer periods than I would otherwise have wished. This discontinuity caused me problems, particularly in the early days, and may still be visible in the manuscript. I hope that they are not too visible in the text.

(x) Original Contribution to Knowledge

I do not intend to use this section to further summarise my findings, as I have done so already, particularly at the end of the discussion chapter and in the creative synthesis. To attempt to do so would be unnecessary and would also run the grave risk of being repetitive. I have, in this research project, attempted to describe the meanings of the experience of establishing an independent practice in the social care field in England in

considerable depth and detail. This final section will therefore concentrate on what I see as the original contribution to knowledge contained in this thesis concerning the experience of establishing and independent practice in the social care field in England.

Firstly, it has become clear that there appears to be very little academic knowledge or research relating to this area, so in one sense the whole research project in totality is an original contribution to such knowledge. This may appear to be a large claim, but I do not make this point with levity, as it seems to me to be a very important one.

Secondly, I hope that I have shown that the gradual liberalisation of the social care field through the coming together of a combination of factors has meant that the establishment of small-scale independent practices such as my own and those of my research respondents has become a possibility. These factors are set out in Chapter 1 and comprise (i) the philosophical shift created over the last 30 years by changes in government policy and ways of thinking about the social care sector and (ii) the rise of the internal market. This has led in turn to (iii) a more management-driven culture and (iv) a much greater emphasis on performance measures. This in turn has led over time to (v) a lack of managerial capacity within social care organisations. The cumulative impact of these changes has been, I contend, the opening up of the social care sector. I further contend that it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to have established an independent practice in the social care sector before these changes occurred. As Geoffrey said, *'It [then] became more possible to exist outside the local authority.'*

Thirdly, I have attempted to show why these particular individuals took the step of creating and establishing their own independent practices when others in similar positions did not take such a step. I have argued that the motivational profile of my research respondents and myself when using a profile developed by Huczynski and Buchanan (2001) is congruent in at least five important areas. These areas are in (1) The high need for work to be interesting, (2) the high need to gain recognition through work, (3) the low need for structure within the workplace, (4) the high need for achievement at work, and lastly (5) the high need for work to include a strong element of self-development.

Fourthly, I have shown that the primary co-ordinating mechanism between individuals who have established their own independent practices in the social care field is that of the informal network. The operation of such networks relies on trust between the participants and works on several different levels, such as for the purposes of gaining work, or individual support or information-sharing. The important and unique finding here is that the research respondents and myself still have some need for structure. However, in line with the findings of the motivational profile, which showed clearly that the research group had low needs for structure at work, we have all gravitated from operating within the constraining structure of a large organisation to operating within the far less determinate or rigid structure of an informal network. The shackles have been thrown off and replaced with a much more comfortable garment. This means that the creation of networks were not just a by-product of the establishment of an independent practice; they were also one of the desired outcomes, even if this was not stated by individuals at the outset of their journey.

The fifth factor in terms of a contribution to knowledge is that of the discovery of the need for substance and corporeality. None of the research group felt comfortable as mere individuals once we had emerged from the embrace of the large organisation. All of us had to produce embodiment by clothing ourselves in the garments of a small organisation, both for purposes of recognition by others and as a shelter from what felt like a more exposed, and possibly much harsher, environment.

The sixth finding that contributed new knowledge concerns the irrevocability, or near irrevocability of the step that had been taken by individuals leaving organisations and commencing independent work in the social care field. This only really occurred to individuals in retrospect and some of the research respondents (including myself) had allowed themselves to leave organisations on the premise that if it did not work out, then a quick return would be possible. We had all, perhaps hugely, underestimated the gravity and significance of taking such a step, which only became clear when the individual had walked through the portal of independence. There seems to be no going back.

