

**Professional learning as a way of being
a social worker: Post-qualifying learning
among Japanese social workers**

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Abstract

This study examined how the experienced social workers continued to learn as professionals in the context of Japanese social work. The findings have suggested that the challenges and struggles they confronted were closely related to their professional ways of being. We cannot understand their learning unless we set each person's learning experiences in the context of their way of being a social worker. They saw their learning as something about changes in their understanding in varying ways. Though those perspective changes in learning varied widely depending on their learning situation, three components of professional learning have been identified: *Experience*; *Opportunity*; and *Reflection*. *Experience* describes how professional learning involves the interconnection of cumulative background experiences they had, which can include both within their professional work and outside. What counts as a learning *Opportunity* can vary considerably according to them. It makes good sense to treat learning opportunities not as a distinct one but as a unified entity. *Reflection* involves them seeing practice from different perspectives, in that their taken-for-granted assumption is challenged, which may lead to new possibilities that can make their practice different in their working context. These three components are not entirely distinct from each other, but inextricably interwoven.

The findings reveal that there is the significant gap between what the social workers value in learning and what is expected from their organizations, professional associations, and universities in today's uncertain working environments, in which they are required to ensure increased professional accountability for their performance with measurable standards. In the gap, voices of social workers have been underrepresented in the discourse of professional development. To share awareness of diverse and complex learning as experienced by social workers can be a first step in making a difference to professional learning in the context of Japanese social work.

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Author's declaration

I hereby declare that the contents of this thesis entitled: *Professional learning as a way of being a social worker: Post-qualifying learning among Japanese social workers*, are the result of my own work. Any help that I have received in my research project has been acknowledged. I also certify that the thesis has not previously been submitted for the award of any other academic degree.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis is about the nature of social work practitioners' continued learning as professionals in the context of Japanese social work. In this Introduction, I begin with briefly outlining the context of Japanese social workers in terms of qualifying and post-qualifying education. Following this, I look at the genesis of this study through my work experiences in Japan, describing the focus of the research and then outline the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Research basis

1.1.1 Context of Japanese social workers

Although the licensing requirements vary from country to country, it is generally required to receive variable amounts of courses provided by educational institutions such as universities in order to qualify as social workers. In Japan, the certified social workers were approved as a national qualification in the law of certified social workers and care workers which was implemented in 1989. Here I give a brief account of the licensing requirement for qualified social workers. There are broadly two routes to qualify as social workers: through either universities or vocational institutions—both of which are accredited by the state. While in the former it takes four years to complete all required courses, in the latter one or two years to do the same courses; this is because there is a need to have a Bachelor's degree to attend the latter. After finishing all required courses, in order to obtain the qualification one needs to pass a national examination—that is only paper-based and held once a year.

Moreover, while varying depending on countries, social work practice in Japan and most countries—where social work is established—requires a commitment on the part of social workers to continue their professional development throughout their careers. There is no doubt that qualifying education can be never sufficient for their careers as professional social workers. In Japan, after having qualified, social workers are required to participate in certain professional development programmes, according to different requirements set out by the state and/or professional associations.

1.1.2 Why did I choose this topic?

In what follows, I describe my work experiences in Japan before starting my PhD programme to make clear what led me to the focus of the study. After completing my Master's degree, MSW (Master of Social Welfare) at the Doshisha University in Japan, I had worked for Kyoto International Social Welfare Exchange Centre (hereafter KISWEC) for about eight years as the

chief instructor of the course for the certified social workers, which applies to the vocational institution as described above. KISWEC is a non-profit organization approved by Kyoto City in 1973; it involves professional education for the helping professions, mainly social workers. KISWEC provides not only pre-qualified but also post-qualified social workers with professional education programmes. My duties in KISWEC included teaching some required subjects to the students studying to become certified social workers, developing teaching materials, and evaluating students' performance. My research interests are, to a considerable extent, an outgrowth of my work experiences in KISWEC. The students in the certified social workers course—who varied in age—had a variety of educational and vocational backgrounds, and were enthusiastic about learning. I was regularly faced with the challenges of helping students cope with their career-related anxieties and concerns. For example, some of them worried about the demands of the work, and others were concerned about the anticipated lower income in their chosen profession—they considered it did not match the demands of the job. In those situations, I tried to encourage them to develop their own professional identity as social workers through sharing individual student's concerns; that led me to consider repeatedly the fundamental question of what social work and social workers are.

In addition to the course for the certified social workers, I engaged in the continuing education programmes for post-qualifying social workers as an administrative staff member in KISWEC. My duties involved organising the programmes—it included choosing a subject and content of the programme, and also a lecturer who is deemed suitable for that. Through my engagement with the continuing education programmes, I had frequently heard that the participants of those programmes had their serious difficulty in translating what was learnt into their daily practice. Some of them went on to complain that no matter how much they learn in continuing professional programmes provided by educational institutions and/or professional associations, knowledge learnt in those opportunities was seldom applicable in their actual working setting. While, to be honest, it was very challenging to receive such negative responses from the participants in the programmes, those experiences gave me an opportunity to reflect on how social workers considered they learnt something important associated with their actual practice. In Japan, there have been a large number of social workers who gave up their jobs after short careers. As a result, we have suffered from a work-force shortage in this field. Van Heugten (2011) has demonstrated how social workers experience high levels of stress in the reality of everyday practice—which can be caused by high caseloads, staff shortages, budget cuts, among others. Indeed, social workers need to deal with uncertainty embedded in everyday practice as front line practitioners, which can lead them to experience setbacks and feeling of powerlessness within the “evidence-based

practice” movement—which has had a considerable implication for the discourse of professional development as well as their day-to-day practice itself.

In the context of Japanese social work, professional development continues to be discussed within the context of traditional learning, in that the so-called informative lecture style—in which a lecturer conveys up-to-date knowledge and information unilaterally and learners passively absorb it—has been still dominant. In addition, a majority of professional development programmes for qualified social workers provided by educational institutions and/or professional associations such as the Japanese Association of Certified Social Workers (JACSA)—aimed at the improvement of their professional skills and the acquirement of the up-to-date knowledge—are implemented as a once only isolated event, while very few programmes are continuously conducted. It can be argued that professional communities—which include organizations, professional associations and universities—still adopt a traditional learning model, which focuses on delivering content to “deficient” professionals in a didactic manner (Coffield, 2007; McWilliam, 2002; Webster-Wright, 2009). However, during the last few decades, there has been a growing interest in workplace or informal learning in a wide range of disciplinary fields. Traditional educational structures have been criticized for focusing on transmission of explicit knowledge (Brown et al., 1989; Brown and Duguid, 1991). It is acknowledged that the traditional educational structures are far removed from a working context in which knowledge and skills learnt is to be practically applied. There is a wide and growing acceptance that learning at or through work can be a key to the understanding of professional learning in a range of disciplinary fields (e.g. Dall'Alba and Sandberg, 2006; Evans, 2008). Through the engagement with professional development for social workers—mainly in KISWEC as described above, I developed my research interests that how we can address the serious discrepancy between what social workers learn in professional development programmes and what they require and value in their daily practice as professionals.

1.2 Focus of the study

The focus of my study is on post-qualifying learning among Japanese social workers. The main purpose of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of professional learning for social workers in their working context, in order to provide them with the support to continue learning throughout their careers as frontline practitioners and further enhance their professional practice.

The general theme of the study is: How can we best design a learning environment so that social workers keep developing professionally within their current working context? The research theme focuses the study on mainly the following three parts:

1. How do social workers understand, construct and explain learning experiences that have significantly affected them?
2. What constitutes professional learning for social workers in their working context?
3. What would make a difference in professional learning?

