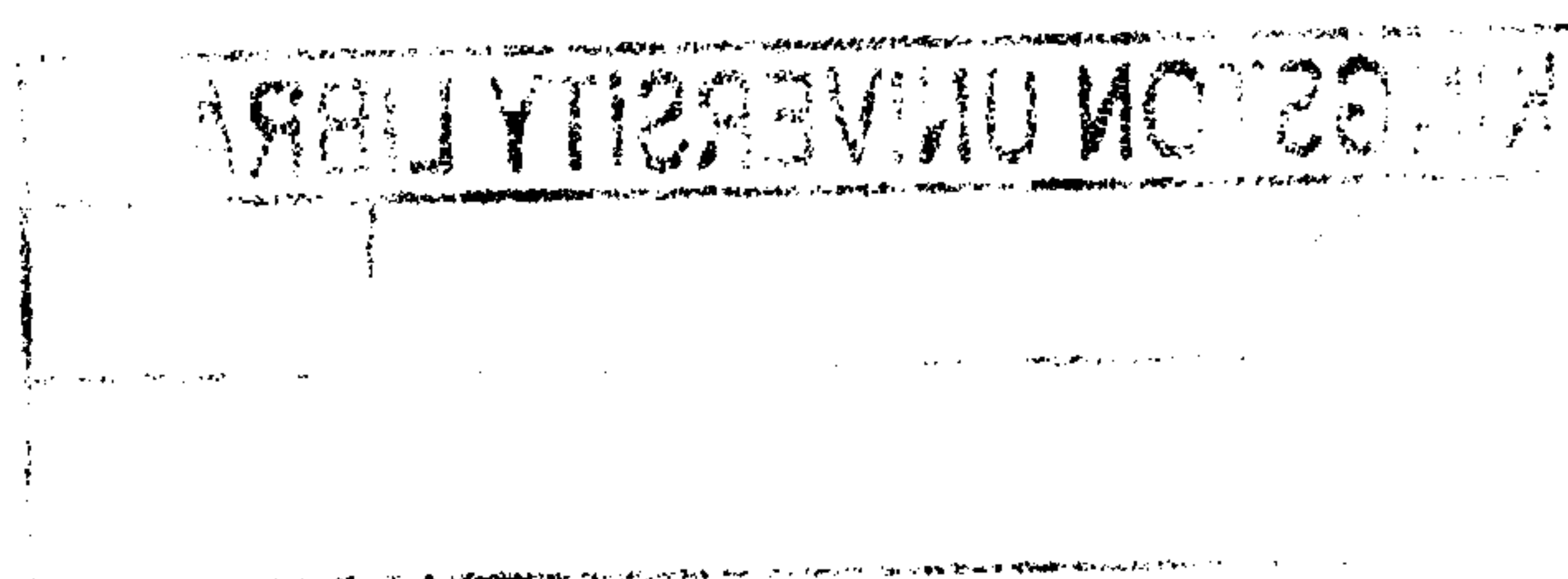


**CHARTING THE PRACTICUM:
A Journey in Probation and Social Work**

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GLOSSARY

AASW	Advanced Award in Social Work
ACOP	Association of Chief Officers of Probation
ADP	Anti-discriminatory Practice
BASW	British Association of Social Workers
BPhil	Bachelor of Philosophy
CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
CPO	Chief Probation Officer
CPSU	Crime Prevention Support Unit
DipPS	Diploma in Probation Studies
DTTO	Drug Treatment and Testing Order
GSCC	General Social Care Council
MLitt	Master of Letters
NDipM	National Diploma in Management
NOMS	National Offender Management Service
NPD	National Probation Directorate
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
QDSW	Qualifying Diploma in Social Work
SDU	Staff Development Unit
UEA	University of East Anglia

ABSTRACT

The Commentary reports chronologically on work published between 1988 and 2003. The publications form a record of a varied career in probation and social work, which has involved changing roles and perspectives, reflection and learning. Opportunities for research and practitioner evaluation have been created. The writing draws on these ingredients.

Five unifying themes to the publications are explored. The first theme is personal and developmental, engaging critically over time with policy and practice. This creates a cycle of critical practice, reflection and learning, which is likened to a 'reflective practicum' (Schon, 1987). The second theme is linked, namely the growth of my engagement with research, knowledge creation and theory in pursuit of their integration with practice.

The third theme explores the nature of professional practice within contested and politicized fields of social policy. It is argued that probation and social work are more than the mere expression of social policy and that they require professional identity and autonomy if the demands of good practice are to be met. The fourth and fifth themes take this further by identifying and exploring twin pillars that are necessary supports for autonomous professional identity, namely a values base and ethical framework on the one hand and a constituency of free academic learning and enquiry on the other.

The Commentary ends with three distinctive contributions that the publications have made to scholarship in probation and social work. First, the record of the practicum and its critical engagement with policy and practice is seen as a distinctive contribution in its own right. Second is theory development relating to work-based learning environments and the relationship in social work practice. The

third contribution concerns practitioner career choices in today's unstable policy and organizational environment. The publications guide the reader to a set of benchmarks by which the congruence between a practitioner's vocational 'service ideal' (Banks, 2004) may be measured against agency-based practice realities. The Commentary concludes by presenting a typology that may be used for this purpose.

1. Introduction

This Commentary introduces a body of published work about probation and social work that spans twenty years, drawing upon practice experience and reflection upon that practice spanning thirty years. During the twenty years that I have been writing for publication, I have moved in and out of practice and academic settings. Within the world of practice, I have been a practitioner, manager and trainer, while within the academic setting I have been an educator. As part of fulfilling all these roles, both within practice and academia, I have on occasion been a researcher.

A quality of the accompanying published work is that it reflects this career path, criss-crossing between boundaries, profiting from different perspectives and cumulatively building on these diverse experiences. A central argument is that the published work is both coherent and developmental: as the accumulated experience grows, so the published work grows in depth and breadth of understanding. Something of a synthesis has now been achieved, which provides an opportune moment to pause and reflect upon the process to date. This Commentary is that moment of pausing and reflecting.

In preparing to write, I re-read the publications carefully and purposively, viewing them as an entity. The publications are largely about one of the most dynamic, volatile and contested areas in public policy making in the United Kingdom and internationally. They are about crime and how democratic, capitalist societies should respond to crime and the criminal. I found that the works provide an unfolding commentary on these penal developments from the mid-1980s to the near present. Out of this comes much of the coherence to the work because the articles and monographs are a record of my own professional growth as it engages with the penological change taking place around me.

Turning to the approach I have taken, therefore, five themes are clearly evident in the published work and these will now be identified and introduced. They are:

1. the movement between roles;
2. involvement with research methodology and the generation of knowledge;
3. the importance of professional practice and professional autonomy within politicized fields of social policy such as probation and social work;
4. the need for a sound values and ethical base to professional practice and
5. the need for a strong academic, educational and research community as necessary supports if an autonomous professional identity is to be maintained.

I will discuss each in turn. The first two themes are autobiographical in that they track my professional development and associated publications over the years. They are:

1. The movement between roles

This theme covers my movement between direct practice, management, in-service training and academia. Social work is not institutionally supportive of such a career pattern, as can be seen, for example, in the absence of requirements or, on the whole, provision for social work academics to maintain themselves in direct practice (Brown and Webb, 1973; Sale, 2005). This stands in contrast with many other professions, notably health care. Following a career in social work and probation that moves dynamically across these boundaries has, on occasion, involved sacrifices but it has also served to enrich my understanding of social work as a profession.

Schon describes the learning process found in fields of professional practice, which he calls the 'reflective practicum', in terms of a similar cycle between direct practice and standing back to reflect on that practice (1987, p.311; italics in original):

And the work of a reflective practicum takes a long time. Indeed, nothing is so indicative of progress in the acquisition of artistry as

the student's discovery of the *time* it takes – time to live through the initial shocks of confusion and mystery, unlearn initial expectations, and begin to master the practice of the practicum; time to live through the learning cycles involved in any designlike task; and time to shift repeatedly back and forth between reflection on and in action. It is a mark of progress in a reflective practicum that students learn to see the learning process as, in John Dewey's terms, 'the practical work --- of modification, of changing, of reconstruction continued without end' [quotation from Dewey, 1974, p.7].

In these terms, my career *is* a reflective practicum in that I have always attempted to render my work settings into learning environments, alternately reflecting on and in practice. By the same token, I view my publications as an unfolding twenty year record of a reflective practicum and, as such, they form a distinctive scholarly record. The career has not been, by choice, a conventional academic one and no claim is made that the volume of publication is commensurate with one that is. Instead, the career chosen has resulted in publications that exhibit a reflective criticality arising from changing perspectives and roles, making, when taken as a whole, their own particular contribution to the body of social work scholarship.

England (1986, p.125) argues that critical faculties need to be developed in social work if it is to develop a language that describes quality in practice:

Good social work rests upon the process of criticism, a process of experience and understanding, of analysis and comparison. A critical faculty is integral to the very practice of social work, to enable the worker to evaluate his client's and his own communications. A widespread and detailed critical dialogue is the only means whereby any canons of professional judgement and evaluation can be established in social work, through the establishment of common professional meanings and a common professional culture. This criticism, like art, and like life, is subjective, but it is the apparent fallacy of social work to assume that this precludes the possibility of inquiry, intellectual precision and impersonality. The opposite is true, for through criticism we may achieve some certainty about the real, experienced world.

