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# The Role of the Scholar-facilitator in generating Practice Knowledge to inform and enhance the Quality of Relationship-based social work practice with children and families

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# 2

This is the title of Tony's PhD by publication completed in late 2009 and awarded in early 2010

Included:

- 3 books – one co-authored with Jan Horwath
- 4 articles published in peer-reviewed journals
- 3 book chapters

Plus a 'Critical Review and Analysis', and it is this which I am drawing on today

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/9005>

# 3

Three main themes:

- The role and nature of ‘practice-based knowledge’
- Its contribution to effective relationship-based social work practice with vulnerable children and families
- The role of the ‘scholar-facilitator’ in generating, testing and disseminating practice knowledge

# 4

Tony:

- Bridged the world's of academia, welfare agencies and policy
- But also training, research, consultancy and writing
- And worked across the UK and abroad

# 5

It is now recognised that we can usefully describe and differentiate 3 types of knowledge for social work (and the 'social' professions):

- Theoretical knowledge
- Factual knowledge
- Practice knowledge

Where practice knowledge is defined as 'the way that theoretical and factual knowledge can be used to inform effective practice' (Trevithick, 2007 p15)

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While this is important in recognising that social work is a *practice-based discipline*, there is also a danger that it continues the traditional professional and academic hierarchies based on the notion of

‘applying theory to practice’.

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However, drawing on:

Raelin, J (2007) 'Towards an Epistemology of Practice', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 6(40), 495-519

Tony argued we could identify a shift towards a 'practice turn' in social theory.



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Traditional (modernist) conceptions saw knowledge as objective, independent and external to the practitioner, whose role was to acquire and apply such knowledge.

Thus theory was firmly separated from practice, knowledge producers were separated from knowledge users, and teachers were separated from learners

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Increasingly, however, it has been recognised that epistemology – what we know and how we know it – is much more complex.

The result is a move to a more pluralist epistemology which includes not only formal knowledge, but also tacit, intuitive and creative knowledge arising from experiences and practice

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‘In sum, a practice epistemology is one in which new theory can be generated *by* practice, rather than simply *for* practice, and which includes practitioners as producers as well as users of knowledge. It also suggests that practice knowledge is emergent, tentative and provisional, as it is continuously tested and refined in new practice and socio-cultural contexts’ (Morrison, 2009, 14-15)

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‘Practice knowledge, expertise and scholarship thus involve a commitment, not only to continuous learning, but also its articulation and dissemination through writing and teaching’  
(Morrison, 2009, p15)

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Having considered the ‘knowledge’ element of *practice knowledge* it is also important to consider what is meant by ‘practice’.

Drawing upon the ‘practice turn’ in the sociology of knowledge, Tony outlined three elements to the idea of ‘practice’.

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1. Learning and practice are seen as social rather than individual processes
2. Rules are not enough to ensure shared practice, because they rarely contain rules for the *application* of the rule.
3. Understanding emerges from, rather than precedes, action.

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Thus Harry Collins (2001) argues that practice comprises both thought and action, through which individuals can know what to do, particularly in situations for which rules are not a sufficient guide.

The challenge is how to develop knowledge through and for practice, that is useful in conditions of uncertainty and indeterminacy.

Such knowledge needs to be anchored in critical reflection, emotional awareness, and inter-personal skills

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However:

‘we have arrived at a situation in children’s social work where: managerialism, performativity and procedural compliance dominate; little time exists for reflection; form-based information is privileged over relationships and narrative; and knowledge becomes increasingly synonymous with information’ (Morrison 2009, p17)



# 16

Tony draws on his extensive work on Staff Supervision to illustrate how his own thinking and practice had increasingly recognised **the importance of relationship-based social work practice with vulnerable children and families.**

This is demonstrated by a comparison of the 1st edition of *Staff Supervision in Social Care* published in 1991 and the 3rd edition published in 2005

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Tony argued that the major development and contribution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition was its description of the relationship between supervision, practice and outcomes described in the

## *Supervisor– Outcome chain*

It drew on both research about supervision and outcomes as well as *reflections with, and on, supervisors' own experience*

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It argued there were six key factors that link the quality of supervision and the quality of social work practice.