1.3 Overview of the thesis

The thesis is structured into four parts and nine chapters. In Part 1, Literature review, I provide the context of the discussions about professional learning through examining what is meant by professional development (PD), exploring the three key theoretical models of learning: individual; socio-cultural; and mediated analysis of learning, and reviewing the approaches to professional learning pursued in social work literature. Through the review of the discussions about professional learning, problematic issues have been raised—complex and diverse learning as experienced by practitioners in their working context tends to be reduced to specific factors or categories that can affect their learning, rather than being comprehended in an integrated way. Such underlying assumptions about professional learning are not questioned in much research into professional learning across different fields of practice. This brings us to the need for research that challenges such assumptions and explores “the ‘experience’ of learning in everyday practice” (Webster-Wright, 2009: 713).

In Part 2, Methodology, I illustrate the research design, the process of data collection, and the approach to analysis. For this Japanese-based study, I chose a qualitative research strategy because it allows exploring the ideas, perspectives and experiences of participants of the study on professional learning in more depth, than would be possible with methods such as survey research. The study is based on the following methods: 6 focus groups; one-to-one interviews with 16 participants; and observations. In addition to the qualitative interviews, I carried out the more direct observation work in different learning opportunities in which the participants were involved; relying only on qualitative interviews has a potential problem in that it can be not necessarily a good guide to what actually happens in their working context. The participants of the study were a total of 26 experienced social workers in a range of social work agencies and settings, who had around ten years of practice after they had qualified. I also conducted the research with the intention of participatory inquiry in a way that organised the research team for the study, and also involved the participants in the process of the interviews. In terms of data analysis, I employed “thematic narrative analysis” (Riessman, 2008) to interrogate the stories of the participants’ learning experiences as social workers. Through the thematic narrative analysis, I tried to see their lived learning experiences in a holistic way as they experienced in their own working context, rather than

breaking the data up into very small “chunks” as we often move to thinking of “themes” almost automatically, as represented by grounded theory (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In Part 3, Findings consisting of three chapters, I examine the commonality and variability across a diverse range of learning experiences described by the participants in the study. In Chapter 4, we discuss that we cannot understand the participants’ learning unless we set each person’s learning experiences in the context of their way of being a social worker. My findings have shown that talking about actual learning experiences—that the participants considered had significantly affected them—prompted them to reflect on their professional identity as social workers, or to recall their past reflection on it. Through the interviews, many of them talked about challenges and struggles they confronted in various ways. The findings have suggested that these challenges and struggles were closely related to their professional identity as social workers, in other words, “professional ways of being” (Dall’Alba, 2005; 2009; Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009). Chapter 5 demonstrates that the participants saw their learning as something about changes in their understanding in varying ways. Three components of professional learning have been identified—that can lead to such changes in their understanding: *Experience; Opportunity; Reflection*. Component 1, *Experience*, describes how professional learning involves the interconnection of cumulative background experiences that the participants have. Their learning experiences were more than a single learning situation, rather involving an open-ended process without any starting and ending point. In Component 2, *Opportunity*, though different types of opportunity were identified, what counts as a learning opportunity can vary considerably according to the participants. It makes good sense to treat such various opportunities not as a distinct and separate but as a unified entity. The last component, *Reflection*, which is discussed in Chapter 6, involves the participants seeing practice from different perspectives in a diverse range of opportunities. The findings suggest that what they value in learning is to be challenged their taken-for-granted assumption about practice to different degrees—which may lead to new possibilities that can make their practice different in their working context. These three components are not entirely distinct from each other; Professional learning should be seen as a holistic experience with each component inextricably interwoven.

In Part 4, Discussions consisting of two chapters, I explore crucial issues that arose from the empirical findings presented in Part 3 through integrating with the literature to draw a broad picture of professional learning for social workers in the context of Japanese social work. In Chapter 7, through the focus of the issues of “uncertainty” in being social workers, we examine the significant gap between what the social workers value in learning and what is expected from their organizations, professional associations and universities in today’s ever changing working environments—where they are required to ensure increased professional accountability for their performance with measurable standards. Chapter 8 provides the

discussions of the implications for stakeholders in supporting learning for social workers. After highlighting a need of a broader understanding about professional learning, we explore ways in which we can encourage social workers to experience a change in understanding about their way of practice and further professional ways of being in a working context. Learning relationships with others—through which the participants experienced changes in understanding—could be something that are built as an intricate web. Support for learning should necessarily be flexible and diverse, which lead social work practitioners to have more professional autonomy so that they can develop the web of learning relationships in their own way, rather than imposing on them.

In the concluding chapter, after the review of the study I consider the ways to make a difference to professional learning in the context of Japanese social work. In order to bridge the gap between actual learning experiences valued by the social workers and the rhetoric about professional development, there is a need to share and voice such a disparity in learning among stakeholders—social workers, organizations, and professional associations. We also discuss the limits of the study and a future direction for further research into professional learning.

Part 1

Literature review

Chapter 2

Mapping the scope of the discussions about professional learning

In Chapter 2, which consists of three parts, I will explore literature relevant to professional development (PD) across the field of professional practice. To begin with, I will examine what is meant by professional development across a range of fields of professional practice, reviewing the discussions of formal and informal learning that have created complexities in the understanding of professional development. Then, I will explore the key theoretical models on learning through three categories: individual, socio-cultural and mediated approaches to learning. Finally, I will consider how social work literature has responded to the issues of professional development. Through this chapter, I will attempt to map the extensive discussions of professional development in a range of fields onto the social work field specifically.

2.1 Exploring professional development

2.1.1 What is meant by professional development?

There is a diverse range of literature relevant to examining professional development (PD), and we will operate on the assumption that professional development is an especially important part of professional life for any professional. Professional development has been promoted in varying fields of practice through developing and implementing policies and programmes in the context of the “lifelong learning” or the “learning society” (Coffield, 2007) over the past few decades, which has led research into professional development to be truly interdisciplinary. Within the contemporary working context which has become increasingly complex and uncertain, professionals are required to commit themselves to continuing professional development in different ways in order to deal with various issues they face; this valuing of professional development has been reinforced by professional standards and registration procedures set out by stakeholders (Friedman and Phillips, 2004). As a result, considerable resources have been invested in professional development practice (Borko, 2004), has led to the evolution of a professional development industry that multiple stakeholders—which include professionals, professional associations, universities, workplaces and governments—define in different ways. In the UK, a survey of professional associations found that 62% of respondents had developed a continuing professional development policy and programme and that it was mostly the small professional associations of less than 1,500 members who had not provided any programme (Friedman et al., 2000). Professional development is increasingly linked to professional requirements that must be complied with across various fields of practice.

Reviewing the literature on the discussions about continuing professional development (CPD), several terms are used in a range of related research areas; continuing professional education (CPE), continuing learning, and professional learning, to name a few. The Construction Industry Council (1986) definition of CPD, which was adopted by 40% of UK professional associations (Friedman et al., 2000), is as follows:

CPD is the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner's working life (p.3).

This definition includes professional and technical expertise and is applied to a practitioner's whole career. Also, the term continuing professional education (CPE) is often used rather than CPD. For example, Queeney (2000) describes CPE in the following way:

The education of professional practitioners, regardless of their practice setting, that follows their preparatory curriculum and extends their learning...throughout their careers. Ideally this education enables practitioners to keep abreast of new knowledge, maintain and enhance their competence, progress from beginning to mature practitioners (Queeney 1996, cited in Queeney 2000: 375)

Also, Battersby (1999) defines CPE this way:

Continuing professional education refers to the ongoing, structured and unstructured learning and educational opportunities that are pursued by particular professional groups and their members (p.58).

Thus, it can be argued that the concept of CPD or CPE is still ambiguous in ways that there is no single definition of them across a range of practice fields. In a large research project which involved a survey of professional associations throughout the UK and qualitative interviews with professionals and their employers, Friedman and Phillips (2004) confirmed that professionals had a vague view of the definitions and purposes of CPD. They highlighted that how CPD was regarded was relative to each one: some described it as a means of keeping up-to-date with new knowledge and skills, and others as a way to build a career. In their study, it was also found that there were gaps between what employers desired and what professionals actually did in the light of CPD. Such gaps or tensions between different stakeholders were pointed out in many studies in a range of fields of practice (Beijaard et al., 2005; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009).