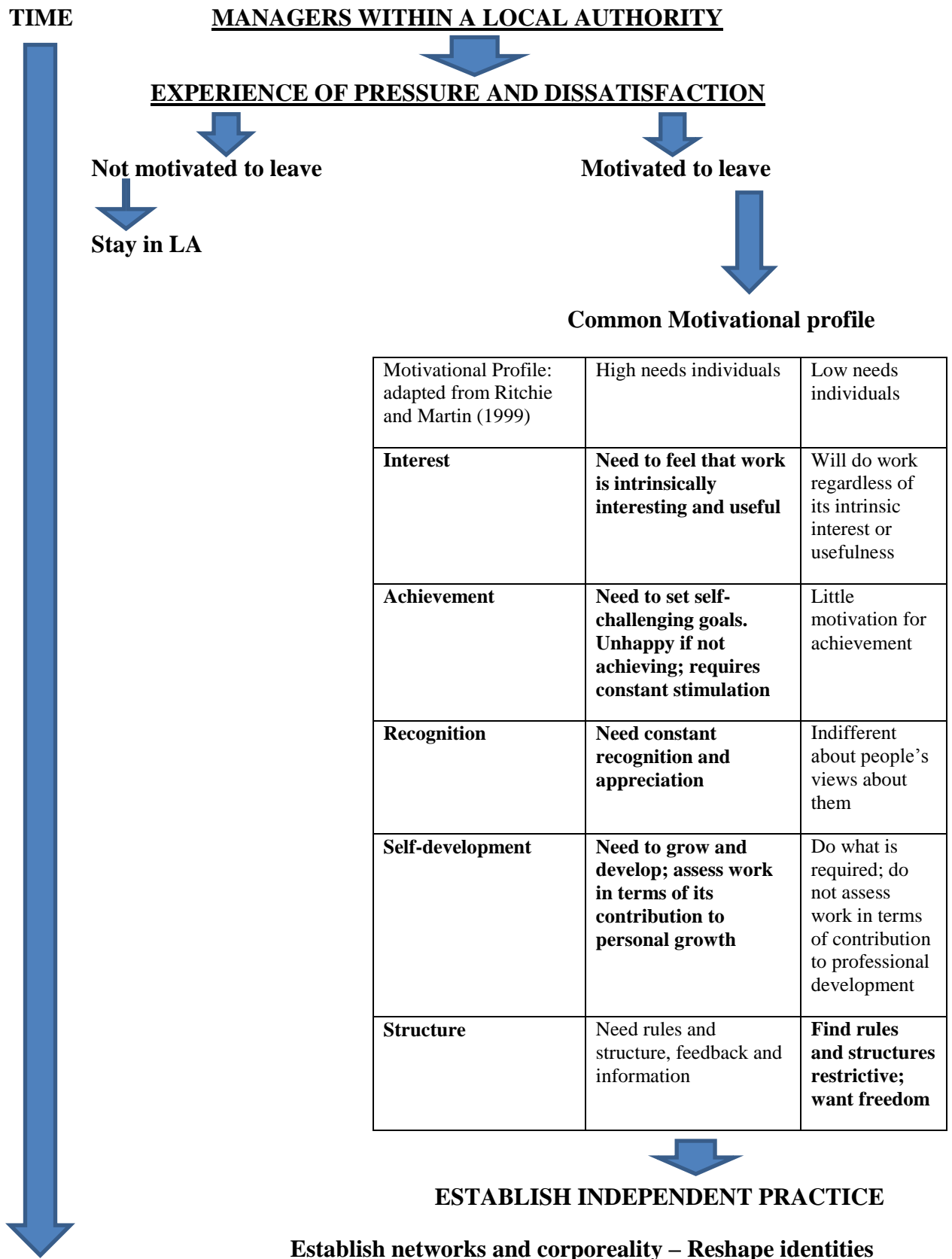
The seventh and final principal area of new knowledge concerns the long, complex and evolving process of the unmaking and remaking of the individual, social and work identities of the research group as they moved away from their previous organisation and into independence. There was for all of us, I think, a deeply experienced, transformational and life-changing shift involved in doing this. This is perhaps because we had all underestimated the power of organisations to shape and define us and to create powerful identities for us that are linked to the organisation.

It will be useful to create a visual diagram (Table 6) of the process of becoming independent for this group of individuals. While I remain rather cautious about the generalisability of the findings of this research to other settings, it is certainly possible and perhaps even likely that some of the processes that I have observed and noted might well apply to those who come after.

