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Striking Ethical Balances: The Contribution of ‘Insider’ Practitioner–Academic Social Work Research in England

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Abstract

Clinical-academics are well established and expanding in English health settings. However, despite growing evidence that research-active organisations improve service quality and outputs, research by social work practitioners remains relatively rare in social work practice in England other than as part of qualifying or post-qualifying study. In this context, the National Institute for Health and Care Research developed new funding streams to support the development of ‘practitioner–academics’, as an equivalent to clinical-academics in health settings. As early career practitioner–academics, who undertake research whilst remaining employed in our social work organisations, we present a case for practitioner–academic research, via two small research projects within our teams based on creative methods and focus groups. These projects illustrate the benefits of practitioner–academics in the knowledge production process, improving access to hard-to-reach research areas, developing swift rapport, which facilitates the production of rich and reliable data, and providing a novel means to navigate ethical issues including researcher positionality and research sensitivity. We also highlight challenges around informed consent, employee roles and researcher bias, including where practitioners are critical of practice within their service areas or are exposed to criticism themselves.

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Introduction

The National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) aims to support the expansion of research capacity within local authorities in England via the Local Authority Academic Fellowship programme. The aim is to develop practitioner–academics in local authorities and related third-sector organisations, by funding training in research skills and encouraging the development of a career pathway for social workers and other local authority staff who wish to divide their time between social work policy and practice, and university-affiliated research. This bridges the gap between being a social worker in practice, seeing research as something unattainable that happens elsewhere, to becoming research-literate and developing skills to develop and carry out research in our own organisations. We recognise there are multiple useful definitions of practitioner–academic research and practitioner research. For this article, we define practitioner–academic in a narrow sense: practising social workers, who undertake research, remain employed in their social work organisations and may or may not hold a formal joint practice-university-based role. This term is used by the NIHR and borrows from the health-related term clinical-academic which means academic researchers who are currently in clinical practice alongside their research role. We define this as distinct from ‘practitioner research’, which is a broader term (Lunt and Shaw, 2017; Shaw and Lunt, 2018). We are not aware of any funded practitioner–academic job roles in England at the time of writing, but we adopt the usage to reflect our practitioner–academic career paths.

This culture of clinical-academic roles is expanding in health care (Olive *et al.*, 2022). As well as improving outcomes, clinical-academics have a contribution that goes beyond simply combining two roles: their contribution to clinical teams is particularly valued in health settings (Newington *et al.*, 2022). However, the experiences of embedding such an approach can be variable. Clinical-academic opportunities have been established in health settings over the last decade, beyond doctors working in hospitals, but the proportion of nursing (1 per cent), midwifery (<1 per cent) and allied health professions (4 per cent) remains low (Olive *et al.*, 2022). Ferguson *et al.* (2021) point to the fragmented nature of the career trajectory for clinical-academics in nursing. It is noted that, unlike doctors, nurses do not have research time in standard contracts, despite most research time being unfunded. Current funding strategies,

whilst being a welcome development, are not yet creating a ‘critical mass’ of clinical-academics (Westwood *et al.*, 2018). All of these issues are amplified in social work where opportunities for practitioner–academic research and practitioner–academic career pathways are rarer.

This article presents two short workplace-based studies by the practitioner–academics based in English social work teams. As co-authors, we are both pre-doctoral local authority fellows, funded by the NIHR to develop our research skills: Burke is a social worker in a regionalised post-adoption support service, and Ashworth is a team manager in a child protection team. As part of our research skills training, these two short practice research projects were undertaken in our respective service areas. Ethical approval was received from the University of Sheffield and all participants provided written consent to take part in the studies.

The two research projects shared common themes that illustrate the value of practitioner–academic research. This was sensitive research, navigating the dual tensions of researcher positionality and employee positionality, as well as additional ethical challenges around exposure, informed consent and researcher bias. We show that, where practitioner–academic positionality can be successfully navigated, we were able to gather rich data, full of tensions and contradictions, which contribute both to our respective research areas and our understanding of research ethics and epistemology.