With ever-changing working environments, professionals are required to respond to complex issues effectively. Employers need to ensure that their staff are provided with PD programmes to gain new knowledge and skills with defined learning goals, which is followed by the evaluation of their performance based on standardised criteria. We can see the considerable implications that the “evidence-based practice” movement has had in the helping professions, in ways that an increasing emphasis is placed on “evidence” and “outcomes”, which often leads to increased regulation of practice and PD (Beddoe and Henrickson, 2005; Beddoe, 2015). In this context, while resources for PD are provided for professionals, their learning tends to be managed and controlled in a working context so that organizational goals can be achieved. Reviewing a range of current literature informing PD, Webster-Wright (2009) point out some implicit assumptions about the term PD: “The term PD is part of a discourse that focuses on the professional as deficient and in need of developing and directing rather than on a professional engaged in self-directed learning” (p.713) . Webster-Wright argues that this implicit assumption remains being not questioned in the current professional working context where “control and standardization” (p.712) is increasingly emphasised within the evidence-based practice movement, highlighting the need of reconceptualising PD. The tensions between different stakeholders—which are based on the implicit assumptions about PD—are a central theme in this thesis. Therefore, this point will be considered further later in this chapter and in the section of discussion from a different angle.

2.1.2 ‘Formal’ and ‘Informal’ learning

In the previous section we have discussed what is meant by professional development (PD). I now expand the discussions about professional development (PD) into related issues about different forms of learning: that is, formal and informal learning, which can often confuse the understanding of learning in the discourse of PD. It can be acknowledged that research into PD has been informed by a range of fields of study which includes higher and professional education, workplace learning, adult education, organizational learning, and human resource management and development, among others. In the discourse of PD across fields of practice, while the emphasis has tended to be more on “formal learning” rather than “informal learning” (Coffield, 2000; 2007; Coffield and Edward, 2009), over the last two decades there has been a large amount of literature on informal learning or workplace learning across fields of practice (Webster-Wright, 2009), which shows an increasing interest on the workplace as a site for learning (Boud and Garrick, 1999). When informal learning is defined, it is likely to be characterized by contrasting it with formal learning, as Colley et al. (2002) point out that informal learning is “defined in relation to what is not-formal” (p.5). Though there are no clear definitions for “formal learning” and “informal learning” or “non-formal learning”

(Eraut, 2000), in what follows I review discussions related to defining different forms of learning.

Marsick and Watkins (1990) made a distinction between formal, informal and “incidental learning”. Based on the review of some literature on informal learning, they described informal learning as ubiquitous when people need to learn, highlighting that it is “experienced-based, non-routine and often tacit” (Marsick and Watkins, 2001: 24) and also involves “self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, and performance planning that includes opportunities to review learning needs” (p.25-6). On the other hand, “incidental learning” is regarded as “a by-product of some other activity such as sensing the organizational culture, or trial and error experimentation” (1990: 8). They put an emphasis on the concepts of ‘intentional’ or ‘non-intentional’ learning in informal learning. Also, Eraut, who has been one of the most cited researchers in professional learning across different fields, proposed the term “non-formal” rather than informal learning because the term informal is associated with other features of situations: “its colloquial application as a descriptor of learning contexts may have little to do with learning per se” (Eraut, 2000: 12). Eraut’s model presents an overview of the formal and informal continuum of learning in a workplace, outlining how formal learning has the following characteristics (p.12):

- A prescribed learning framework;
- An organized learning event or package;
- The presence of a designated teacher or trainer;
- The award of a qualification or credit;
- The external specification of outcomes

Eraut (2000; 2004) has developed a further typology of informal learning in terms of intentionality as “implicit”, “reactive”, and “deliberative” learning. With these modes of learning, he attempted to explore the issues of time and the level of intention in learning. “Implicit learning” involves a knowledge acquisition without deliberation or a conscious effort to learn. “Deliberative learning” involves a conscious or intentional effort to learn. “Reactive learning” is situated between the two and entails “situations where the learning is explicit but takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current, or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it” (Eraut, 2000: 12). The last one, “reactive learning” appears to have commonalities with “incidental learning” suggested by Marsick and Watkins (1990).

On the other hand, reviewing the literature on informal learning, Colley et al. (2002; 2003) discussed the question of dichotomous categories among formal, non-formal, and informal learning. They pointed out that these classifications presumed that one form is regarded as superior to the other; however, there are “few, if any, learning situations where either

informal or formal elements are completely absent” (2002: 3). Instead of classifying different forms of learning, they highlighted the importance of acknowledging dimensions of “informality” and “formality”. There is a relational continuum rather than a firmly separate quality that each form of learning can possess, in that formal features can be found in what is seen as informal learning, and similarly, informal features can be found in formal learning. They categorised attributes of informality and formality into four aspects of learning: process, location and setting, purposes, and content (2003: 30-31).

In this context, Billett (2002) asserts that the dualism between formal and informal learning is problematic in many ways. He puts the main emphasis on workplace learning, attempting to move the existing framework beyond the dualism, which is, implicitly or explicitly, based on the assumption that one mode of learning is better than the other. He argues that describing workplace learning as being informal is “negative, inaccurate and ill-focused” (Billett, 2002: 58), maintaining that activities in the workplaces are often structured intentionally for learning:

As with educational institutions, in workplaces there are intentions for work practice, structured goal directed activities that are central to organisational continuity, and interactions and judgements about performance that are also shaped to those ends. Therefore describing learning through work as being ‘informal’ is incorrect (p.56).

Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, learning tends to be linked to “control and standardization” (Webster-Wright, 2009: 712) in the discourse of PD so that organizational goals that are measurable can be achieved in an effective way. Billett (2002) believes that our focus should be more on the “norms, values and practices” within workplaces in order to advance the understanding about the workplace as learning environment (p. 59).

When we think of the fact that though numerous attempts have been made by scholars to examine the differences between formal and informal learning, the differences remain highly elusive. The points made by Colley et al. (2003) and Billett (2002) seem to be very helpful to draw our attention beyond the dichotomy between them. In this thesis, I use the term “professional learning” rather than professional development (PD) or other related terms, to avoid the dichotomy between formal and informal learning, as some researchers are critical of the view that different forms of learning are regarded as something separate each other (Colley et al., 2002; Hodkinson et al., 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). The separation between formal and informal learning can lead to the view that learning at or through work is different to learning through PD programmes provided by professional communities such as organizations, professional associations and universities. It can be argued that such a view

has been predominant in the discourse of PD within the evidence-based practice movement. However, when we draw our attention to “any experience where professionals consider they have learned”, the separation between formal and informal learning may be “artificial” (Webster-Wright, 2009: 713). I intend by the use of the term professional learning that different forms of learning should be taken as something not “competing” but “complementary” in a holistic way, which will be explored in detail through the whole of this thesis.

2.2 Theoretical models on professional learning

In the previous section, we have discussed what is meant by professional development (PD) in various fields of practice and also reviewed different forms of learning, formal and informal learning. I now move on to examine the key theoretical models of professional learning. While there are varying approaches to understanding professional learning, it can be argued that the differences between them depend on underlying assumptions about what can constitute learning, which involves what, when, and how people learn. Those approaches can be classified into the following three types. The first approach is the individual level of learning, which places primary emphasis on the process at the individual level and also is strongly influenced by psychological theories. The second type, a socio-cultural analysis of learning, focuses on the social and cultural context in which learning takes place, which is influenced by social psychology, sociology and social anthropology. Much of the existing research on workplace learning has focused on either the individual level or the socio-cultural analysis of learning. However, some authors point out that there are drawbacks with placing an emphasis on either individual or socio-cultural perspectives, highlighting that multilevel analysis, namely, mediated analysis of learning, is necessary to move the discussions forward to illustrate the complexities of the learning process. In this section, I examine how these three key theoretical models conceptualise professional learning in different ways.