The publications are just such an unfolding critical reflective record and they have been made possible by the type of career that I have chosen to follow (Elliott, 1990, pp.31-3; Elliott, 2001, p.37; Schon, 1987, p13 on the 'artistry' of practice).

2. Involvement with research methodology and the generation of knowledge

Themes of professional knowledge and research methodology and methods are discussed explicitly and in some detail throughout the Commentary. It tracks a growing understanding on my part of the contribution of research, theorising and academic endeavour to social work practice and the incorporation of the associated learning into my practice. It traces my involvement in these activities from 'apprenticeship' stages through to a broadly based and more sophisticated application of research and knowledge creation that dynamically interacts with my day-to-day practice. In the final two publications (Elliott, 2001 & 2003), direct practice, practitioner evaluation, management, action research and theory are developed in a way that strives for a seamless merging between them.

The two themes identified above are, in a way, 'outside' the publications themselves. They have an element of a commentator adding external context to the publications. This is not wholly the case because, as the reader will see, the publications have strong autobiographical and methodological elements but these elements are developed much further within this Commentary. Perhaps they should be described as 'outside / inside' themes in respect of the publications and, importantly, they determined the chronological narrative approach taken. Hence the title: a journey that charts a career long practicum.

There are three more themes that need to be identified. These are at a different level from the two above in that they emanate exclusively from 'inside' the publications. They can be seen threading their way through all the publications yet, as

an explicit set of ideas, they are latent within them. What the Commentary does is to make them explicit. It is this set of ideas that gives the publications their particular quality of internal coherence and development. The first ‘inside’ theme is:

3. The importance of professional practice and professional autonomy within politicized fields of social policy such as probation and social work

This is about the place of professional practice and the scope for professional autonomy within highly politicized fields of social policy (Jones and Joss, 1995 examine concepts of professionalism; Cooper and Lousada, 2005, pp.11-15). My professional qualification is in social work, which was the required qualification for probation officers before 1995. I refer, therefore, both to probation and social work when I say that a driving force behind my published endeavours over the last twenty years has been ‘in the interests of preserving an independent and critical voice in social work – the peer professional community’ (Youll and Walker, 1995, p.214; Elliott, 2001, p.29). Consequently, I take issue with Lacey, who was explicitly writing in his role as a chief probation officer, when he stated (1991, p.112; Elliott, 1995, pp.17-19):

It seems to me impossible to conceive of social work – at least in Great Britain – as anything else but the expression of social policy expressed through Statute, Government Circular and, at the local level, Committee policy.

The reader will find that my published work is in a constant tussle with this issue.

4. The need for a sound values and ethical base to professional practice

5. The need for a strong academic, educational and research community as necessary supports if an autonomous professional identity is to be maintained

The other two ‘inside’ themes are best treated as a pair. They may be seen as necessary pillars upon which a ‘peer professional community’ rests. They are the need

for an underpinning values and ethical base and a robust educational, academic and research constituency (Bisman, 2004, pp.115-6). Together these pillars contribute to the maintenance of standards of practice and the growth that comes from free enquiry. Their existence is premised upon a pluralist society that provides room to be responsive to but not driven by instrumental social policies and ephemeral political priorities.

The issue of values in probation work and social work are explored and developed within the publications but with an insistence that an adequate value base must combine solidity and continuity with space for incremental development. Equally, education, training and research is present throughout the writing in multi-layered ways: academia and practice, theories of practice and practice theories, research and practitioner researchers, college learning, practice learning and nurturing the practice based learning environment.

Having identified a value base and associated ethical framework as a necessary pillar supporting any practice that, with integrity, can be seen as professional, some examination of the philosophical influences on my practice and writing is required. I look particularly to Isaiah Berlin. In the essay *Historical Inevitability* (1969), he steers a middle course between the extremes of relativism, whereby no objective judgement is possible and all perspectives are valid (for example Elliott, 1994, pp.99-100), and determinism, whereby individual freedom of choice is reduced to insignificance. Both these extremes remove from the individual any responsibility as moral agents. Referring to Kant's (Berlin, 1969, p.114) 'insistent' belief 'upon the reality of human autonomy, that is, upon the reality of free self-commitment to an act or a form of life for what it is in itself', which commensurably entails absolute respect for persons (O'Neill, 1993, pp.178-9), he

espouses a form of controlled relativism – or pluralism – that takes into account cultural contexts and differences without abandoning the realm of universal moral values that must fall within ‘the human horizon’ (Berlin¹, 2003, p.11). Such a position requires the exercise of moral judgement and Berlin argues that the exacting nature of enquiry and judgement within the humanities can be as disciplined as ostensibly more objective enquiry in the natural sciences. Hence, for example, knowledge and good practice in social work can indeed be advanced as much by a rigorous ‘critical dialogue’ such as that described by England as by controlled experimental design (England, 1986, chapter 9; Pawson and Tilley, 1997, pp.4-8; Denscombe, 1998, chapter 3; for example Elliott, 1990, pp.31-3).

The concept of human autonomy is developed in Berlin’s subsequent essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Again there is a balance to be struck, this time between negative freedom, that is the absence of constraints or coercion on the person, and positive freedom, that is having the means to fulfil one’s projects (Berlin, 1969, pp.122, 131). The mere absence of constraints is no freedom for people whose social position denies them the resources to act upon their aspirations. Jordan (1985, pp.4-18; Jordan, 1989, chapter 5) takes these ideas forward in his argument for social and economic structures that enable the autonomous fulfilment of individual goals along with investment in the social cohesion of the common good. Work with criminals and those at risk of social marginalization will always operate on the border between negative and positive freedoms by raising questions of how to draw, with humanity and judgement, the boundary of constraint and coercion and how to create opportunities for inclusion through cohesive social structures (Braithwaite, 1989;

¹ Howe (1999), in a lecture on social work values, builds on this essay, *The Pursuit of the Ideal* by Berlin, which leads him to a call ‘above all’ for compassion in our practice (quoted Elliott, 2001, p.ii).

Drakeford and Vanstone, 1996; for example Elliott, 1995, pp.17-21 & 2001, chapter IV and pp.42-8).

Issues of opportunity relate to the impediments to opportunity created by structural disadvantage and unfair discrimination. It is incumbent upon the social work profession to attempt to alleviate and not to reinforce these factors in clients' lives, as stated in the definition of social work produced by the International Federation of Social Workers, which forms the foundation stone of the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (BASW 2002; Bisman, 2002, pp.109-10). This places upon all practitioners a responsibility to think deliberately and carefully about their practice and, in particular, about its research and theoretical roots. Thompson refers to '*informed practice*' without which social work will be based on 'assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes that can lead to discrimination and oppression'. It is the articulation of this informed practice that makes practice accountable and capable of evaluation (Thompson, 1995, pp.1-2, italics in original; for example Elliott, 1995 & 2001, pp. 6-8, 41).

Although I use the word professionalism extensively, it follows from the above that social work must never be esoteric in the sense of shutting out the layperson from its mysteries. Professional identity and knowledge must inform a practice that always makes sense to and actively engages the client in a way that is rooted in her/his reality (Jordan, 1979, pp.129-31; Jordan, 1990, pp.178-82).

I have attempted to meet the moral imperatives indicated by these reflections on values and ethics by articulating issues of practice – and of my own practice – through publication and through personal study, such as the Advanced Award in Social Work portfolio, which will feature with some prominence. These endeavours result in products – articles, monographs, materials for study, reflection and

examination – that contribute to a ‘reflective practicum’ (Schon, 1987, p.311) and the ‘critical dialogue’ (England, 1986, p.125) that are the substance of ‘an independent and critical voice’ in the ‘peer professional community’ (Youll and Walker, 1995, p.214).

This Commentary makes the claim that this twenty year engagement with the worlds of social work and probation, recorded through publications that are peer reviewed or published under peer academic editorial control, amounts to a body of work that satisfies the descriptors for a Doctoral degree at Kingston University (*Research Students Handbook*, 2003, Appendix 1, p.2).

2. Career Review

The Commentary is organized chronologically. I provide, under this section, a brief introductory career review to provide a route map to the detail that is to follow.

The Commentary begins with work for an advanced research degree (Master of Letters: MLitt) in early modern history taken at Oxford University from 1972-6. Core research skills were learnt at this time that have transferred to social science research and scholarship. While doing this Oxford research, I acquired substantial voluntary work experience in social work that enabled me to gain a place on the Exeter University post-graduate qualifying course in 1976. The Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) in Social Work at Exeter included a research dissertation that, as will be seen below, provided rich learning for me.

From 1978-89, I worked in North East London Probation Service. I was a main grade field probation officer in East Ham and Forest Gate until 1985, when I moved into the Staff Development Unit (SDU). In 1986, I was promoted to senior probation officer in the SDU. It was while at the SDU that I did the empirical research that resulted in the first publication (1988: *The Experience of the Singleton Practice Teacher*) and wrote the theoretical monograph that, in part, arose out of this research (1990: *Practice Teaching and the Art of Social Work*).