The table below, in very simple terms, shows what has happened to the research group over the passage of time. We – and many other colleagues – were managers within local authorities and gradually the increasing pressures of management, as discussed in the first chapter, started to become apparent. These are likely to have been experienced widely, but only a subset of managers became motivated to leave. I have argued in some detail in chapter four that these managers, i.e. those in my research group, share a common motivational profile that starts to explain why they made the step to independence and others didn't. This is based on the profile developed by Huczynski and Buchanan in 2001 from original work by Ritchie and Martin (1999). The diagram lists the *common elements* of that profile that begins to explain why this particular group of managers left the employ of the local authority for independence.

Finally, on leaving to set up an independent practice, these individuals had quickly to establish substance and corporeality and then, usually over a longer period, unmade and remade their professional (and to some extent their personal) identities. The diagram is intended to show the flow over time of these events.

Table 6 – Model of Progression



As a final thought, it has become clear to me, whilst conducting the research and thinking intensively about what it means, that the whole move to independence was a struggle that perhaps none of us had really anticipated. Organisations exert a grip that is strong and insidious and which challenges and constrains our free agency. This is often unseen and only unconsciously experienced.

That we still became independent against these odds represents a small but perhaps significant victory for human agency and for us all.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One

Letter to research respondents 21 May 2008

Dear

I am writing personally to you to see if you would be willing to be interviewed by me as part of the postgraduate doctoral research that I am currently undertaking at Sussex University. My research question is “What is the experience of establishing an independent practice within the contemporary social care field in England?” The research is partly autobiographical inasmuch as I am currently living through this experience myself, having started my own consultancy practice within the social care field in late 2003. I am interested in describing this in a way that will get to the very heart of the matter and will encapsulate the essentials of the whole experience. A substantial part of my research will also involve talking to others in a similar position in a detailed way about their own experiences.

I have decided to approach you because I am aware that you have been involved in a similar venture in the social care field. I would therefore very much like to come and interview you with the intention of exploring your experiences since commencing your business. Your views and insights into this would be extremely valuable. I would be seeking vivid, personal and comprehensive descriptions of your personal experience, concentrating on your thoughts, feelings and actions as your business took shape as well as talking about situations, events, places and people connected with your experience. I would also be interested in your views on the social care scene and whether you feel there have been any changes over the past 10 or 15 years that have made the setting up of small scale consultancies or independent practices easier or more difficult. I would like to make it absolutely clear that I will not be seeking any commercially sensitive information from you and that all data generated will be used only in connection with answering the research question.

I am proposing to interview all participants twice at a place of their choosing. The second interview is likely to be shorter and will concentrate on key points arising from the first interview. In terms of a time commitment for the interviews, a rough estimate would be to allow 2 hours for the first interview and a slightly shorter time for the second.

If you are willing to be interviewed I would propose, with your agreement, to tape-record our meetings and will send a full transcript to you for checking and amending. I undertake to alter or amend anything that is inaccurate or which gives a misleading impression and I will only use this material for my research when you have agreed that I may do so. I also intend to anonymise all interviews and will not identify research participants by their real names or organisation names.

I hope that you will be able to take part in this research and if you have any questions at all then please give me a call to discuss these at any time. If you do decide to take part you may of course withdraw your consent at any time for any reason.

Yours sincerely

John Hyder-Wilson

Appendix Two

DPhil interviews: Interview guide

Ensure housekeeping aspects are in place and confirmed prior to interview, i.e.