2.2.1 Individual level analysis of learning

In the individual level analysis, learning is described as a cognitive process and equated with individual rational learning. Kolb (1984) developed the model of experiential learning, in which learning is viewed as a cyclic process which entails active experience, observation and reflection, formulation of concepts, and application and testing concepts in practice. Through this cyclic process, what we learn shapes the knowledge base we draw upon in a subsequent event. In this model, a primary focus is placed on individual learners so that learning is seen as something taking place within the responsibility of themselves; thus, this model is open to criticism about its ignorance of evaluations of the effectiveness of accumulated learning

occurring in an actual practice setting (Argyris, 1999). Also, another problem with this model is that it fails to take learning contexts into account (Boud et al., 1993; Usher et al., 1997). In relation to its lack of criticism about learning process in the Kolbian model, Schön (1983, 1987) developed a convincing argument concerning the concept of reflection for learning. Schön's work has had considerable implications for the research into professional learning across fields of practice (e.g. Cranton, 1996; Gould and Taylor, 1996; Moon, 1999; Pollard, 2008).

Argyris and Schön (1974; 1978), in their seminal work, inquired into how practitioners solve a problem arising in an actual practice. They introduced the key concepts of "*single loop learning*" and "*double loop learning*". In "*single loop learning*", practitioners react and adapt to changing circumstances in ways that experiment with and acquire new techniques based on existing presumptions. On the other hand, practitioners engage in "*double loop learning*" when their underlying assumptions are challenged and the way they frame a problem is called into question, which could lead to reframing of the problem and to alternative solutions. They also proposed two theories of action. One is described as "*theories-in-use*" which refers to the implicit assumptions in actions performed, and the other as "*espoused theory*", which is explicit in actions.

Their influence challenging assumptions in learning was highlighted in Schön's work (1983; 1987). Schön (1983) developed his argument by proposing the notion of the "*reflective practitioner*" through case studies which examined what professionals—like architects, psychotherapists, engineers, researchers, and managers—actually do in their working context. He challenged what he terms "*technical rationality*", which views professional practices as the application of a body of specialist knowledge, particularly in a scientific field, to analyse and solve the problems that practitioners are faced with in their daily practice. "*Technical rationality*" is "the dominant paradigm which failed to resolve the dilemma of rigour versus relevance confronting professionals" (Usher et al., 1997: 147). Schön highlighted that professionals do not mechanically apply propositional knowledge to problematic situations but seek to create and design interventions to solve problems in a working context. Instead of "*technical rationality*", Schön put primary emphasis on "*reflective practice*", which involves professional "*artistry*" that tailors a scientific knowledge base—what he referred to as the "*high ground*"—to fit an actual practice setting which is complex and uncertain, sometimes referred to as the "*swampy lowlands*" (Schön, 1983). According to Schön (1983), the reflective practitioner engages in "*knowing-in-action*" and "*reflecting-in-action*" in everyday practice. He argued that professional practices entail a form of tacit knowledge and repertoires of solutions to problems that practitioners face on their day-to-day practice. Schön sees our knowing as "ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing" (1983: 49). Our knowing is "in our

action” (p.49) in that “We reveal it by our spontaneous, skilful execution of the performance” (1987: 25). It can be argued that professional practice involves practitioners trying to make tacit knowledge explicit to some extent. In this study, one of the key considerations with professional learning is different forms of knowledge that practitioners utilise in day-to-day practice, which will be discussed further in the discussion section, Part 4.

In the light of reflective practice, reflection is the crucial element for practitioners to make judgments in an actual practice setting, as Schön put it: “Stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back on action and on the knowing that is implicit in the action” (1983: 50). Schön made a crucial distinction between “reflection-*in*-action” and “reflection-*on*-action”, which forms a key part of his work (1983). The former refers to the thinking that happens in the middle of an action in a given practice situation, which is described as “thinking on our feet”. The latter involves the post hoc process of making meanings of the action, in ways that review and learn from it. Through these concepts about reflective practice, Schön made a significant contribution to a better understanding of the relationship between professional knowledge and day-to-day practice, which offered a platform for discourse upon professional learning in a wide range of fields.

On the other hand, his seminal work on reflective practice has been subjected to considerable criticism. One criticism of his description of “reflecting-in-action” is about the time required for decision making in the “hot action” of practice (Beckett, 1996). According to Eraut (1994), “hot action” is the situation where the “pressure for action is immediate” (p.128). He points out that ‘when time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited’ (p.145). There does not appear to be enough time for reflection in much of the practice of teachers, surgeons, and nurses, for example, in contrast to the practice of an architect developing a design, which Schön offers as an example. It can be argued that a variant of this criticism would be to point out that there are intra-professional differences as well as inter-professional ones. As Bloor (1978) illustrated the routinised character of practice by tonsillectomy doctors in his early influential work, much of professional practice include more or less routinised aspects. Whilst Schön highlighted the importance of the role of reflection in the development of practice and learning, he overlooked the routinised aspect of making judgments that shapes everyday practice (Dall’alba and Sandberg, 1996; Dall’Alba, 2005; Van Manen, 1991; 1999).

The other criticism of Schön’s work is that, as Usher and colleagues argue, Schön’s description of knowing in practice underestimates the impact of the wider socio-cultural context (Usher et al., 1997), which will be discussed in detail in the following section. This line of criticism has been prompted by the exploration of “situated learning” by Lave and Wenger (1991) to considerable degrees. Chaiklin and Lave (1993) argued that practitioners implement practice

according to situations occurring in a working context, which include power issues in the relationship with others at various levels. However, Schön made no acknowledgement of the issue of power relations that can constrain practitioners in an actual practice setting (Kincheloe, 1991; Smyth, 1991). Though not exclusively, Schön's notion of reflective practice still predominantly focuses on the individual level (Hager, 2011).

2.2.2 Socio-cultural analysis of learning

Having discussed the individual level analysis of learning in the previous section, we now move on to the socio-cultural analysis of learning. From a socio-cultural perspective, the relationship with the social and cultural context is central to learning. Dall'Alba (2009) describes context as something that is "more than the obvious physical locations and structures" (p.723), and goes on to say that it

includes implicit workplace expectations hidden as discourses. Different professions and organizations have their own discourses as evidenced by shared jargon, behavior, practices, and expectations (p.723).

In the socio-cultural approach, Lave and Wenger (1991) have had a significant influence on theories of learning by challenging the traditional, individual understanding of learning as discussed above, in which learning is regarded as a "thing" (Hager, 2011) and learners as "containers" of knowledge (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This conceptual approach leads to a focus on the learner's mind and to learning being decontextualized from a day-to-day practice, as Lave describes as follows:

To decontextualize knowledge is to formalize it (to contain it, pour it into forms) at a more inclusive level... It follows that abstraction from and generalization across 'contexts' are mechanisms that are supposed to produce decontextualized (valuable, general) knowledge (1993: 23)

Instead, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasised the "significance of shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice" (p.43). Thus, they view learning as not just involving a mind but being situated in and occurring through processes of participation in everyday activities, which is what they call a "*community of practice*". As they put it:

The concept of community of practice underlying the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, and hence of 'knowledge' and its 'location' in the lived-in world, is both crucial and subtle... A community of practice is a

set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice (p.98).

In their work, Lave and Wenger (1991) demonstrated how individuals progress gradually from novice as “newcomers” to expert as “old-timers” through a range of examples that include Yucatec midwives, tailors, quartermasters, and butchers, highlighting that “*legitimate peripheral participation*” in a community of practice can lead to “full participation” into the community. “Legitimate peripheral participation” refers to a form of apprenticeship in which newcomers participate at the edge of a community, learn from a wide range of people through undertaking increasingly complex tasks according to their progress, and develop a sense of shared identity of the community; thus “identity, knowing, and social membership entail one another” (p.53). Viewing learning as legitimate peripheral participation draws our attention to the fact that “learning is not merely a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership” (p.53). Identities are thus regarded as “long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice” (p.53).