Between 1989-95, I worked as senior lecturer at Croydon College, teaching on the social work qualifying course with responsibility for the Home Office sponsored probation stream. While at Croydon College, I wrote two pieces. The first (1994: *Review Article on Selected Papers from the British Criminology Conference, 1991*) addressed, amongst other subjects, issues of probation qualifying education. The second article (1995: *College Reflections on Practice Theory*) was a substantial piece

that drew together my reflective learning on social work values, theory and practice from my experience of teaching at Croydon College.

From 1995- 2000, I was back in practice with South East London Probation Service, as a main grade field probation officer in a community supervision team for eighteen months in Croydon and then as senior practitioner in the same office. After the initial months of adjustment to my new role, I resumed my interest and involvement in qualifying training. This was the time when the probation qualification was removed from social work education and a free standing qualification was devised. In response to these developments, I wrote an article addressing issues associated with the new qualification (1997: *The Qualification of Probation Officers: Thoughts for the Future*).

While with South East London Probation Service, I completed two externally validated professional qualifications. The main qualification was the Advanced Award in Social Work (AASW) awarded by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and subsequently by its successor body, the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The other qualification was a Diploma in Management (NDipM) awarded by the National Examining Board in Supervision and Management. These two awards, particularly the AASW portfolio, provided extensive practice based primary material that resulted in two further publications. The first is a monograph (2001: *Working with Structural and Ideological Change: An Example from Probation*), which combines practice material from the portfolio with the earlier theoretical article, *College Reflections on Practice Theory*, to provide the synthesis to which I refer above. The second is an article (2003: *Portfolio Creation, Action Research and the Learning Environment: A Study from Probation*). It was written following my move to Kingston University in 2001 as a principal lecturer and it arose

out of renewed exposure to research methods as a result of this move. It draws upon material from the AASW portfolio, which is reframed as an action research project. This article also provides a synthesis around my thinking on management, education, training and learning.

3. Learning the Researcher's Craft: Oxford and Exeter Universities

For my first degree, I read medieval and modern history at Trinity College, Oxford. Following graduation, I stayed to research for an MLitt degree (1972-6). My subject was the Roman Catholic community in Essex during the period of persecution. I was interested in how a marginalized and persecuted community retained their faith and survived. The outcome was a 60,000 word thesis of original research based upon primary sources. The whole work was published in *Essex Recusant* under the editorship of Monsignor Daniel Shanahan (Elliott, 1983 & 1985). Producing this thesis taught me the skills of researching across a wide compass, with the acquisition, compilation, interpretation and ordering of large quantities of data, particularly available from the proceedings of the ecclesiastical and secular courts, and shaping them into a coherent work that is in dialogue with the wider body of scholarly published work on that subject.

If the Oxford thesis provided experience of handling large data sets, the Exeter research (Elliott, 1978) provided an example of what can go wrong in social science research. At the time of choosing my research topic (1977), Exeter police station was home to the pioneering Crime Prevention Support Unit (CPSU; Alderson, 1979). At the CPSU, officers were working within the framework of the ecology of crime, mapping priority offence areas and priority offender areas and experimenting with crime prevention initiatives that placed emphasis on community involvement, partnership and responsiveness to cyclical crime patterns. Having plotted in detail the incidence of crime in Exeter, the next research goal was to compile a set of self-report studies by offenders on their offences so as to test the hypotheses about the commission of crime suggested by the mapping exercises. Today, this form of research into crime has reached sophisticated levels through the application of

geographical information science (Chainey, 2004) but in the 1970s the CPSU was pioneering the work by overlaying coloured slides on overhead projectors.

I was invited to carry out the self-report research for my BPhil dissertation. The purpose of the information to be gathered was to situate the offence: location, time, what the offender had been doing prior to the offence, whether s/he was alone or in a group, travel arrangements, the degree of premeditation or opportunism in the offence, employment status and pay day. Information was to be gathered by questionnaire and interview. Data collection from respondents, however, required inter-agency collaboration between police, social services and the probation service as well as interviews conducted by myself.

Although principles for confidentiality and protocols were agreed between the University and the police, the problems that arose were, nevertheless, ones of research ethics and collaboration. The most important problem was that of acquiring informed consent and participation from potential respondents when attempts were being made to gather information at times, for many, of crisis or trauma coinciding with cautions, court appearances and sentencing. Associated with this issue was the readiness of other professionals to co-operate, particularly by acquiring information from respondents in the court setting. In the event, it did not prove possible to bring the research to a successful conclusion.

I learnt much from the exercise. The project was far too ambitious for the resources that I could bring to bear and I learnt that successful social research must match the resources available. I learnt that there are complex issues of informed consent, for which timing and context are important (Patton, 2002, pp.407-9). I learnt that inter-agency negotiation and agreement is complex and fraught with political and

protocol pitfalls. Above all, I learnt that one must be in control of one's own research and not driven by someone else's agenda (Denscombe, 1998, pp.3-5).

4. The Experience of the Singleton Practice Teacher (1988)

Practice Teaching and the Art of Social Work (1990)

From 1978-85, I was immersed in front line generic practice in the East End of London. It was an innovative and exciting working environment. Skilled supervision and very wide ranging practice experiences provided a sound basis for future research, theorising and writing. We had close links to the Tavistock Clinic, which is a centre for psycho-dynamic clinical practice, research, training and consultancy. I was one of several colleagues who attended Joanne Silove's seminars there, *The Role of Assessment*, which were later to inform the theoretical basis for my monograph on practice teaching. We were also a 'learning centre' because we invariably had students on placement and I acquired my direct practice teaching experience during these years.

In 1985, I moved to the Staff Development Unit. The Unit was new and could only develop its activities at the pace that could be accommodated by staff in the field and this created an opportunity to pursue some large scale personal project. I chose to do empirical research into aspects of practice teaching. Undoubtedly a motivation behind this decision was to see a research project through to its conclusion following my experience at Exeter.

This was a time of ferment in social work education (Elliott, 1988, pp.29-30). Aspects of it were being severely criticized, especially the quality of practice teaching. This criticism was then overlaid with a crisis in the provision of placements. Meanwhile, in an attempt to remedy these shortcomings, CCETSW (1987a) proposed an overhaul of social work education based upon a three year Qualifying Diploma in Social Work (QDSW) and an ambitious programme for accrediting practice teachers and practice teaching agencies. A clash between quality and supply loomed. The

ferment was worsened when, in 1988, the government rejected out-of-hand the QDSW, forcing CCETSW back to the drawing board. Out of the debacle eventually emerged the Diploma in Social Work.

Within the Staff Development Unit, I was part of the core group of probation placement providers for the five London probation services. Our links with the social work courses were close and I was involved in training practice teachers for North East London Probation Service and running consultancies and support groups for them. I was involved in CCETSW's consultations and was one of the delegates at a national residential conference on accreditation of agencies and practice teachers held in 1987 (CCETSW, 1987b). The subject of my research, therefore, could not have been more topical or relevant to my work. I chose to explore the experience of singleton practice teachers and the extent to which they were prepared for and supported in this role by their agencies. It is worth remembering that, of the 9,000 placements provided nationally each year, 8,000 were with singleton practice teachers (Elliott, 1988, p.29).

The research was conducted during 1986-7. The research instruments and data have been destroyed for reasons of confidentiality but I have kept a typescript draft of 6,000 – 7,000 words that gives a fuller picture of the research than the piece, of slightly less than half that length, that was published. This first typed draft deals only with the research process and its findings – there is no discussion of the wider range of issues affecting social work education at the time – so it allows for close recapturing of the research design and prompts my memory.

The work consisted of qualitative research designed to lie within my resources. An article by Miller was influential in informing the research approach and its implementation. This passage, in which Miller (1983, p.19) discusses her move

from experimental psychology to the field of educational evaluation, captures my thinking at the time:

The rigorous degree of control of the experimental situation, specific to the science model, did not fit the subtle realities of the lecture room and teaching department. These have their special characteristics, influential personalities and political constraints, and staff and students are very much affected by the rich context in which they work. Students do not see courses in isolation but in relation to other things going on in their department. To pretend that they function with a prespecified, limited and constant set of variables defined by the researcher simply does not do justice to the complexity of educational settings. But this point hardly needs labouring for those involved in social work, where the influence of social context on the individual is inseparable from understanding behaviour.

This emphasis upon context in research has remained with me, reaching its fullest expressions in the argument for ‘realistic evaluation’ in research into intervention programmes with offenders (Elliott, 2001, pp.33-8) and the exploration of action research (Elliott, 2003).

In the mid-1980s, however, qualitative social science research was far less developed than it is today. I shall take retrospective advantage of today’s articulation of qualitative research methodology in looking back at my former work. I align myself with the position taken by Reid (1994), who is writing from a social work perspective, regarding the epistemologies of research. He draws up criteria for ‘evaluating the truth claims of knowledge’ (*Ibid.*, p.466) and argues that qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are not only (*Ibid.*, p.477)

eminently compatible, they also serve complementary functions in knowledge building. The strengths of one tend to be the weaknesses of the other.

Reid encapsulates the strengths of qualitative research with this description (*Ibid.*, p.477; Shaw and Gould, 2001, pp.6-9, 27-31 also discuss the nature of qualitative

research from a social work perspective and provide a literature review that places Reid's article within the epistemological debate):

Qualitative methodology is better able to depict the workings of social systems in holistic ways, to take into account contextual factors, to detect elusive phenomena, and to generate more thorough descriptions as a base for generalization.