The research projects

Burke used creative methods with a small group of social workers to understand the problems experienced by people affected by adoption, and Ashworth used focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore social workers’ personal experiences and reflections on their practice during COVID-19. Our research questions focused on social workers’ experiences, how they conceived the problems and what they thought would help.

Research questions

Project 1

1. How do workers draw on knowledge frameworks when thinking about adoptive families?
2. What do workers think are the problems faced by adoptive families?
3. How does the conceptualisation of the problems and how to help, relate to the actual roles they undertake in the post-adoption service?

Project 2

1. What were social workers' experiences of adapting their practice during the pandemic?
2. How did social workers feel about their practice during the pandemic?

Methods

We used creative methods, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with social workers in our own service areas. An original arts-based method, 'creative mind mapping', was developed by Burke for the research. Participants were encouraged to write, draw, cut and stick ideas onto the paper and to identify themes and concepts addressing the problems experienced. We both aimed to navigate our researcher presence (Knowles and Cole, 2008) by attending to areas of disagreement and this proved important in both projects, highlighting new themes not covered by existing literature. Ashworth did this by retaining 'open coding' (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and Burke by recording discussions between participants on speech bubbles, which participants could include, modify or reject, choosing where to place them on the creative mind mapping. Bagnoli (2009) makes a case for enhancing participants' reflexivity through discussion of the piece created, so they can respond to and shape emerging interpretation. The speech bubble technique, and open coding, were both intended to incorporate participants' shaping of the analysis.

Sampling was based on our own teams and service areas, and participants were mixed in terms of ages, gender identity, ethnic background, experience in social care settings and lived experience of social care services. We had a working relationship with all of the participants, including being current colleagues as well as previously line managing three of the participants.

Results

Our methods were effective in drawing out a broad range of conceptual frameworks and themes used by participants to analyse their work, including themes within our research areas that merited further exploration. There is insufficient space to cover the full project-specific findings here, and for this article, we focus on discussing the ethical and epistemological themes that arise from our practitioner–researcher positionalities.

Discussion

Researcher positionality

Navigating an insider role meant at times that participants had to be explicitly asked to explain aspects of their work they assumed the researcher knew (Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2020). Our identity as researchers was questioned, for example, when Burke was asked by a research participant whether this was the first time they had done this.

Our findings revealed the tension between researcher, participants and employer. These range from cartoons expressing the frustrations of young people’s needs not meeting the service remit, or waiting lists, to a full critical exploration of the role. Figure A shows a frustration at the way managers define the role:

‘You can’t just make stuff out of thin air. Or can you?’ [cut from a newspaper and next to it written, ‘Who decides what adoption support is? And how do we find an evidence base for this?’]
‘We mustn’t look away. It’s a moral imperative to stand up against the daily breaches of human rights’ [cut from a newspaper and placed next to what is adoption support?] (Figure A above)

These comments suggest a desire to support families in the context of a restricted remit, directly questioning the employer image as supporting adopters. There is also tangible emotive content. The piece about letter-box contact details the emotions of everyone involved and includes comments like ‘feels like I’m fighting fires’. It is dominated by a large picture

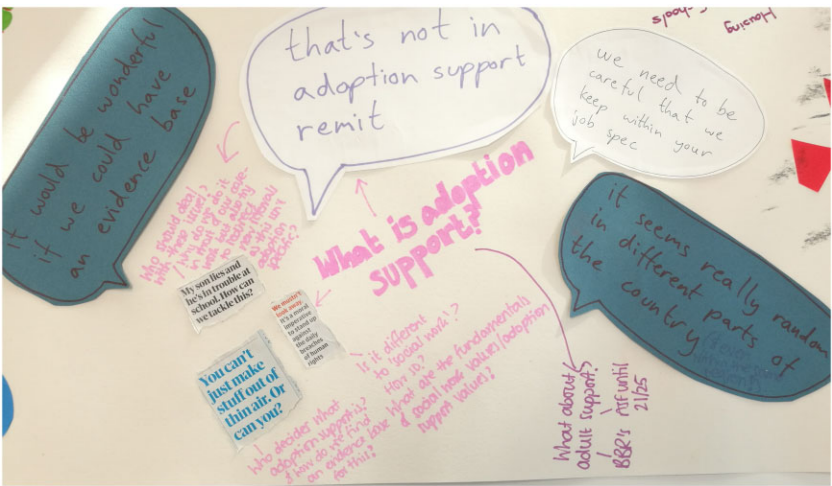


Figure A: What is adoption support? Creative methods piece with post-adoption workers.