While these terms, communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, have become established in a wide range of fields of practice including the corporate world (e.g. Brown, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002), there have been criticisms of their concepts. For one thing, when we think of workers’ opportunities to learn in a community or an organization, the issue of power relations inevitably arises. Nevertheless, the issue of power relations inherent in organizations is not adequately taken into consideration in the communities of practice model (e.g. Fox, 2000; Fuller et al., 2005). What is more, Engeström and Miettinen (1999) cast doubts on the unidirectional movement in the notion of legitimate peripheral participation, in which novices at the periphery learn from experienced practitioners at the centre. While the communities of practice model does not imply the opposite direction—that is from novices to experts as Fuller and Unwin (2004b) argued—novices and experienced practitioners can learn from each other. Boud and Middleton (2003) also pointed out that workers are often involved in multiple, changing groupings of people. Even within a given grouping, people may be either experts or novices according to the aspects of the work at that particular moment. Thus, the roles of novices and experienced practitioner are often multidirectional in a community according to their redeployment. Furthermore, communities of practice see “single, localised and bounded fields of practice, which implies that practice is understood within these boundaries rather than as constituted as complex relations and movements across multiple sites” (Fenwick et al., 2012: 5). Indeed, the issue of how learning across communities can take place is overlooked in the communities of practice model. The

last point directs our attention to the idea of crossing boundaries between communities, which will be reviewed in the following section, and which has been explored by Engeström (2001) through what he calls “activity theory” and “expansive learning”.

2.2.3 Mediated analysis of learning

As discussed in the previous section, the socio-cultural perspective of learning has developed theories of learning as context-dependent. However, it can be argued that while the individual level analysis of learning overlooks workplace context and learning cultures as discussed, the socio-cultural approach underemphasises individual agencies in the process of learning, as Hughes et al. (2007) put it in a critique of the notion of communities of practice: “a number of authors seek to rescue proactive, creative, purposeful, reflexive agents from over-deterministic structural perspectives in learning theory” (p.172). Sfard (1998) used a metaphor for this dualistic approach to learning: “*acquisition*” and “*participation*”, in other words, individual and community or organization, which symbolically represents the long-standing argument over the interpretation of learning. In thinking of a way to move beyond this dualism, Sfard’s idea of “middle way” seems to be especially noteworthy. Sfard suggested that “one metaphor is not enough”, highlighting that “we can live neither with nor without either of them” (p.10).

Placing an emphasis on either individual or socio-cultural perspectives has limitations for comprehending learning at or through work, which draws our attention to the need to acknowledge the interrelationships between individual agencies and workplace context and learning cultures as suggested in some research (Billett, 2008b; 2008c; Fenwick, 2008; Hodkinson et al., 2008). In order to move forward from the dualistic approach, there is a need to theorise and examine professional learning as “an experience by individuals within socially situated activities and in a reciprocal interactive manner” (Cairns, 2011: 81). Billett (2001a; 2001b; 2006) points out that comprehensive conceptual bases for understanding the workplace as a learning environment will not be realized without consideration of both individual and social, and the relationships with them. As he puts it:

There are relations between human thought and action, and the social world. ... Accordingly, the relations between the mind and the social world have become the focus for understanding both conceptions of human development and how learning proceeds (2001b: 21).

Billett (2008a) casts doubts on the tendency to gloss over the role of personal agency in socio-cultural perspectives on learning, arguing how “the socio-genesis of knowledge is realized through a person’s unique socially shaped life history or ontogeny” (p.234). Instead,

in order to bridge the gap between the individual and socio-cultural level processes in which learning takes place, he develops the concept of “*relational interdependency*” between individuals’ intentional action and social agency, proposing the key concept of ‘*workplace affordances*’, which refers to “how the workplace invites and structures individuals’ participation in work” (Billett, 2002b: 38). Affordances distributed within a workplace include (Billett, 2001a: 210):

- perceptions of individuals’ competence;
- the worker’s race and gender;
- status of work;
- employment status;
- workplace demarcations;
- personal relations, workplace cliques and affiliations

By proposing the notion of ‘*co-participation*’, Billett argues that a reciprocal relationship between individual agency and the affordances of the workplace determines the access to workplace activities as “the bases of competition and exclusion between competing interests” (2001a: 210), which can shape the quality of learning on a variety of levels in a working context. According to Billett (2001a):

The degree by which workplaces provide rich learning outcomes through everyday activities and intentional interventions will be determined, at least in part, by its readiness to afford opportunities and support for learning (p.210).

Thus, throughout his body of work, Billett has highlighted the significant role of individual agency in relation to learning in the workplace, which is overlooked in the socio-cultural perspective of learning, as he calls the “personal into community” (2007): “It is necessary to offer an account of learning for work which acknowledges the independence of individuals acting within the interdependence of the social practice of work” (2001b: 22).

However, Billett’s approach to workplace learning has been challenged by some researchers. While relying on the distinction between individual agency and workplace structure with the concept of relational interdependency, Billett places particular emphasis on the role of agency and does not address how individual agency is affected in a workplace context (Lee et al., 2004). There can be various factors such as “occupational positioning, one’s position within a workplace hierarchy” (p.29), which can have an impact on individual decisions to participate or not in learning opportunities afforded in the workplace. Lee et al. (2004) point out that:

Whilst Billett identifies agency in his analysis he does not explain it as grounded within these sorts of social relations and tensions. This has the effect of suggesting both a voluntarism, which through his acknowledgement of contextual constraints he clearly seeks to avoid, and a reified organisational structure which is somehow independent of the individuals through whom it operates (p.29).

Thus, it can be argued that Billett does not fully acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between work and learning, especially as it presumes that “a limited set of factors can be manipulated to improve the probability of learning” (Johnsson and Boud, 2010: 362).

Another influential theory of professional learning, which suggests the need to combine the concepts of individual agency and socially situated learning, is *activity theory* developed by (Engeström et al., 1999b; Engeström, 2001; 2004). Activity theory is based on the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) and his successors, such as Leont’ev (1978), from the cultural-historical approach. Vygotsky (1978) studied how relationships between human agents and their environments are mediated by “artefacts” such as cultural means, tools and signs. In activity theory, Engeström (2001) has expanded a form of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), where the focus is put on the dynamics of learning within a collective activity:

People and organizations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time. In important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. They are literally learned as they are being created (p.137-8) .

Engeström (1993) replaces the concept of “communities of practice” proposed by Lave & Wenger (1991) with the term “activity system” and takes an activity system as his unit of analysis of learning:

An activity integrates the subject, the object, and the instruments (material tools as well as signs and symbols) into a unified whole. An activity system incorporates both the object-oriented productive aspect and the person-oriented communicative aspect of the human conduct... Actually a human activity system always contains the subsystems of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption (1993: 67).

Engeström (2001) sees that it is not individual actions but social, organizational, and cultural factors which mediate human activity within an activity system. An activity system involves “multi-voicedness” made up of “multiple points of view, traditions and interests” (2001: 136). The system continually changes according to either internal or external “contradictions” which are “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (p.137). Learning occurs through questioning and challenging established norms within activity systems, which leads to what he calls an “expansive transformation” which happens when “the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of activity” (p.137).

Engeström (2001) has also developed the theory of “*expansive learning*” by drawing on Bateson’s (1972) theory of learning which involves three level of learning: conditioning/acquiring the responses considered to be right in an given context; learning the “hidden curriculum” of something in the context; and questioning/reconstructing the sense and meaning of the context. Expansive learning focuses on the third level of learning:

We speak of expansive learning, or third order learning, when a community of practice begins to analyse and transform itself. Such expansive learning is not any more limited to predefined contents and tasks. Rather, it is a long-term process of re-finishing the objects, tools and structures of the workplace (Engeström, 1994: 43).

In the theory of expansive learning, the focus is put on collectives and networks rather than isolated individuals. Engeström views expansive learning as “crossing boundaries”, which entails “stepping into unfamiliar domains” (Engeström et al., 1995: 333). In this context, Engeström has proposed the concept of “*knotworking*”:

The notion of knot refers to rapidly pulsating, distributed and partially improvised orchestration of collaborative performance between otherwise loosely connected actors and activity systems. Knotworking is characterized by a pulsating movement of tying, untying and retying together otherwise separate threads of activity. The tying and dissolution of a knot of collaborative work is not reducible to any specific individual or fixed organizational entity as the center of control (Engeström et al., 1999a: 346-347).