Within this qualitative approach to my research, purposive sampling was used or, as Patton (2002, p.243) expresses it, a sample of 'information-rich cases' was selected 'strategically and purposively'. His category of 'typical case sampling' (*Ibid.*, p.236) describes most closely the approach taken. I balanced the sample across county and metropolitan areas, statutory and voluntary agencies, practice teacher and management respondents.

I chose not to interview practice teachers and managers who worked within the same agency because of the risk of inadvertently exposing areas of internal agency politics and conflict, which I had no mandate to do. In choosing to forego the opportunity of directly comparing practitioner and manager perspectives, I gained the advantage of working with a larger sample of agencies than I could otherwise have managed. In all, I conducted sixteen interviews – six managers and ten practice teachers – from a total of twelve agencies. The claim that the research findings had a transferable applicability beyond the agencies visited rests upon the number and spread of agencies from which I gathered data and the data's rich, detailed quality, which permits reasonable extrapolation of the findings to other similar settings (Reid, 1994, pp.469-70; Shaw and Gould, 2001, pp.194-9; Patton, 2002, pp.581-4).

The research tool used most closely fits what Shaw and Gould call the 'semi-standardized interview' (2001, p.142-4, quotation pp.143-4), which

--- seeks a compromise between asking very open-ended questions which may produce a free-flowing discussion but little material

which can be compared across interviews, and structured closed questioning which produces limited, superficial responses. The interviewer may use a combined or 'layered' approach to combining the format questions so that they alternate between standardized questions which elicit more specific, even codifiable data, and more interrogative follow-up questions which extend and deepen the responses.

Hence, factual information in relation to each question was gathered and some questions provided for a limited choice response with Likert scale options (May, 1997, pp.96-101). There followed an invitation to provide a more discursive response to each topic. This allowed for comparison across the different categories of agency and respondent visited both in terms of what was provided for the practice teachers and satisfaction levels with that provision. In addition, more elaborated and reflective observations were assembled. The different categories of data that were gathered can be seen in most detail in the first typed draft but all categories have been retained in the published article.

The responses were recorded in writing during the interview and checked with the respondent before its close. On completion of the interviews, the data was tabulated for thematic analysis, laying the responses alongside each other in parallel columns. Respondents and agencies were coded and the coding remains in the first typed draft but is deleted from the published article. There followed a process of close reading, comparison and analysis until the material could be shaped in its final form (Denscombe, 1998, pp.207-14; Patton, 2002, pp.432-4). Patton (2002, pp.503-4) summarizes these processes by saying

[t]he purpose of analysis is to organize the description so that it is manageable. Description provides the skeletal frame for analysis that leads into interpretation. An interesting and readable report provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the basis for an interpretation, and sufficient interpretation to allow the reader to appreciate the description.

The research was done from an agency base but I consulted widely both within and beyond the agency setting. As I was to argue many years later (2003, pp.333-4), consulting colleagues, seeking out those with specialist expertise, gaining others' opinions on research design and research tools and receiving feedback on report drafts are all important ingredients in achieving rigorous research and theorising (Shaw, 1999, pp.26-31), diminishing insider bias, maximising reflexivity and meeting standards that carry conviction in professional circles (White, 2001, pp.103-6; Elliott, 2001, p.37).

My intention had been to conduct and carry through to publication a piece of original primary research about levels of preparation and support provided to singleton practice teachers. But the close practical engagement in my daily work with the subject matter of this research combined with the quality of the data that I gathered led me to write a second article. This second piece took the topic of the research forward by tackling the *theory* of practice teaching and it proved to be my first in-depth exploration of the supportive workplace environment for learning. With the advice of 'critical readers' and peer review, this second article was expanded, eventually to be published as a University of East Anglia (UEA) social work monograph, the series at the time being under the editorship of Professor Martin Davies.

The UEA monograph draws on a wide range of theoretical and research sources published at that time to develop its argument on the role, principles and skills involved in practice teaching and it explores the overlap between staff supervision in social work and student practice teaching / supervision. Included within the sources was the research I had conducted into the singleton practice teacher, which played a precise part in the argument (Elliott, 1990, pp.5-6, 15-16). This research acted as a

spur to my thinking in respect of the psycho-dynamic theories of organizational defence systems against anxiety, the reflection process in supervision and containment (Menzies, 1970; Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1970, pp.142-6; Mattinson, 1975; Mattinson and Sinclair, 1979, chapter 4 and pp.183-91; for recent theoretical developments, see Briggs, 1995; Hughes and Pengelly, 1997; Cooper and Lousada, 2005). I related and adapted the tripartite model of social work staff supervision (Kadushin, 1976), with its administrative, educative and supportive modes, to the practice teaching role. The administrative was developed in relation to dysfunctional defence systems, with defences against anxiety being linked with the added factors (in today's parlance) of managerialism and audit, the educative was explored in terms of adult learning and the supportive was developed in terms of overcoming these dysfunctional defence systems. In particular, my own research data revealed a pattern of balanced tripartite supervision embedded in the voluntary casework agencies, with clear support for this approach from management, which stood in contrast to the findings from the statutory agencies, where the administrative mode tended to be privileged at the expense of the educative and supportive. The issue was one of organizational culture, with the voluntary agencies supporting a learning culture with fully articulated tripartite supervision in operation for all staff, which included students. The advantages of this were evident in the confidence with which respondents discussed the quality of the learning environment provided for them as practice teachers and for their students as learners.

The above is an example of essentially inductive reasoning, that is drawing the theory from the research findings (Byman, 2001, pp.8-11). In keeping with grounded analysis and theorising (Denscombe, 1998, pp.214-8; Patton, 2002, pp.124-9), the findings from the research led me, following prompting from two 'critical readers' of

early drafts, to conduct detailed readings and analysis of three recent enquiries into deaths of children who were subject to statutory protection. The conclusions I drew concerning the operation of bureaucratic organizational defence systems and the importance of tripartite supervision in circumventing these defences remain, I believe, compelling, especially when managerialism and audit are added as components in the defence system (Elliott, 1990, pp.10-14; Elliott, 2001, p.28; Cooper and Lousada, 2005, pp.65-7; Ferguson, 2005, pp.790-2). The exercise of using these different documentary sources provided a means of interrogating and testing the research conclusions and theory building concerning the interplay of defence systems, organizational culture, supervision and practice teaching / learning in which I was involved.

It cannot be said, of course, that the research data precedes the theory of organizational defence systems. The process was inductive specifically in the way in which the pattern in my own research data could be laid on to pre-existing theory, thereby *extending* the theory through the particular perspective posed by the research questions. I was throughout working within a theoretical framework of explicit and tacit knowledge and what emerges in the two publications is a result of the encounter of these different types of knowledge: formal theory, practice wisdom and the daily working environment being acted upon by newly generated research data. It is essentially an iterative and reflexive process (Fook, 2001, pp.127-30; May, 1997, pp.30-1). Bryman (2001, pp.8-11, quotation p.10) describes it as ‘a weaving back and forth between data and theory’ involving elements of both inductive and deductive processes.

The research was subsequently cited in Weinstein’s Placement Survey (1992). This survey was produced at the behest of the Minister of Health following a high

level meeting concerning the placement 'crisis' (*Ibid.*, p.5) to which I refer above. Weinstein refers to my research in a brief literature review (*Ibid.*, p.9), noting that although research studies 'have been mainly small scale and localized, the findings have been surprisingly consistent across the UK', suggesting that it is reasonable to extrapolate from the findings so as to contribute to policy formulation. Weinstein's work paved the way for the Practice Learning Fund arrangements, which have continued to support social work practice teaching to the present day.

5. College Reflections on Practice Theory (1995)

In 1989, I moved to Croydon College and worked there for the next six years as a senior lecturer. Two publications were produced during this period. I shall first consider the most substantial, which was a full length peer reviewed article published in *Social Work Education*. The article set out to capture the impact of my movement between practice and academic settings, the cycle of the practicum as one reflects in and then on action. It explores theories of practice and practice theories and whether or not, cutting across the paradigms, a common core of social work knowledge, values and identity exists. The article is an exercise in theory building, drawing on my own experience of practice, teaching, reading, research and reflection (Fook, 2001, p.131).

The impetus for writing it came from the encounter of my own practice theories with the need to teach the range of formal theories of practice in the classroom. It is closely interwoven with preceding and succeeding publications and is pivotal to the development of my thinking. I looked back at the earlier monograph on practice teaching and saw it in a new light (Elliott, 1995, p.9):

In looking back at this monograph, I think it was written, in part, as a working out – a making articulate, with a search for its theoretical sources – of the practice theory that I had developed through my practice experiences, which included experiences as a teacher and learner of practice. This practice theory, I feel, was not just a personal synthesis, but represented instead something of a collective base of knowledge, values and skills that existed about me in the agency, and that acquired a strength through having a central core to it.

The monograph articulated a theoretically well grounded, coherent but rather narrow approach to practice. Croydon College broadened my horizons and, in *College Reflections*, I built on the monograph to develop a more complex and versatile theoretical framework for practice, particularly applicable to generic statutory settings. This process was later taken a step further in the AASW portfolio.