of a clock (Figure B), expressing the time taken to process. This has a double meaning: both the administrative task and the emotional sense making involved.

There is an interaction here between the constraints of role definition, and the constraints of emotional self-management when supporting others. As a researcher with a relationship with the employer, this can provide difficult ethical terrain.

The theme of wanting to help but facing procedural- and role-related barriers was expressed multiple times in the creative piece. An additional dimension of this was that we both made a positive choice to complete research within our service areas, even where there was an option to work with a team ‘next door’ in a different service. Building on this work, we are both planning larger research projects based on a shared commitment to develop practitioner–academic roles. Our aim is for all practitioners in our team to become research-literate and for some to be eventually engaged in their own academic research.

Our shared positionality as team-based practitioner–academics raised further questions about informed consent, our own exposure as researcher–employees and research and participant bias where we anticipated differing stories about the work, which would suit institutional, personal and academic contexts. In Project 1, this meant critical stories that might harm the relationship between employees and their employer,

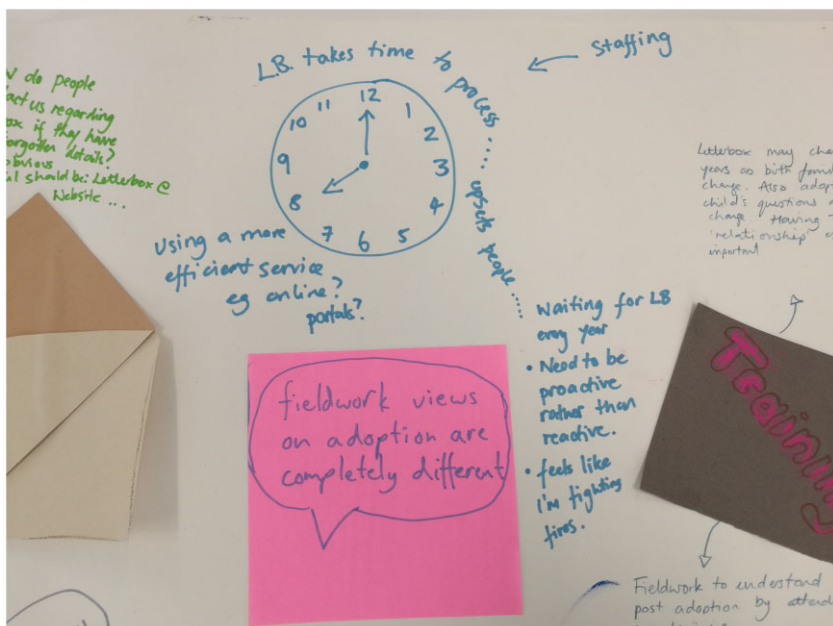


Figure B: Letterbox takes time to process ... feels like I'm fighting fires. Creative methods piece with post-adoption workers.

and the future relationship between the practitioner–academic and their employer. A decision was made during the analysis stage to openly acknowledge this ethical tension, given the overwhelmingly practice-critical theme from all participants.

In contrast, in Project 2, the stories highlighted participants' breach of COVID-19 guidance in a positive light, as supporting the needs of children over unworkable guidance, but nevertheless participants were similarly vulnerable. In both projects, we believe that participants shared much more material, and put themselves in greater positions of vulnerability, than might have been the case with outsider research. We contacted participants with the first draft of this article, inviting them to discuss with us any concerns they may have about what was being presented and to shape the dissemination if they wished. One participant withdrew from the process at this stage, exercising their rights as a research participant and highlighting the ethical tension in presenting practice-critical research. This may have been missed had we simply proceeded on the basis of the written consent we had.