Thus, it can be argued that Engeström has attempted to move beyond the notion of communities of practice through developing the theory of expansive learning in order to conceive of learning as something more fluid and complex.

On the other hand, some researchers have posed several problems with the activity system. Engeström (2001) gives an example of expansive learning through a study conducted with the care teams and patients' parents in a children's hospital and a health care centre in Finland. As Young (2001) pointed out, all learning at work does not necessarily occur within teams. Young (2001) also raised a point that Engeström does not deal with the issue of who the participants are in questioning and challenging established norms in an activity system. Indeed, who participates or not in questioning the current practice could have significant influence on the subsequent process of expansive learning. In relation to the issues of power in organizations, Fuller and Unwin (2004a) argued that Engeström does not address the organizational context that impacts decision-making processes. Furthermore, while Engeström put an emphasis on the notion of transformation in expansive learning, Lee et al. (2004) pointed out that this notion could lead to a new binary in which "learning that cannot be characterised as having reached the 'gold standard' of expansive learning could potentially be perceived to have lower status and value" (p.13).

So far we have discussed how the key theoretical models conceptualise professional learning through three broad categories: individual, socio-cultural, and mediated analysis of learning. As discussed, it is evident that there are limitations to viewing professional learning as either individual "acquisition" or "participation" in communities or organizations. In order to move beyond the dualism of approaches to professional learning, there is a need for multilevel analysis which can allow for capturing the complexities of learning processes. In the following section, I will review how social work literature has dealt with the issues of professional learning, and then consider the question of what research is needed to further our understanding about the complex and diverse learning of social work practitioners.

2.3 Professional learning in social work field

From an examination of the social work literature, it is possible to map the approaches to professional learning onto the following distinctions: individual-level and organizational-level approaches to professional learning, which seem to be parallel to considerable degrees to the distinctions made in the previous section regarding individual level and socio-cultural analyses of professional learning.

2.3.1 Reflection, reflexivity and critical reflection

In the individual level analysis of learning, Schön's work, as described earlier, has had a considerable impact on approaches to professional learning in the social work field as well as in other human services, though Schön has written less about social work explicitly, except

for his essay titled *'Reflective Inquiry in Social Work Practice'* (Schön, 1995). His notion of the “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983) has provided a focus on the process of ongoing learning in a practice setting, especially on how to encourage reflection and critical reflection (e.g. Fook, 1996; 1999; 2004; Gould and Taylor, 1996; White et al., 2006; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Also, Schön’s distinction between “reflecting *on* action” and “reflecting *in* action” as discussed earlier, has “entered the vocabulary of many social work students” (Shaw, 2012: 53). It can be argued that reflective practice has held a key role in professional learning for social workers in an attempt to structure reflection in day-to-day practice. Fook (1996) points out the key benefits of reflective practice as inspiring a practitioner’s implicit theories of action; creating new knowledge; evaluating the effectiveness of everyday practice; and integrating a theory and practice.

On the other hand, though numerous studies have attempted to explain what reflective practice is, it arguably remains ambiguous. While Schön used the term reflective or reflection, many writers has used another term reflexive or reflexivity for the terms instead. These two terms tend to be sometimes used in an interchangeable way. Though they are related to some degree, there is a need to acknowledge key differences between them. There is also a difference in which communities use the terms. “Reflective” practice more often is part of discourse about professional practice, whereas “reflexivity” occurs much more in the research methods literature (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). As discussed, reflection involves internal self-awareness in order to make underlying assumptions—which are based on understanding and action in practice—explicit in different ways. Fook and Askeland (2006) define reflexivity as “an ability to recognize our own influence—and the influence of our social and cultural contexts on research, the type of knowledge we create, and the way we create it” (p.45). The idea of reflexivity presumes that practitioners cannot separate from themselves who make meanings in practice through interaction with others. As discussed earlier in the criticism of Schön’s work, what he meant by the term “reflective” is predominantly subjective in focus. We can see the notion of reflexivity as a critique of reflection that aims to expand its scope by taking into account contextual factors that have an implication for action in practice. Evans and Hardy (2010) draw an important distinction between reflection and reflexivity:

Whereas reflection is practice oriented, concerned with paying due attention to how practitioners apply theory to practice, reflexivity is more alert to the impact of taken for granted assumptions which underpin and legitimize knowledge and action for practice (p.127).

In addition, recent contributions to reflective practice have provided a theoretical expansion towards a more critical direction by challenging power relations and social structures, as Fook (1999) put it:

A critically reflective approach therefore relies upon knowledge which is generated both empirically and self-reflectively, and in a process of interaction in order to analyse, resist and change constructed power relations, structures and ways of thinking (p.202).

The critical approach assumes that “power operates through ways of knowing” (Everitt et al., 1992: 135) on the basis of critical theory (Brookfield, 1995; Hillier, 2002). Webb and Gray (2009) apply critical theory and draw on “Critical social work” (with a capital ‘C’) to understand “how dominant relations of power operate through and across systems of discourse” (p.78) . The critical reflective approach provides a framework of change-oriented action for the marginalized in society. Its aim is “to unsettle the major assumptions on which... practice is based, making connections between assumptions and beliefs about the social world” (Fook and Gardner, 2007: 15) .

The question now arises about how critical reflection is different to reflective practice described above. There has been little agreement on this question. Some researchers draw a distinction between the two so as to emphasise a need for empowerment or emancipation of the marginalized in society (e.g. Catterall et al., 2002; Fook and Askeland, 2006; Reynolds, 1998). Others see the two as not separate but intertwined—complementing each other (Redmond, 2006). Brookfield (1995) seems to give us a good indication of the question. According to Brookfield (1995), the reflective approach provides the framework of critical reflection when it has two purposes in the education field. The first one is “to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions” (p.37). The other purpose is “to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests” (p.37) . It can be argued that the critical reflective approach involves practitioners in the process of being aware of the way in which they construct social structures at both individual and social levels, which can offer an alternative view about the problems they are faced with in a working context, as Moon (1999) highlights:

Emancipatory interests rely on the development of knowledge via critical or evaluative modes of thought and enquiry so as to understand the self, the human condition and self in the human context. The acquisition of such knowledge is aimed at producing a transformation in the self, or in the personal, social or world situation or any combination of these (p.14).

Here critical reflection can be seen as a transformative concept. The emancipatory potential of critical reflection is linked to transformative learning with the aim of personal transformation for practitioners and social change (Grace, 2007; Oakes and Rogers, 2007). For transformative learning, which was originated by Mezirow (1990), to occur, practitioners need to be involved in critical reflection which entails “reassessing the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from the transformed meaning perspectives that results” (p.18).

On the other hand, Baldwin (2004) identifies four threats to critical reflection in the social work context (p.47-9): managerialism; evidence of what works; rational policy implementation; and failures of critical reflection. Baldwin notes that the first three threats overlap each other, and the last threat is a result of each of them. He emphasises the influence of managerialism as a major threat to critical reflection, in that “managerial knowledge” becomes more valued rather than other forms of knowledge, including practitioners’ tacit knowledge and service users’ knowledge. He also points out “the rationalist reliance on managerialist practices”, which involves “the use of resource management techniques” and “staff and service control techniques” in uncertain working environments (p.48). The idea of managerialism assumes that management and control of uncertainty embedded in practice can lead to effective practice. This has considerable implications for what counts as “evidence” in the evidence-based practice movement, which stresses that “interventions must be selected and used on the basis of their empirically demonstrated effectiveness” (Mäntysaari, 2005: 254). In relation to the evidence-based practice movement, policy implementation is also influenced by managerialism in a desire to focus more on outcomes. Indeed, for the critical reflective approach to be pursued in an actual practice setting, there is a need to recognise that social workers—as front line practitioners in today’s changing working environment—struggle hard to deal with uncertainties embedded in everyday practice, where they are required to demonstrate professional accountability for evidence which is scientifically established and outcomes which is measurable in an explicit way. Lynch (2006) makes a crucial point when he argues:

How can we be immersed in a specific context and reality whilst at the same time analytically observing the structural implications of that context? This dilemma, I argue, lies at the heart of how we think about social work knowledge and therefore social work education and social work continuing professional education. It is this dilemma which, I believe, is not sufficiently explored in the social work literature relating to reflective practice (p.83)

This comment reminds us of the need to acknowledge that professional learning cannot be decontextualized from a working environment of practitioners, as discussed earlier in the socio-cultural approach to professional learning. In order to consider Lynch's question of how practitioners can be situated in day-to-day practice and also step back from it to allow for critical inquiry—not only into the self as professionals but also the wider context in which they practise—there is a need to draw our attention to structural and cultural aspects of professional learning, which will be taken up in the following section.