Something I wished to achieve with the article was to integrate anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) more fully into my writing than had been achieved in the monograph. At the time of writing the monograph, the ADP agenda was sending shock waves through the social work profession and I was a participant in some of the challenging and confrontative training that characterized the mid-1980s. As argued in the monograph in terms of processes of learning, it is at such moments that the 'integrative task exceeds integrative capacity' (Elliott, 1990, p.26; quotation from Towle, 1968, pp.133-4). Consequently, ADP was, in a sense, bolted on and not integrated in the monograph. In *College Reflections*, on the other hand, I achieved a fuller and, I think, more convincing integration of ADP into the value base. The typology that is worked out in the article, with particular but not exclusive reference to probation policy and practice, concerning coercing, imposing and oppressing, has a strength to it that is carried over into subsequent work.

While writing this article, I observed from the vantage point of Croydon College rapid changes in the probation service and an increasingly coercive stance emanating from the policy makers. The growth of managerialism within the service appeared to undermine any senior management bulwark against this coercive drift. The article, therefore, explored at length the issue of professional practice and autonomy within politicized fields of social policy, linking this closely with the underpinning value base of practice (Elliott, 1995, see especially pp.17-21). The pressure of events was bringing out clearly the core themes to the published work that were identified in the Introduction to this Commentary.

I had an insight into the impact of my work when, some years later at Kingston University, an external examiner reported to me that 'all the good students' at another university were quoting this article positively in their essays (personal

communication, with permission). This seems an appropriate outcome because the article arose out of the dynamic of the classroom and the questioning curiosity of the students.

6. Review Article of Selected Papers from the 1991 British Criminology Conference (1994)

The Qualification of Probation Officers: Thoughts for the Future (1997)

In 1993, I wrote a review article for the peer reviewed *Issues in Social Work Education* on the two volumes of Selected Papers from the British Criminology Conference, 1991. These volumes included Nellis's (1992) seminal paper on the future of probation training. Nellis cogently argued for the separation of probation qualifying education from that of social work and for the creation of a Diploma in Crime Management. I argued against this, taking forward Nellis's own point that 'the most telling argument' against this separation is that 'it is vital for probation staff to be educated alongside other social workers so that they can develop an understanding and a skill in implementing social work values' (Elliott, 1994, pp.101-2). In the event, the separation did take place, fortunately along the lines advocated by Nellis, who is rooted in concepts of a strong professional identity and academic freedom.

In 1995, the requirement that probation officers hold a social work qualification was rescinded (Worthington, 1996, pp.5-6). Worthington refers to the 'despair' (*Ibid.*, p.10) of this period until the election of a Labour government in 1997 held the prospect that the new qualification would be of a valid professional standard. The outcome was the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) that combines a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 4 with a university awarded degree. During the gestation of the DipPS, I wrote the article (Elliott, 1997) that was published in the peer reviewed *Probation Journal*. The article appraised the suitability of national vocational qualifications for professional and higher education and particularly argued that the new qualification should have a strong autonomous educational base linked to universities and an award that is under university control. I was concerned – and

remain concerned – about the issue of academic freedom, which relates to the underlying themes of this Commentary: that within a democratic and pluralist society there needs to space for an ‘independent and critical voice’ (Youll and Walker, 1995, p.214) vested in peer professional and academic communities even within – and, indeed, specifically within – such contested and politicized fields as criminal justice (see Havel, 1989, pp.43-50 for a vivid analysis of the converse, namely the oppressive power of ideology in a non-pluralist state).

This concern can be seen in the challenge involved in maintaining critical reflective practice and learning within strongly managerialist and audit cultures. Knight and Ward (2001, quotation p.181; Nellis, 2001, pp.419-26; Adamson and Asquith, 2004) provide a careful, largely positive assessment of the DipPS but quote with some agreement from the *Probation Journal* article:

Other concerns include the fear that:

‘NVQs are employer led and, in a managerial age, management can be reduced, as McWilliams put it, to a “second order activity”, a conduit for implementing populist political policies, and there is a need for alternative power bases that are not so directly beholden to their political bosses’ (Elliott, 1997, p.207).

Thus we share the concerns of some social work commentators --- but we have found that there is scope for a reflective and critical approach [within the DipPS].

Treadwell’s (2006) recent assessment of the DipPS, however, is less positive. He finds evidence of a disjunction between the vocational and academic components of the programme with insufficient time and support for students to develop a reflective criticality. He argues that ‘the academic component is not adequately protected’ (*Ibid.*, p.10) while the NVQ based vocational element can encourage an unquestioning procedural authoritarianism on the part of the student / trainees.

The DipPS is heavily dependent upon integrated delivery between the training consortia and the probation areas, which between them are responsible for the NVQ,

and the universities, which hold the degree awarding power under fixed term contracts. As the Regulations put it at the inception of the DipPS: 'Programmes have a joint responsibility to ensure a climate conducive to learning. As this is an employment-led programme with a great deal of time being spent in the agency the climate of the agency for learning will be crucial to success' (Diploma in Probation Studies, 1998, p.7; Elliott, 1999; Elliott, 2003 for an exploration of the development of such a learning culture in a probation and DipPS context). Services may not prove to be safe custodians of this integrated educational experience when under financial, staffing and policy pressures. Articles in the *NAPO News* for May 2004 capture something of the pressure and demoralization under which parts of the probation service are operating and which can undermine the learning environment for the services' student / trainees (Davies, 2004, p.3; Fletcher, 2004, pp.6, 11; also Farrow, 2004). At times like this, education may not be classed as the service's priority or even a primary function.

Nellis (2001, pp.427-8) expressed concerns about the long term future of the DipPS in light of such operational policies and pressures, increasing centralization and amalgamation with the prison service, which has since reached its apogee with the proposals for the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Referring to managerialist 'new vocationalism', he argues (*Ibid.*, pp.421-2) that there is

a strong moral case for resisting its implicit claim to produce "better" professionals, and for affirming a more humanistic, more rounded approach to training, which encourages "thoughtfulness", in both its intellectual and its ethical sense --- This seems particularly important in organisations which deal with those whom the wider society reviles, organisations where "de-civilising" tendencies might easily flourish unless consciously held in check --- In such organisations it is essential that employees (and trainees) are given both the opportunity and the intellectual resources for reflection as moral agents, not only on the immediate task in hand, but also on the broader context and longer-term consequences of their work.

With the creation of NOMS, the probation service *per se* will cease to exist, requiring a new strategy for training future offender managers and programme implementers. The high costs of a degree level qualification such as the DipPS (Elliott, 1999, Appendix 3) are unlikely to survive this reorganization. NVQs at level three and lower level awards and courses are already embedded within the probation service. Moving to a miscellaneous employer-led structure of awards and courses, if developed within NOMS as the future style for qualifying training, would not meet the professional and intellectual benchmarks to which the DipPS aspired and would usher in a process of de-professionalization in the services provided for offenders.

7. Working with Structural and Ideological Change: An Example from Probation (2001)

The return to practice in 1995 began a period of professional growth and consolidation. The AASW came to provide the focus for this development and it generated a wealth of primary practice material. Directly from this work have come two publications, the first being a University of East Anglia Social Work Monograph (Elliott, 2001) on penology and probation practice, published under the academic editorship of Ann McDonald at the School of Social Work, UEA. The second piece is an article on learning processes and action research (Elliott, 2003), which I will consider in the next section of this Commentary. The UEA monograph will be discussed first. It is my most substantial social work / probation publication to date, encompassing what I term structural, organizational and operational levels of analysis (Lymbery and Butler, 2004, apply a similar approach using the terms macro, mezzo and micro. Stevenson (2004, p.225), in her chapter in this book states, with reference to these different levels of analysis, that '[p]rescriptions and exhortations which are not based on an appreciation of the contexts within which social workers function are largely futile'. I hope all my writing endorses this viewpoint).

The monograph uses the article *College Reflections* for its theory base – hence the pivotal nature of this article – and all my previous writing is interwoven into it (Elliott, 2001, p.7):

My return to practice provided me with the opportunity to test the feasibility of this theorising [*College Reflections on Practice Theory*] in front line practice, under the pressures of a full caseload and within the complex policy and organisational environment where the social work discourse is clearly not in the ascendant. As Schon (1987, p.3) expresses it only too graphically, reflection *on* professional practice needs to be tested by reflection *in* the world of operational reality, which he calls the 'swampy lowland': it is 'In the swampy lowland [that] messy, confusing problems defy technical solution'.

Clearly, however, exposure to practice – the need to take forward practice wisdom and to ‘unearth’ one’s ‘tacit knowledge’ (Fook, 2001, p.129) – led to developments in the theory articulated in *College Reflections*. This can mainly be seen in two respects. Further reading and close critiques of my practice through the AASW portfolio led me to the concept of metatheoretical practice, which, in turn, linked with the development of a model for evaluated, evidence based practice (Elliott, 2001, pp.29, 35-8; Thompson, 1995, p.59).