Featherstone and Gupta (2020) draw on Weinberg's (2009) two concepts of 'moral distress' and 'ethical trespass' to explore ethics within adoption. Our positionality as practitioner–academics may have enabled participants to express such distress openly. Moral distress, the feeling when you know something is wrong but procedure dictates you do it, is expressed in Figure C representing two discussions recorded separately but analytically combined by Participant 4 into one piece. Ethical trespass, where every decision involves some infringement of rights, was apparent in the piece exploring letterbox (exchanging letters with birth family following adoption), both by the worker ('should we be intervening?') but also in empathy with the dilemma of a birth parent (Figure D: 'I don't know how to write or what to write/mummy').

Ashworth considered whether there could be any impact on working relationships if, for example, the focus group were to have disagreements resulting in tension or participants feeling undermined. This speaks to the practitioner side of our positionality, where we need to maintain constructive working relationships alongside the research process. Fortunately, this concern did not materialise, and participants were respectful to each other when disagreeing about in-person home visits by non-social work professionals during the 'lockdown' phases of the COVID-19 pandemic:

[Participant 2]...And I know a lot of other agencies, and I'm not saying they've used it as an excuse to not go out, but it seems that it's been quite easy for a lot of other agencies to not go out, and not see these families and, erm, I feel more proud than anything else, about what we've achieved with our families through the pandemic. I don't know if that's fair, I don't know if that's fair comment.

(murmurs of agreement)

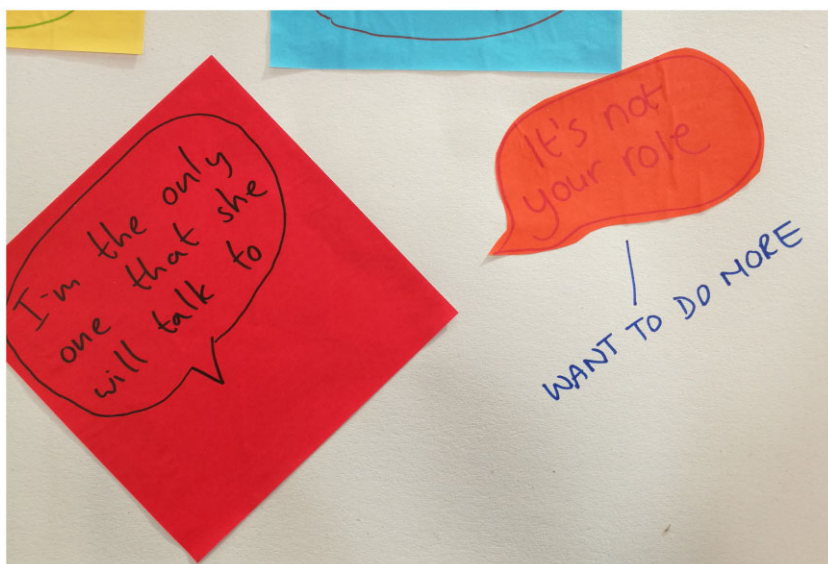


Figure C: I'm the only one that she will talk to/It's not your role. Creative methods piece with post-adoption workers.



Figure D: 'I don't know how to write or what to write/mummy'. Creative methods piece with post-adoption workers.

[Participant 3] No, I agree, I agree, but I do, but I'll be straight to the point, I do think, you know, health used it as an excuse not to go out.

Participant 3 initially says she agrees, but then goes on to give an opposite view about the motivation of non-social work professionals, whilst being careful not to undermine Participant 2.

Swift rapport and data quality

The reader may imagine the invitation to collage, charcoal and generally create to be potentially intimidating to a group of social workers, particularly in the context of office dynamics and mediated via work relationships. However, [Bagnoli \(2009\)](#) found in her research that participants were quite willing to engage in her creative methods. Similarly, Burke found participants willing to express their ideas in collage, text and drawing. The desire to represent perspectives appeared more important than social constraints about the relationship with the researcher or with colleagues. Some participants collaborated, some made individual pieces, but they all joined in lively discussion about the problems encountered in post-adoption support and how they can help.