- Check and confirm previously made agreement about timings – up to two hours. Confirm that I will time-keep and draw meeting to a close if two-hour limit approaches. Also remind interviewee that s/he can conclude the interview at any earlier point if they wish to for any reason.
- Ensure recording equipment set up and unobtrusive
- Ensure supply of water/glasses
- Ensure setting is quiet and that our time will be uninterrupted
- Ensure phones off

NB – this is not meant to be a ‘script’ and I intend to carry these prompts into each interview in my head. Each interview will be different and will be essentially free-flowing. The prompts below are therefore a ‘mental checklist’:

- (1) Start with brief description/reminder of my research project: what the research question is, where I have got to, summary of methodology used. Set out the general areas that the interview will cover and emphasise the importance of personal experiential recollections.
- (2) Discuss with respondent first thoughts about leaving paid employment and setting up independently – what were the motivators for this? What made you act? How did you feel? How do you feel about the experience in retrospect?
- (3) Go deeper into the experience of setting up independently. What was this like? Hopes, dreams and fears? What stands out as key and pivotal now in retrospect? Follow interesting leads that the respondent gives and probe the experience further.
- (4) What was the relationship between your plans and actions and the wider social care scene in which we all operate? Has this changed over time and if so, in what ways?
- (5) What about now – where have you got to? What are your plans for the future?

Heuristic checklist

- What qualities or dimensions of the experience stand out for the person? What examples are vivid and alive?
- What events, situations and people are connected with the experience?
- What feelings and thoughts are generated by the experience?
- What time and space factors affect the person’s awareness of the experience?
- Has the person shared all the significant ingredients or constituents of the experience?

Appendix Three

Annotated Ethics Checklist

University of Sussex - Sussex Institute

Standards and Guidelines on Research Ethics Annex: Checklist for proposed research

Standards 1 & 3: Safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research. Establish informed consent.

- 1.1 Have you considered the well-being of those involved or affected? Have measures been taken to protect their interests (e.g. by clarifying use to be made of outcomes)?

The letter that goes out to possible participants makes clear that their contributions will be anonymised. All participants will also have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview(s) and amend anything that they wish to. I will make clear in the initial letter and at the beginning of interview that the research is a heuristic exploration of the experience of setting up a business in the social care field and that I am simply seeking their views and experiences of this matter as it has been for them. This explanation will help to alleviate any possible fears that I am seeking commercially sensitive information in a competitive market, as I am categorically not seeking information of this kind. I will state this clearly in the letter. I am also known to all possible participants and I believe that personal trust will also be a factor in allaying any possible fears.

- 1.2 Has written and signed consent been obtained without coercion? Have participants been informed of their right to refuse or to withdraw at any time?

Yes – a written consent form will accompany the letter which will be signed by participants agreeing to participate in this research. Also in the letter is a re-assurance that any participant may withdraw themselves and their data from the research at a later stage if they wish to do so. Prospective participants will not be placed under any pressure at all to take part in the research.

- 1.3 Have the purposes and processes of the research been 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?

The purpose of the research is explained in the letter. I have also clearly pointed out the likely time commitment of the initial and second interviews and reading through transcripts.

- 1.4 Where covert research is proposed, has a case been made and brought to the attention of the School committee and approval sought from the relevant external professional ethical committee?

I am not proposing any covert element to this research.

1.5 Does the proposal include procedures to verify data with respondents and offer feedback on findings?

Yes – all interviews will be fully transcribed and returned to participants for verification and amendment. This will be set out in the initial letter. I will also make clear that each participant will be able to read the research and its associated findings upon completion.

1.6 Will the participants be involved in the design, data collection or reporting where feasible?

Direct involvement of this nature is not really feasible. I am using a heuristic/phenomenological frame for the research which looks at personal biographies and attempts to get to the root of lived experience. In that way respondents will be 'telling their own stories' within a semi-structured framework and what they say is entirely up to them. In that sense they will be directly involved in shaping the research and its findings.

1.7 Has conditional anonymity and confidentiality been offered?

Yes – in the letter accompanying this document.

1.8 Has the appropriate person (e.g. Headteacher, manager of residential home, head of service) been identified to whom disclosures that involve danger to the participant or others must be reported?

This is not applicable – my research involves exploring with senior independent professionals the experience of setting up a business in the social care field.

Standard 2: Ensure legislative requirements on human rights and data protection have been met.