Gould (1999, pp.66-9, quotation p.68; Reid, 1994, pp.473-6) describes ‘practice as a form of ongoing inquiry and evaluation that produces new knowledge’. The process is reflexive in that it involves self-critique and progression in one’s practice and understanding of it (Fook, 2001, pp.127-31; Gibbs, 2001, pp.696-8). Such an approach to practice may be described as practitioner research, the credibility of which rests upon the rigour and discipline with which it is conducted. That is why the mechanism of producing a portfolio, under external supervisory guidance, for examination against evidenced benchmark standards and competencies, is essential for underpinning the publications that have arisen from the AASW. Ultimately, the reflexive process and the practice to which it relates has been subject to the research disciplines of data gathering; documentation; analysis, interpretation and theorising; articulation and peer examination. The publication of the monograph was the culmination of this process that had developed over the course of many years.

The Croydon office and South East London Probation Service were at the forefront of many practice developments that have since been widely implemented across the national service. Exposure to this practice environment allowed the monograph to prove prescient and it retains relevance to the penal environment of

2005-6. In order to explore this further, I read the monograph again in the light of current debate in probation and academic circles.

The monograph opens with the assertion that social work remains a valid professional base for probation practice (McIvor, 2004, for a discussion of Scotland where probation has remained to date within generic social work settings). The approach to practice developed within the monograph is metatheoretical and evidence based, with an emphasis on practitioner evaluated practice. The overall orientation to practice has strong narrative qualities. Practice, it is argued, should provide a trustworthy and coherent experience for the client, which encompasses an holistic awareness and engagement with her/his world (Butler and Drakeford, 2005, pp.649-51). Arising from this comes the possibility of engaging (ex-)offenders as active agents in the work. These approaches are pervasive throughout the monograph and are repeated clearly in the Recommendations (Elliott, 2001, pp.49-53).

These issues remain of concern and retain currency in today's debate about probation practice. Kemshall *et al.* (2004) identify failings in the provision of an adequate infrastructure to support the What Works initiative within the Probation Service (Elliott, 2001, pp.9-10 for a brief introduction to this initiative). Referring to the overly programme-based and largely cognitive-behavioural focus that characterizes these developments, they (Kemshall *et al.*, 2004, p.175) note 'the tendency of functional specialisms to compartmentalise and to create a fragmented journey through the service for the offender'. Merrington and Stanley (2004, p.17; Robinson, 2005) present the need to establish case management's pivotal role in managing the assessment, pacing and referral of people subject to supervision. They go so far as to state 'the quality of case management as a whole could be more

influential than individual interventions'². They consider that target driven referrals for commencements contribute to the high attrition rates that have dogged the implementation of What Works (Home Office, 2004, pp.1-6; Mair, 2004, 22-8; Elliott, 2001, pp.31-2). All these commentators are identifying an imbalanced and fragmented approach to service delivery that is a persistent theme within the monograph.

How enforcement and effective practice interact also remains a contested area, with Hedderman and Hough (2004; Falk, 2004) publishing research evidence that bears out the cautionary note sounded by Hedderman and Hearnden in 2000 and quoted in the monograph (Elliott, 2001, pp.24-6, 32, 53). A case is emerging for taking less of a sanction based approach to enforcement and more of a reward based approach to compliance. Yet, far from moving in this direction, current enforcement regimes reflect a ratcheting up in overall sentencing patterns (*Ibid*, pp.14, 24-6), with resulting distortions in sentencing and a prison population that is threatening to become out of control. This trend is now a major driving concern behind policy (Morgan, 2003, pp.12-16; Carter, 2003, pp.9-12; Blunkett, 2004, pp.8-9; Dobson, 2004, p.145-7).

Within this correctional environment, the use of language remains an issue. In the monograph and generally in my professional speech, I opted not to use the generic term 'offender', preferring to reserve this term for contextually specific purposes: a stand that cut directly against prevailing usage. In recognizing the power of language (Thompson, 2001, pp.30-3), there are evident risks that a profession can, over time, become inured to a vocabulary of objectifying and oppressive language, attitudes and behaviour. Mantle and Moore (2003, p.306) identify this tendency in today's

² Probation terminology is being used here, distinguishing assessment and case management from 'interventions', by which is meant the delivery of treatment or training programmes.

probation service, describing examples of current language that are 'indicative of the corruption of care' that, they argue, is (*Ibid.*, p.299) 'already well established in the probation service'. The link between this correctional agenda and the growth of an instrumentalist culture, whereby rehabilitation is no more than one of many means to the end of risk assessment and management, which is central to the policy analysis presented in the monograph (Elliott, 2001, pp.11-17, 22-4), continues to be developed in the literature. Robinson and McNeill (2004, p.296) use the term 'punitive drift' to describe the consequences in policy and practice of this instrumentalism that, it seems to me, aptly describes much of the current climate.

The future of the service rests with the National Offender Management Service and the continuing move towards a correctional agency that has lost the social work part of its own history seems probable in the current political and policy climate. Yet the relational and social work discourse of work with offenders persists. The practice implications of desistance research, which explores people's movement from offending to 'going straight' in terms of 'life paths' (Maruna *et al.*, 2004, pp.221-4; Farrall, 2002), points in the direction of an holistic, narrative and relationship based approach to practice. This research is beginning to have a significant impact, even to the extent that the concept of relationship is slowly re-emerging in the language used at policy making levels (Burnett and McNeill, 2005, pp.222-6). Burnett and McNeill argue that work with offenders should move towards a new 'desistance paradigm' that links the building of individual and social capital, or capacities, with clients' understanding of their own narrative and reconstruction of its potentialities. Such work is challenging and involves a mix of practical and emotional help for the client. Who, they ask, 'would risk engaging in such a precarious and threatening venture

without the reassurance of sustained and compassionate support?' (*Ibid.*, pp.235-7, quotation p.236).

Smith (2005; Robinson, 2005) reviews recent probation history in relation to social work, noting how all references to social work discourses have been expunged from professional correctional language. Yet, as with Burnett and McNeill, he discerns signs that this is now changing because (Smith, 2005, p.634)

--- for all the rhetoric of punishment and public protection, risk management and enforcement, when practitioners decide what they are actually going to do to engage and motivate clients, help them access resources and convey a sense of hope in the possibility of constructive change, they will find themselves using ideas and skills that have emerged from social work theory and research. This will be true whether they know it or not, but it would be better if they did know it, and were able to locate their work in the heritage to which it belongs.

The monograph begins by stating that (Elliott, 2001, p.i) 'the probation officer's professionalism lies with social work'. It may be that the arguments presented in defence of this position relate not to a vanishing culture, as in many respects seems to be the case, but to a future renaissance of social work practice within criminal justice settings, driven by the weight of empirical evidence drawing substantially upon realistic evaluation approaches (Farrall, 2002, pp.31-8, 222-6).

8. Portfolio Creation, Action Research and the Learning Environment (2003)

The most recent article was published in 2003 but, as with the monograph, it is rooted in the practice context that lies behind the AASW portfolio. At heart, the article amounts to a positive statement about the power of educational endeavour in people's lives and serves also to reinforce the practice recommendations with which the preceding monograph ends.

The spur to the article came with my arrival at Kingston University in 2001 and, as part of my teaching responsibilities, renewed exposure to the range of research methodologies. Again I was crossing boundaries, reflecting on and in practice. This time, the material was linked to the Diploma in Management that I had completed as a senior practitioner in South East London Probation Service, which had contributed significantly to the AASW portfolio. My focus was management as a vehicle for nurturing a learning environment within the work setting. I observed how the process of the project work undertaken for the Diploma in Management aligned itself against the action research cycle. The AASW portfolio provided a disciplined framework to the process in the same way as research commentaries and reports do. In producing this article, I had the advantage of working within a University environment, with ready access to library, supervisory and other research facilities. In particular, there was the opportunity for a trial run of my ideas before submitting for publication by presenting a paper at the annual School of Social Work research conference (Elliott, 2002).

The action research methodology in *Portfolio Creation, Action Research and the Learning Environment* is fully articulated and worked through. It demonstrates a striving after open and participative approaches to practice and management, and will not be elaborated on here. The action research also included a small but significant

piece of more conventional qualitative research that explored the early stages of the Diploma in Probation Studies and the impact of Diploma students and a practice development assessor on the culture of the workplace as a learning environment. This research formed the most substantial assignment for the Management Diploma (Elliott, 1999; material from this research is published in Elliott, 2003, pp.338, 341).

This case study research (Denscombe, 1998, pp.30-2) took place in my practice setting. Data gathering was triangulated (Patton, 2002, pp.555-6, 559-60). Three parallel open-question questionnaires (Denscombe, 1998, pp.101, 104-7) were designed for practitioners, trainee probation officers and practice development assessor to complete. Additionally, there was a guided interview (Patton, 2002, pp.343-4) for trainee probation officers and practice development assessor. Finally, I drew upon documentary and personal knowledge of the programme and its context within the setting investigated. Data analysis was along similar lines to the research into practice teaching (Elliott, 1988). Material was generated on the multi-layered understanding that respondents had of the learning process within the work setting, not only in formal training and in reflective time with colleagues and DipPS students / trainees – who were described by one respondent as generating a workplace ‘culture of curiosity’ – but also in direct work with clients. The effective practice agenda and cognitive-behavioural approaches place a premium upon learning and learning styles in work with clients and this creates an opportunity for learning, at all levels, to become a pervasive culture within the practice environment. Indeed, one experienced practitioner was also alert to principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1984, pp.55-61 & 76-8, citing Rogers, 1983): ‘some of my clients also teach me things!’ (Elliott, 1999, pp.4-7). Being engaged in this research provided a complement to and means of

informing the 'practicum' (Schon, 1987, pp.18-21, 36-40) that was at the heart of the action research (Elliott, 2003, pp.336-40).