Creative mind mapping poses a difficulty in assessing research quality. Whilst acknowledging important arguments from arts-based methods for the need to go beyond text and language, and to match participants' preferred mode of expression, creative mind mapping does not meet [Knowles and Cole's \(2008\)](#) definition of arts-based research. The aim was not to produce a piece of art. Neither was the research an extended focus group, where creative pieces are a facilitative tool ([Dalton, 2020](#)) designed to elicit conversation, or a 'mapping technique', where the focus is on precise representation ([Newman, 2013](#)). Nevertheless, it is proposed that the results are authentic ([Kara, 2020](#)), as a robust representation of the experiences and analysis of the participants.

For Ashworth, the advantages of recruiting participants in her workplace was her familiarity with the setting, and the ability to access front line workers, which is often a barrier to other social researchers ([Vaswani, 2018](#)). During the early stages of the pandemic, a request was made to social researchers from the Department for Education to not put 'undue burden' on local authorities ([Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021](#)), which affected researchers making approaches through the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

Recruitment of participants from her own workplace meant that Ashworth needed strategies to manage her 'insider' approach ([Cheng, 2014](#)) and the impact of her researcher presence on participants' willingness to share information, given that she remains a team manager within their workplace. Ashworth gave this careful consideration within the ethics application, as the duality of practitioner–researcher can create the

potential for confusion, power imbalances, the need to maintain critical distance and complications associated with anonymity and confidentiality (Vaswani, 2018). This was largely managed due to the research taking place with social workers and not service users and participants were briefed that taking part (or not taking part) would not have either a positive or negative benefit within the workplace.

In the event, Ashworth did not struggle to recruit participants and participants did not seem inhibited in discussing drawbacks of some of the adapted social work practice during lockdowns. In fact, participants were quite open about ignoring guidance when this conflicted with their own values and ethics regarding assessments of parents and seeing vulnerable children face to face:

So I think for me, I ignored a lot of it, quite frankly, because it didn't feel like it was possible to do my job in the way that I wanted to do it.
(Participant 4)

There was a little bit of discussion about whether we could do that via phone, but throughout we all decided that we needed to be seeing them.
(Participant 2)

When transcribing, Ashworth was also struck by the frequency with which participants in the focus group laughed together when they were sharing their experiences and perspectives, which underlines the usefulness of insider approaches, where open discussion can be established fairly quickly. Indeed, in other research, participants have indicated that 'insider interviewers' enabled them to express themselves more freely (Cyr, 2016) and participants may feel more guarded with someone they considered an outsider (Taylor, 2015).

Ashworth's focus group was successful in generating rich data about both the research topic and in the group interaction, illustrated by this exchange:

[Participant 3] And morale as well, like across the floor as a whole with the pandemic and everyone's tired and, we've been so busy, haven't we?

[Participant 4] Weary.

[Participant 3] Yeah, but... yeah.

[Participant 2] ...That's a good word, that, weary.

[Participant 4] Battle worn

(laughs)

[Participant 3] Yeah

[Participant 2] Yeah

[Participant 3] We've survived the war.

(pause)

Foregrounding social worker knowledge

Kara (2020) makes a case for experiential authenticity in arts-based research, in common with anti-racist methods which place researcher and participants' experience at the centre of any enquiry (Sefa Dei, 2005). For Finley (2008), this means rethinking methodologies as a communal endeavour. Rather than being an expert artist-led process (Piirto, 2002), Burke's study sought to put the interpretive process back in the hands of participants. The creative pieces were not seen as aesthetic objects, or prompts for elucidation, but as analytical tools in themselves. Rather than situating social workers as passive products of the work environment, the creative approach enabled workers to be analytical about their roles and work contexts.