2.3.2 Organizational learning and learning organizations

Having discussed the individual-level approach to professional learning in social work through examining the related but different kinds of reflection—reflection, reflexivity, and critical reflection—I now move on to the organizational level approach to professional learning. Here a key question is about the relationship between individual and organizational learning. There are underlying assumptions about the links between them—that learning is not something limited to an individual learner's task but something that needs to take the organizational context of learning into consideration. As Gould (2000) puts it, individual learning is a “necessary but not sufficient condition for organisational learning” (p.587). Organizational learning that dates back to the work of, for example, Argyris and Schön (1978) and Simon (1969), raised the question that organizations as entities may be capable of learning, which is based on the assumption that “there is a (positive) association between certain forms of work organization, learning, and improved organizational outcomes” (Fuller and Unwin, 2011: 53) . Hence, Watkins and Marsick (1992) defined organizational learning as:

One that has embedded a continuous learning process and has an enhanced capacity to change or transform. This means that learning is a continuous, strategically-used process – integrated with, and running parallel to, work – that yields changes in perceptions thinking, behaviours, attitudes, values, beliefs, mental models, systems, strategies, policies and procedures. Learning is sought by individuals and shared among employees at various levels, functions, or units. As a result, learning is embedded in an organisations memory of past wisdom, current repertoire of beliefs and actions, and future thinking processes (p.128).

Though there has been a large body of literature on organizational learning, the concept of the “learning organization” developed by Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, published in 1990, has had a significant impact on the discourse of organizational contexts of

learning beyond the fields of business and management, including social work (Gould, 2000; Gould and Baldwin, 2004; Kurtz, 1998). The concept of the learning organization has its roots in sociological studies which involve theorising about the relationship between organizational structure and behaviour (Gould, 2004: 2). Senge (1990) highlights the importance of the distinction by Argyris and Schön (1978) between “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning, defining the learning organization as:

Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to act together (p.3)

The learning organization involves double-loop learning where “goals, norms, and assumptions, as well as behaviour are open to change” (p.20), by contrast with single-loop learning which involves just seeking to achieve fixed goals. As such, the concept of the learning organization stresses continuous change as the key to being responsive in a working environment that entails complexity and uncertainty. According to Senge (1990), the common features—what he calls as “disciplines”—of the learning organization include: systems thinking; personal mastery; mental models; shared vision; and team learning. Systems thinking involves an ability to view aspects that make up an organization as a dynamic system from a broader perspective. Systems thinking has been described as a “discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice” (p.12). Personal mastery involves personal growth and learning, which is a “special level of proficiency in every aspect of life—personal and professional” (p.142). Mental models involves examining personal, taken-for-granted assumptions that have an implication for “how we understand the world and how we take action” (p.8), and making those “open to the influence of others” (p.9). Shared vision involves building “shared ‘pictures of the future’ that foster genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance” (p.8). Team learning involves collaborating to develop and share knowledge through “dialogue” in a team, which is regarded as the “fundamental learning unit in modern organizations” (p.10). Each of the disciplines is essential to building a learning organization, with each one interconnected. Senge argues that these fundamental requirements for the learning organization allows organizations to facilitate the learning of its members at all levels and adapt to changes accordingly in an ever-changing environment.

While Senge’s formulation of the notion of the learning organization has provided a great inspiration for organizations in a diverse range of fields to become learning organizations, it has been met with criticism by many. A major criticism of Senge’s work is for its unrealistic

nature such that few organizations are able to meet all of the criteria in an actual working context (e.g. Garvin, 1994; Örtenblad, 2004). The simplified notion of the learning organization has been criticised failing to take account of organizational dynamics which entail power relations and politics, which can have considerable implications for organizational learning. The concept of the learning organization is arguably reliant on an idealised view that all employees at different levels have shared interests and purposes within an organization. In this context, Lee and Cassell (2009) make an important point when they argue:

Rather than being built on harmony and shared visions and values, modern organizations comprise groups with disparate power, with the more powerful managers resisting ideas of their interdependence with others. Instead of pursuing learning to create a learning organization, many managers appear to be guided by short-term, bottom line considerations of profitability when considering learning provisions (p.8).

Though Senge places emphasis on human values in describing systems learning, highlighting that “real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human” (1990: 4), in applying systems theory the emphasis often is to move away from human values towards organizational control.

Another problem with the notion of the learning organization is that a primary focus is placed on an organization as “a site and frame for learning” (Fenwick, 2001: 77), which can lead to underestimating learning that takes place beyond the organization. Placing great reliance on an organization as the most important site for learning can lead to what Field (1997) calls a “technoculture” which “ensures continuity, stores lessons of the past and provides a basis for ongoing, gradual learning” (p.153). The technoculture can become entrenched, which as a result may not be likely to allow learning for changes to occur in the organization. Fenwick (2001) argues that within the limited scope of learning, learning is seen:

Only in knowledge that the organization can access, knowledge which can be spoken, deconstructed and shared (for example, through dialogue), rather than knowledge which might be tacit and embedded in practice, communicative relations, visions, choices and intuition (p.77).

The domination of the organization as the site for learning can lead to taken-for-granted assumptions being not questioned and challenged. Though Senge et al. (1994) stress the importance of reflection through small-group talk in an organization, as Fenwick (2001)

highlights, there can be a risk that “critical scrutiny is deflected from the power structures and the learning organization ideology itself and focused on the individual” (p.82). Marsick and Watkins (1990) go so far as to describe as “dysfunctional” an individual’s “incidental” learning that does not lead to achieving organizational purposes and goals. The narrow view of learning in the workplace can hamper us from drawing our attention to a diverse range of learning experiences. Though not acknowledged as effective and valuable from an organizational perspective, practitioners themselves consider they learn something important associated with their practice in their working context. Thus, it can be argued that issues of power relations and practitioners’ agency are centre to the critique of the concept of the learning organization. Without explicit recognition in a working context, as Owenby (2002) argues, professional learning is inextricably linked to organizational control to achieve organizational goals.

We have discussed how social work literature has dealt with the issues of professional learning, the division between reflection and critical reflection, and organizational learning. Though both approaches to professional learning have contributed to a better understanding of professional learning, limitations are evident when placing an emphasis either on individual professionals or on the context for learning. As discussed in the previous sections, in order to further the understanding of professional learning there is a need to draw our attention to the relationships between individual agency and socio-cultural context, rather than taking each as something that is separate (Billett, 2001b; 2006; 2008b). In the following section, let us now return to the issues of the tensions between different stakeholders over the implicit assumptions about professional learning.

2.3.3 Tensions between rhetoric of professional development and diverse learning experiences of practitioners

As discussed earlier, within the evidence-based practice movement in the helping professions the regulation of practice has been increasingly emphasised, with “evidence” and “outcomes” being accorded high value; It follows that professional development is increasingly linked to professional requirements over a career. Social workers are required to attend professional development programmes to comply with certain professional requirements set out by professional communities, which include workplaces and professional associations. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that there are gaps or tensions between the rhetoric about professional development employed by professional communities and what practitioners value in learning as professionals (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2005; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009). This tension is echoed by several studies in social work literature (Clarke, 2001; Smith et al., 2006), revealing that social workers tend to put less value on in-service training, as the focus of most such training is on “the needs of the

organization” rather than their “personal learning needs” (Smith et al., 2006: 475). This gap seems to reflect that social workers and professional communities can have different assumptions about professional learning.