The interdisciplinary possibilities in a very different setting of the portfolio / action research / practicum model developed in the article is shown by this email from Dr. Christopher Hartmann, Assistant Professor at Georgia State University (personal communication, 2004, quoted with permission):

Portfolio Research Article. I shared the article with a colleague who used it recently in a seminar for mathematics teachers who have recently passed the National Board Certification for mathematics teachers (a portfolio based assessment) and are beginning to engage in action research as a next stage in their professional development. My colleague said that your article provoked a lively discussion and a lot of positive energy towards their collective project.

Redmond (2004) reports on research that has parallels with my work. She also linked the action research cycle with a reflective practicum. Her work was inter-disciplinary with health and social care practitioners and it was conducted from a university, not a practice, base. She describes (*Ibid.*, chapter 4 and pp.137-41) the multiple layers of learning and teaching that develop through the action research cycle, which enables the teacher to develop reflective teaching that mirrors the stages of reflection through which the students move in the practicum.

My concerns over how robust the DipPS (or an equivalent) is, in the long term, as a professional qualification and how favourable and supportive the probation service is in providing centres of learning, with some real room for free enquiry, are expressed earlier in this Commentary and were also voiced in the *Probation Journal* article (Elliott, 1997). The action research article is, in a way, my riposte to these concerns. What is described, in terms of reflective enquiring practice and the generation of an overtly supportive learning environment not only for formal students / trainees but also for all professional staff, was actually achieved, in the real world, in

a busy pressurized office. The article, therefore, is a record of team-based activity but it is also for me the achievement of a management goal: the blending of learning, practice, reflection and the research creation of new knowledge.

At this point, the themes of probation / penal policy, ethical professional practice and the processes of learning, teaching and knowledge creation that thread their way through the publications come together most explicitly. They are exemplified by the ‘personal development areas’ that I undertook in the Diploma in Management (Elliott, 2003, p.337):

Hence, the personal development areas I adopted for the management diploma – the planning a change in the action research cycle – naturally revolved around skills development and learning as follows:

- To undertake personal study to develop skills and knowledge, particularly in staff supervision and reflective practice.
- To enable team cultural change and development, promoting the ‘practicum’ (Schon, 1987: 18-21, 36-40), that is a forum for discussion of effective practice and professional skills and values combined with a cycle for assessment and feedback on the quality of practice within the team (see also Pietroni, 1995: 46-8).
- To promote individual officer’s skills development using supervision, the appraisal cycle and organizational monitoring of officer’s work.

The difficulties of achieving these goals within ‘an increasingly managerialist and controlling culture’ are noted but the strength and versatility that lies in the alternative culture of social work supervision is seen as potentially up to the task. This links back to the first publications (Elliott, 1988; Elliott, 1990; also Elliott, 2001, p.28) on the importance of balanced tripartite social work supervision that can counterbalance the combined tendencies of organizational defences against anxiety and managerialist procedural centralization. The social, economic and political policies that drive an ever harsher penal discourse cannot be gainsaid (Jordan, 1996; Garland, 2001; Kendall, 2004) but my argument is that there is a robust professional culture and

tradition to which practitioners can appeal and from which they can draw strength and guidance in their daily practice.

Looking back at the reflections on values and ethics presented above in Section One, I think the career described in these publications has fallen during a time of tension – maybe more properly conflict – between two ‘moral voices’ (Banks, 2004, pp.174-8). The professional traditions of the service, to which I refer, are essentially derived from Kantian and virtue ethics. They relate to the *vocationalism* of a ‘service ideal’ (*Ibid.*, pp.53-60, 138-9; McBeath and Webb, 2002, pp.1020-4 for a juxtaposition of Kant and virtue ethics) and they contrast with an ethics of equity and contract. The latter allows room for greater utilitarian instrumentalism and is depicted by Banks, in relation to today’s public services, as ‘the new accountability’ (2004, pp.149-55). There is, however, a risk in the managerialist ‘new accountability’ of moving instrumentally into a practice that is controlling and oppressive. This is particularly the case when the ‘service user’ voice is that of minority groups who are marginalized, reviled and deemed in need of control, or, to use language with a longer lineage, is that of the ‘undeserving’ within the modern opportunity society as opposed to that of the ‘deserving’: ‘the other’ against whom defensive practices are erected (Butler and Drakeford, 2005, pp.647-9; Cooper and Lousada, 2005, pp.49-52, 86-8).

It can be argued that the social, economic and political forces depicted by Jordan (1996), Garland (2001) and Kendall (2004) result in the polarization between these two ‘moral voices’ and the increasing dominance of one over the other. By contrast, Berlin (1969, 2003), Havel (1989) and Jordan (1985, 1989: here writing as a political philosopher), all of whom are political and moral philosophers who have engaged directly within a conflictual world, present alternative visions which share a concern that no single and centralized authority should achieve dominance. They all

call for pluralist societies in which moral – not solely pragmatic, instrumentalist or a monopolizing ideological – debate takes place ‘otherwise we are bound to lose our way’ (Berlin, 2003, p.19; Bisman, 2004, pp.116-20). Without such debate, it is argued, ‘individuals will relapse into competitive self-interest, and elites will use power on behalf of interest groups’ (Jordan, 1989, p.85), eventually possibly creating a social system characterized by ‘conformity, uniformity and discipline’ (Havel, 1989, p.44).

These are perspectives that take me beyond the areas covered in the publications reviewed in this Commentary. They raise questions that I hope I may be able to explore in the future, moving beyond probation and the correctional services to consider more widely the ethics of public welfare provision in today’s social, economic and political climate.

9. Conclusion

The publications discussed in this Commentary espouse the theme of ‘preserving an independent and critical voice in social work [and probation] – the peer professional community’ (Youll and Walker, 1995, p.214), with the need for this to be supported by the twin pillars of a sound ethical professional base and a robust educational, academic and research community. The publications track a profession that is exposed to ever tighter political, policy and instrumentalist prescription. There is probation’s early brush with management by objectives (Elliott, 1990, pp.8-9) leading to emerging coercive tendencies but with the promise that the first edition of National Standards was ripe for being ‘naturalised’ into mainstream social work practice (Elliott, 1994, p.102; 1995, pp.13, 19-21). Then there are growing concerns that a theoretical monoculture, ‘punitive drift’ (Robinson and McNeill, 2004, p.296) and rehabilitative instrumentalism are threatening to distort and possibly destroy the balance in probation practice (Elliott, 2001, chapter VII; Kendall, 2004). These themes are most fully developed in the monograph *Working with Structural and Ideological Change* (2001), which contains both critique and recommendations for good practice.

Additionally, the writing has been dedicated to generation of knowledge and the role of the practitioner as a contributor to knowledge. Gould (1999, pp.63-77, quotation p.68) states that ‘there is now a substantive body of empirical and theoretical work that characterizes [social work] practice as itself a form of qualitative inquiry, knowledge building and evaluation’. I would add that this moves into research when there is (Elliott, 2003, p.334) ‘deliberate and disciplined data collection, analysis and theorising’ which, in the case of action and accountable practitioner research, leads ‘through the research cycle, to the implementation of

changes in practice'. Within the career-practicum's cycle of reflection in and reflection on practice, I have undertaken research, study and writing in pursuit of such knowledge generation: the 'critical dialogue' (England, 1986, p.125) required for professional practice. This theme, however, is most explicitly expressed in the final article, *Portfolio Creation, Action Research and the Learning Environment* (2003). This article argues for and sets out guidance for enabling and nurturing a learning environment within practice settings in a way that links individual learning with organizational growth and change. But it argues that these endeavours need to be supported by an underpinning professional culture and linked to independent, externally validated educational and academic centres.

The publications, therefore, may be summarized in process and thematic terms but are there any overall conclusions that may be drawn from this body of work? What, in sum, has the work contributed to the field of professional knowledge within social work? Three types of contribution may be identified:

- the distinctive quality of the publications as a record of a 'practicum career';
- a set of theoretical contributions to social work practice that stand in their own right;
- by pulling all the themes together, light is shed on how practitioners can navigate a value-based professional career path within today's complex and fluid organizational and policy world.

I shall address each of the above in turn but examine the third point in some detail because the ideas are implicit rather than explicit in the publications.

First, the publications provide an unusually extended record of reflective engagement with a changing, complex and contested field of public welfare practice.

This record is more than a series of snapshots – if it were only that, its value in this respect would be limited – but rather it is a coherent sequence of papers that develops themes and cross-refers within itself. The emphasis on themes and process issues in this Commentary underlines this aspect of the publications. This critically reflective set of publications makes its own distinctive contribution to the scholarship of social work.