Figure E shows a piece with linked circles representing different themes in post-adoption, which becomes analytical in the representation of interlinking and in the comment, 'How do we navigate all these factors? What do we miss when we work on individual issues/too much at the same time?'. Sometimes researchers have despaired at the lack of engagement with, or reference to, theoretical frameworks by social workers (Gibson, 2016). However, here is an example of holistic integration of theoretical categories. Participant 1 asserts that we cannot consider any one aspect of post-adoption social work in isolation. Instead, we should consider the whole picture, including the consequences of an over-focus on one factor to the detriment of others (Figure E). They have created a



Figure E: Links? Discrepancies? How do we navigate all these factors? Creative methods piece with post-adoption workers.

theoretical framework, based on their practice experience of the problems of relying on one single explanatory framework.

There were two main findings from Ashworth's study which departed from the existing literature on child protection practice during the pandemic. The first was focus group participants discussing that they had continued to visit children and their families face to face in their homes, even in the early stages of the pandemic and against advice at the time:

And if someone was in, and they hadn't been seen, someone else would try and go another day and we would keep going until children were seen. (Participant 3)

This would suggest that the picture was more complicated or variable than the results of [Baginsky and Manthorpe's \(2021\)](#) work with English local authorities, which found that most child protection visits were being made virtually. This could reflect participants' positions as front line social workers (as opposed to research conducted with managers), or it could be a feature of the participants' workplace culture, but it nevertheless shows how foregrounding social worker voices produces surprising findings.

Ashworth found a positive emphasis from participants on the value of social work and continuing to do their job under difficult circumstances. The words 'pride' and 'proud' reoccurred in the transcript as participants discussed how they felt about their practice and how they felt about their colleagues. One participant described pride as the 'overriding sense I've felt through this' (Participant 1). Although some existing literature does talk about positive aspects of, for example, working from home, and acknowledges positive and negative experiences ([Leigh, 2020](#)), Ashworth could not find similar references or themes in other studies focusing on social workers.

Conclusion

Social workers engaging with their colleagues as participants have carried out two practitioner–academic research projects. This has highlighted researcher positionality as well as employee positionality, and the sensitivity of such research to all involved in the knowledge production process. It has meant engaging critically with questions about research sensitivity, the value of social work knowledge and the effect of researcher positionality both as academics and as employees. As a result of reflecting on these projects, we hope to have provided an account of the value of building capacity to stimulate future research conducted by practitioner–academics.

Social workers' personal experiences were deliberately foregrounded in both projects. We valued social workers' experiences and contributions to

knowledge about their field, not just as something to critique, or to illustrate the deficits of practice, but to show how social workers are active participants, with their own agency, and their own ability to problematise and even disrupt current practice conditions. In the first study, this was pride in the ability of workers to creatively find ways to continue to support people in post-adoption support, even when it was not formally in the remit of the role. In the second, it was a shared pride at having continued to provide a high-quality child protection service during the pandemic.

Both studies trouble current deficit discourses about social workers in England: that social workers do not currently have the knowledge and skills needed to support families (MacAlister, 2022). We highlight the contributions and perspectives of social workers in our research, and this deliberate foregrounding has shaped our epistemological approaches. We see our participants as potentially analytical and theoretical: as active producers of knowledge, not passive recipients of research. This also applies to our own positionality as practitioner-academics. We were able to undertake small-scale projects, of a kind that could be accessible to other social workers in the field. This could lead to more opportunities for researchers to highlight creative ways that social workers prioritise service user's needs, as we did in our own projects, drawing on the positionality of having researchers who are embedded in the social processes and ethical tensions of contemporary practice.

Both studies have shown benefits in our positionalities as practitioner-academics. These benefits, including openness in participation and participants feeling that the researcher would understand their perspectives, outweighed the anticipated difficulties in terms of participant inhibition and confidentiality concerns. This is despite these positionalities being slightly different: as a child protection team manager in the case of Ashworth and as a case-holding post-adoption social work practitioner in the case of Burke. Our perceived independence and academic integrity as researchers, meant that participants felt able to open up, and were able to recognise and trust that we could balance both academic integrity and our practice roles. This meant the quick establishment of rapport in the group settings. It meant rich data. And it meant we could produce material which highlighted social workers' insight into contradictions in practice.

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Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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