2.1 Have the implications of at least, the four pieces of legislation listed in this document been considered?

Of the four (Data Protection Act, Human Rights Act, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Disability Discrimination Act), the Data Protection Act would appear to be the only one of the four stipulated pieces of legislation that directly applies to this research. I will undertake to anonymise all transcripts and anonymise individual autobiographical accounts for the purposes of this research. I will also be seeking written consent from all participants. I will keep taped transcripts securely, either password protected on my computer or in a locked cabinet.

2.2 Where any particular implications arise from legislation or uncertainties exist, has contact been made with the named university person?

I have met with my supervisor and we have discussed these matters fully. There are no outstanding issues of concern in relation to my research and these pieces of legislation.

Standard 4: Develop the highest possible standards of research practices including in research design, data collection, storage, analysis, interpretation and reporting

4.1 Has existing literature and ongoing research been identified and considered?

Yes – existing literature on heuristic methods has been studied in detail, particularly Clark Moustakas's very specific approach to heuristic research and critiques of his method.

4.2 Have methods been selected to be fit for purpose?

My approach to this research will be a heuristic one which will seek to uncover the nature and meaning of the experience of setting up an independent consultancy in the social care field. Therefore the main method I will be using to gather information will be one-to-one interviews. These will be semi-structured inasmuch as there will be some guiding questions (e.g. "describe your first thoughts about setting up independently"). The intention of these questions will be to structure the autobiographical accounts of becoming independent and provide data for comparison. As stated, full transcripts, verification and second interviews will also be used to ensure accuracy and validity.

4.3 Where appropriate to the research design, will all data collection proposed be used to address the question?

All the data gathered will be used for the purposes of my research. It will not be used for any other purpose.

4.4 Have methods for verifying data (e.g. audit trails, triangulation, etc.) been built into the research design?

Verification of data in heuristic research will mean carefully checking participants' autobiographical accounts, amending full transcripts and re-interviewing respondents on key points.

4.5 Where research is externally funded, has agreement with sponsors been reached on reporting and intellectual property rights?

Not applicable to this research.

4.6 Have plans been made that will enable the archiving of data (e.g. through consulting the guidance available from the UK Data Archive)?

Not applicable to this piece of research.

Standard 5: Consider the consequences of your work or its misuse for those you study and other interested parties

5.1 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?

Yes – many of the possible consequences have hopefully been covered in the sections above concerning anonymity. More positively, I would hope that this research will ultimately be of benefit to participants, researchers and others interested in this field.

5.2 Have the costs of the research to participants or their institutions/services and any possible compensation been considered?

Participants are entirely free to decide whether they wish to take part or not. I propose to travel to meet participants at a place of their choosing (likely to be in their home area) and it would not therefore be appropriate to consider compensation or other costs.

5.3 Has information about support services (e.g. mentoring, counselling) that might be needed as a consequence of any possible unsettling effects of the research itself been identified?

My research involves individuals who are established in their fields and entirely free to decide whether they wish to be involved in this research. I would not expect the research to have an unsettling effect on the participants, but if this did occur I would ensure that this was discussed with the participant and resolved as far as possible.

5.4 Are the plans flexible enough to ensure that time can be spent discussing any issues that arise from the effects of the research on the individuals or institutions/services?

Yes – I plan to re-interview respondents on key points, and will pick up any issues and second thoughts that have arisen at that stage.

Standard 6: Ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant

6.1 Have colleagues/supervisors been invited to comment on your research proposal?

Yes – this has been discussed in supervision meetings.

6.2 Have any sensitive ethical issues been raised with the School Committee and comments sought?

I have discussed this with my supervisor and this is not deemed to be necessary.

6.3 If relevant, which includes all health and social care research, has the external professional ethical body been identified?

There is no external ethical body in connection with this research. However, a framework for research in Health and Social Care is provided by the Department of Health and I have studied the contemporary guidance carefully. There are no particular issues arising from this wider than those considered in this annotated checklist.

6.4 Have the guidelines from that professional committee been used to check the proposed research?

I have read the relevant parts of the DOH document – see comment above.

6.5 Do plans include seeking clearance from this committee (e.g. time to obtain approval may need building into the proposal)?

Not necessary – not an external ethical body.