Second, the publications explore a number of theoretical lines of enquiry, by which I mean the development of principles that inform practice. Pilalis (1986, pp.92-5; Redmond, 2004, p.65) characterizes the integration of theory and practice as the dialectical intersecting of ‘abstract, reflective thought processes’ and ‘purposeful action’. The theory in the publications is the product of such a dialectic. Two examples may be given. The first is the creation of a learning environment within practice settings and the pivotal role of reflective tripartite supervision in this, which involves administrative, educative and supportive dimensions. This requires trust in professional supervisory relationships. The action research article takes this work forward and is a pioneering examination of the possibilities of linking portfolio study, the reflective practicum and action research to create a learning environment within a practice setting. With this action research reflective practicum, I went beyond the closed supervisory relationship to explore the whole-team culture as a learning environment and how this could be facilitated within a modern managerialist and instrumentalist context. The agency’s policy context may assist a reflective learning environment to a greater or lesser degree but ultimately it is the presence of an adequate supervisory structure that determines whether such an environment will exist.

The second example is the core message that runs throughout the publications. It comprises the central place of the relationship in good social work and relationship building as a prerequisite for successful social work. The vehicle for exploring this theme has been provided by first hand experience of the transformation of a public service agency from an avowed social work agency to a criminal corrections service. The distinctive nature of the work lies in the reflective working through of the tensions between values, policy and practice that exposure to this transformation has entailed.

To say that the central quality of social work is a relational one is to make a value statement, which places a premium on intention and process. It is a statement of service ideal from which one's whole approach to the work flows. But it is also to make an empirical, research based statement. Change occurs within a context of trust (Butler and Drakeford, 2005, pp.649-51). The importance placed by service users upon the 'ethical qualities of relationship' was established thirty years ago in seminal research by Sainsbury (1975, chapter 6, quotation p.89). These same qualities are also necessary ingredients in any successful work with service users that achieves change or relief. Within the field of offending, for example, the research evidence upon which this claim is made continues to accumulate (Farrall, 2002; Robinson, 2005, pp.312-15; Burnett and McNeill, 2005, pp.231-5). But for many years this approach has been sidelined – as a practitioner, I can attest to it being scoffed at – in the face of other policy, managerial and operational priorities. Robinson (2005, pp.309-10) describes how this has reached the point whereby the principle of relationship has been undermined by practice that is 'highly fragmented *by design*, and based on a new understanding of offenders as 'actuarial objects'' (italics in original). Hence the importance, as a probation practitioner, of practising, declaring and writing about the

social work principle of relationship through these years. Indeed, it may be that the weight of this evidence will, at last, begin to turn the tide against the techno-rational culture of current public services (Butler and Drakeford, 2005, pp.642-7). This is the cautious conclusion reached by Smith (2005, pp.633-4) and Burnett and McNeill (2005) even for probation in their surveys of recent developments.

The third of the contributions to professional knowledge that the publications make results from these tensions between values, policy and practice and relates to how this has an impact upon people's career choices in terms of the type of setting and agency in which they seek employment. The issue is how the degree of flexibility required for relationship based practice and reflective engagement with theory may be achieved by the practitioner. What aspects of a practice and agency setting should a practitioner look for that would indicate the setting is hospitable to such practice? This question can relate to all personal services within public welfare and not just social work. The value based themes, developed over the years in the publications, come together to shed light on this issue.

The years covered by these publications cover a time when institutional frameworks have become less stable while far more fluid structures and cultures have become the norm (Arnold, 1997, pp.20-30; Cooper and Dartington, 2004). It can no longer be anticipated that a career will be built within a stable agency underpinned by a consistent value base of public service (Banks, 2004, pp.37-45; Cooper and Lousada, 2005, pp.4-6, 195-7). This is a consequence of the same powerful globalizing and political developments that are explored in the publications in relation to penological developments and the structural pressures bearing upon the criminal justice system. What we have is an unstable post-modern environment (Smith, 1997, pp.46-9).

Within this environment, an array of push – pull factors will apply themselves on the professional. There is less stability in terms of employment, while the nature of policy and even practice itself are open to rapid change in ways that can be outside the practitioner's control or influence. Employees require multiple skills, flexibility and continuing education and training to ensure continuity of employment, career development and access to jobs that provide an amenable culture of practice values: 'portfolio careers' (Cooper and Dartington, 2004, pp.133-5) epitomise this developing labour market. Yet professionalism involves a relatively stable sense of 'service ideal' (Banks, 2004, pp.53-60, 138-9), a need for congruity between practice realities and a value base. Individuals will vary in their 'service ideal' and they will have their own understanding of and boundaries over the nature of social work and what is acceptable and unacceptable within it (Howe, 1987, pp.15, 166-9; Elliott, 1995, pp.5-10). Ultimately, however, social work is a moral activity and practitioners are accountable as active moral agents for their actions (Bisman, 2004).

The publications can be seen, if taken as a whole, to set out a framework within which the professional can position her/himself in relation to the practice environment. The framework poses a number of questions about the nature of the institutional, policy and practice setting which provide a mechanism for examining the congruence between the individual's 'service ideal' and the requirements of practice. The factors that need to be addressed are:

- Negative freedom. To what extent is practice bounded by regulation, with professional responses to problems and issues being predetermined? All safe social work practice has boundaries and, as a publicly accountable profession, practice takes place within a regime of law, policy and procedure. But the degree of regulation between settings can vary greatly and extremes of regulation can

deny space to both practitioner and service user to act with moral agency (Cooper and Lousada, 2004, pp.44-6, 81-2).

- Positive freedom. This concerns the opportunities for practitioners to pursue their own projects and the extent to which initiatives of this sort are actively encouraged. Reflection in practice entails questioning the routine, acceptance of uncertainty and ‘experimentation, exploration and evaluation’ (Redmond, 2004, p.144). Is there opportunity within the practice setting for such an approach?
- Values criteria. These are wide ranging and I will make reference to the typology developed in the article *College Reflections on Practice Theory* (Elliott, 1995) not out of any claim to exclusivity but because this article contains a deliberate exercise in benchmarking practice against a set of values criteria. The typology involves the tests of imposition, oppression and coercion of service users. These tests do not relate to absolutes but to a spectrum of behaviours. For example, a profession that is involved with public safety will sometimes be required to act coercively. But it is possible to make hard decisions in the exercise of appropriate authority and carry people with you if there is respectful authenticity, moral congruence and belief in the possibility of change in the practitioner’s actions and relationship. These attributes can assist in enabling the service user to identify and assume responsibility for acting with moral agency through which s/he can gain a sense of self-actualization and empowerment, such as can be found in the narrative constructions of desisting offenders (Maruna *et al.*, 2004, pp.225-9).
- Practice and staff development. The issue here is the extent to which the practice setting supports tripartite – administrative, educative and supportive - supervision. Each of the three modes of supervision is required, although not necessarily contained within the 1:1 relationship, if practice is to flourish. This approach to

supervision is relational, that is it mirrors good practice. Canton and Eadie (2004) examine youth justice practice in today's highly regulated environment. In their examination of a complex case example (*Ibid.*, pp.215-20), the sought-after combination of high accountability with high professional discretion is shown to require an open and understanding supervisory relationship with the line manager. The manager needs to trust the worker's assessment if early enforcement is to be avoided and the worker needs the manager's authorization to gain the time and opportunity to get alongside and, in turn, acquire the trust and active engagement of the client.

- Knowledge criteria. Does the field of practice contain a zone of academic freedom? Does knowledge creation and learning have some genuine independence from employer interests? This is required especially at the levels of professional qualification and research. Such independence and plurality can also be achieved – although not exclusively so – by practitioners as knowledge creators in their own right. Practice based environments that are supportive of learning and research can be developed but this places ‘an onus on employers to recognize the multiple roles held by staff as employees and learners’ (Elliott, 2003, p.341).

The factors discussed above can be summarized as follows:

Factors	Criteria	Questions
Regulatory framework	Positive freedom Negative freedom	What is the balance between positive and negative freedoms for the practitioner? Are both types of freedom present in an appropriate way that caters for individual autonomy?
Values of practice	Example typology: social work that does not: impose oppress coerce Opportunity for relational work and empowerment	How does the choice of methods and delivery of services measure against the values benchmarks? Are the values of practice upheld through the ethical norms of daily conduct?
Support and development of staff	Tripartite supervision: administrative educative supportive	Does the management and practice environment enable a boundaried, accountable and supportive culture of curiosity, learning, development and space for professional judgement and discretion?
Knowledge framework	Continuum of pre to post qualifying learning and accreditation Generation of new knowledge	Is there freedom of enquiry and a supported and open dialogue in knowledge creation between practitioners, management and academia?

The last two of the publications explore the whole range of factors listed above. *Working with Structural and Ideological Change* (2001) explores them across a broad compass – the macro level – in which I examine a whole field of professional practice, within its penological, structural and organizational contexts. This resulted in a wide ranging critique that nevertheless developed a set of good practice recommendations. These recommendations can be mapped against the table presented above. *Portfolio Creation, Action Research and the Learning Environment* (2003) similarly addresses the whole range of factors but, by contrast, at the micro level of the individual team. It explores how, even within a challenging environment where the answers to the questions in the table above are likely to be problematic for the

practitioner, a creative response across the range of factors can be achieved. The outcome was that a learning environment was created which supported professional growth and a sense of personal professional and moral agency. In these ways, the final two publications provide a synthesis and a drawing together of all the themes identified across the whole set of publications.

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