These six factors are equally important in both the supervisory relationship and the practitioner's relationship with the service user

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The six factors are:

1. Role clarity
2. Role security
3. Emotional intelligence
4. Accurate assessment
5. Appropriate level of partnership relationship
6. Clear planning

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The *Supervision-Outcomes chain* demonstrated:

- How supervision is integral to the service delivery process and can be seen as part of the intervention process
- Reinforces and reawakens the professional identity of the supervisor and their key role in leading practice
- Confirms the value of their role in facilitating good outcomes for service users

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More fundamentally, however, a comparison of the 1991 and 2005 editions of *Staff Supervision in Social Care* demonstrated how Tony's thinking had moved away from a more 'realist', 'objectivist' perspective to one which was much more explicitly 'relational' and 'constructionist' in orientation

*‘The practice story does not exist as an objective bite of information. Instead the way the supervisor asks about the worker’s observations shapes both the focus and scope of the practice story. Open ended and wide angled questions elicit a very different account from the worker than narrow closed questions from the supervisor’*  
(Morrison 2005, p.159)

# 23

Now knowledge is no longer restricted to 'hard data' or 'concrete observation'.

*'It is expanded to include other forms of knowledge which are contained within a narrative framework such as experience, recollection, metaphor, meaning and intuition, and which are accessed through **dialogic and relational processes such as supervision**'*

(Morrison 2009, p.23)



Reflective approaches to supervision are important to try and make explicit practitioner's tacit and intuitive 'knowledge' and 'assumptions' and thereby make them open for critical examination.

Knowledge is both *constructed* and *relational*

*Supervision: Right from the Start* was not only the first national guide on supervision of social workers but it was also the first attempt to describe a specific and reflective model for the supervision of assessment practice (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009)

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‘There is concern that the tradition of deliberative, reflective social work practice is being put in danger because of the overemphasis on process and targets, resulting in a loss of confidence amongst social workers. It is vitally important that social work is carried out in a supportive environment that actively encourages the continuous development of professional judgement and skills. Regular, high-quality, organised supervision is critical, as are routine opportunities for peer-learning and discussion’

(Morrison 2009, p32)

‘*Right from the Start* offers a knowledge-based response to rule-based guidance (Munro, 2009)’ (Morrison 2009, p.30)

(Munro, E. (2009) ‘Managing Societal And Institutional Risks in Child Protection’, *International Journal of Risk Analysis*, 29(7), pp1015-1023)

## **The Role of the ‘Scholar-Facilitator’**

The origin lies with attempts to resolve the traditional divide between academic and practice contexts.

It is related to the idea of *scholar-practitioner*, developed in business, which attempts to reframe theoretical knowledge so that it becomes more accessible and relevant in particular business contexts

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Three reasons why the term 'scholar-facilitator' was adopted instead:

1. Tony was not a practitioner but a *facilitator* of learning, operating in a range of roles including: trainer; mentor; writer; consultant; project advisor; lecturer; and action researcher
2. The term can be used to encompass a role that extends beyond the bridging of the academic and practice communities to include policy making, of which *Right from the Start* is a good example of developing 'practice-knowledge' in response to national policy initiatives

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3. The term was more readily suited to someone operating outside a formal organisation and allowed for a wider range of roles to be encompassed.

It enables a much wider testing and transfer of knowledge across contexts (academic, policy, practice, jurisdictions, professions), levels (strategic and operational), and roles (trainer, mentor, researcher).

## Conclusion

Clearly Tony has made a huge contribution to the development of high quality social work practice with children and families and his various publications will be used for many years to come

I would also argue that the three ideas which lie at the heart of his PhD:

- Practice based knowledge
- Relationship-based social work
- The Scholar-Facilitator

Will be key in taking work in this area forward in the future