In an attempt to regulate practice, organizations tend to focus more on measurable outcomes, which involve social workers demonstrating their competence as professionals. This can be related to “a concern with justifying organizational legitimacy through numbers” in the evidence-based-practice movement (Evans and Hardy, 2010: 128). Similar tension has been pointed out in other fields of human services, such as health and education (e.g. Fullan, 2007; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2009; Higgs and Titchen, 2008). An argument has been made for retaining the agency of practitioners in the light of the increasing movement towards regulation of both practice and learning, as Waring and Currie (2009) put it:

Should this knowledge become uncoupled from professional practice and made amenable to more rigorous codification and sharing, then claims to professional jurisdiction and autonomy may be undermined (p.758).

As discussed in the previous section, a number of studies have been critical of assumptions underlying organizational learning and the learning organization in the light of issues about “power” and “agency”, in that human beings tend to be treated not as individual practitioners and learners but as a part of groups. Within organizational contexts in a range of professional fields, individual learning has been increasingly linked to organizational goals—with an emphasis on organizational change to respond to ever-changing working environments. Coffield (2007) has pointed to the tensions in the learning society between “competition and collaboration”; “standardisation and innovation”; “centralisation and local flexibility”; “enabling and controlling strategies”; and “long-term sustainability and short-term goals and targets” (p.39). Thus, a growing body of literature has argued that an underlying assumption exists that learning can be controlled, assessable, and measurable, which can lead to a tension between the rhetoric about professional development employed by professional communities and what practitioners value as professionals.

This drives us to the question of what research can help us to reduce such tensions between different stakeholders over the implicit assumptions about professional learning. Webster-Wright (2009) highlights the need of research viewing “the learner, context, and learning as inextricably interrelated rather than acknowledged as related, yet studied separately” (p.712). Such a study is different from “asking professionals to choose which PD activities they find most useful, as often occurs when attempts are made to engage professionals in PD research” (p.725). As many empirical studies show (e.g. Beckett and Hager, 2002; Eraut, 2007; Glazer and Hannafin, 2006), learning experiences in an actual working context can be

complex and diverse. In order to comprehend complex and diverse learning as experienced by practitioners in their working context, there is a need for more research exploring varying learning experiences from their perspectives in a holistic way, rather than reducing to specific factors or categories that can affect their learning (Webster-Wright, 2009). These issues led to framing the research questions mentioned in Chapter 1, and influenced development of the research design. This study seeks to develop an understanding of professional learning by exploring complex and diverse learning experiences where the participants learn something important associated with their practice over their career as social workers. As will be described further in the next chapter, I employed qualitative interviews which include focus groups and one-to-one interviews to explore the perceptions and views of them about professional learning. However, relying only on qualitative interviews has a potential problem in ways that it can be not necessarily a good guide to what actually happens in their working context. Therefore, I carried out the more direct observation work in different learning opportunities in which the participants were involved. I also conducted the research with the intention of participatory inquiry in ways that organised the research team which consisted of experienced social workers, so that I can attempt to understand the experiences of learning from their own perspectives as frontline practitioners. In the next chapter, Methodology, I will illustrate the research design in this study in more detail, describing the process of data collection and the approach to analysis.

Part 2

Methodology

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter describes and discusses how the study was carried out. In the first section, I describe the choices underlying the research design. In the second section, I move on to describe in greater detail the research procedures for data gathering including ethical considerations, following by discussing the data analysis procedures.

3.1 Research design

For this study, a qualitative research strategy was chosen because it can allow exploring the ideas, perspectives and experiences of participants of the study on professional learning in more depth, than would be possible with methods such as survey research. While quantitative research is designed to provide statistically representative data, qualitative research is designed to illustrate a whole picture of people's lives. Through a qualitative approach, I explored the experiences of social workers' themselves about professional learning in the context of Japanese social work, while it does not allow concluding the extent to which views on it reflect a wider population in the field of study.

3.1.1 The rationale for the methods

Qualitative interviewing as a main source of data was employed to examine the research questions in the study: focus groups and individual interview as mentioned below. Qualitative interviewing involves jointly constructing the data between interviewers and interviewees in that meaning is shared and constructed through interactive conversation (e.g. Fontana and Frey, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Silverman, 2001). One of my research focuses is on how social workers understand, construct and explain learning; therefore, the use of qualitative interviewing was more suitable to hear the voice of the participants and understand their own perception of learning. As Patton (1990) put it:

We interview people to find out from them [interviewees] those things we cannot directly observe... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. ...The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective (p.278).

In the study, I used the combination of focus groups and one-to-one interviews in order that both sets of interviews can counteract each potential weakness and provide rich and diverse data. In addition to the interviews, the method of observation was employed to complement the data from the interviews with the data from making an observation in various learning opportunities. In the following section, I discuss each of the research methods chosen further—focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and observation.

Focus Groups

There are several terms in current use describing—“focus groups”, “group interview”, “focus group interview”, and “focus group discussions”. These are also sometimes used without clear distinction. For example, Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) proposed the definition of focus groups: “Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interaction” (p.20). However, this definition seems to be too broad since it can apply to even therapy groups. Shaw (1999) has a doubt about conducting focus groups for the purpose of therapy. In order to avoid confusion between the above terms used interchangeably, I use the term “focus groups” not in the sense of “asking the same question (or list of questions) to each group participant in turn”, but of “relying on generating and analyzing interaction between participants” (Barbour, 2007: 2).

A focus groups approach was chosen for the following reasons. For one thing, focus groups suited my participatory inquiry intention well—as I will mention later—since it is regarded as a participatory research method (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups can allow participants to learn from each other through the group interaction (e.g. Morgan and Krueger, 1993; Morgan, 1997). In the research process, participants can react to the responses from others and refine their own thoughts in relation to another perspectives on a research topic. While my goal was to collect data in the interviews, I intended the focus groups to help the participants to learn from each other’s learning experiences as social workers—I expected that the participation in the focus groups would be itself a learning experience for each participant. By using the power of groups, it can allow developing thinking beyond anything that can be achieved by one person alone. I expected that it would lead the data acquired not to follow my expectations but to be beyond ones. Thus, focus group discussions can add richness to the data obtained as the interaction within groups can allow generating new information (Fontana and Frey, 1994).

One-to-one interviews

After the focus groups, I conducted the in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The reason that I chose the combination of focus groups and one-to-one interviews is as follows. As Morgan (1997) puts it: “the group itself may influence the nature of the data it produces”

(p.15) . While the focus groups discussions, as discussed, can contribute to generating a rich data, it has a potential weakness. As MacDougall and Baum (1997) has noted, “groupthink” could limit what participants say and as a result limit what is heard in focus groups. Carey (1994) has pointed out this potential weakness of focus groups as follows:

The major pitfall of the focus group technique is the potential impact of censoring and conforming. These processes occur when a person adjusts his or her own behavior in response to personal impressions of other group members and in relation to his or her own needs and history. In conforming, a person elects to tailor his or her contributions to be in line with perceptions of the group members and/or the leader. In censoring, a person withholds potential contributions, often due to a lack of trust of the leader or the other members, or the future use of the data (p.236).

Furthermore, an aspect of a collectivist culture in Japan could have an influence on what the participants communicate about their opinions in the focus groups in that they might try to change their own opinions so as to conform to the other participants’ one. I expected that following up focus groups with one-to-one interviews could minimize such a potential weakness of focus groups. To counter potential problems in focus groups, Morgan (1997) has highlighted that “follow-up one-to-one interviews can help provide depth and detail on topics that were only broadly discussed in group interviews” (p.23). Through the one-to-one interviews, I sought to explore and clarify the topics in more depth which might not have been addressed fully in the focus groups. Furthermore, I expected the follow-up one-to-one interviews to uncover “certain feelings and experiences which would have remained untold if they had taken part only in focus groups” (Michell, 1999: 45).

Observation

As described above, qualitative interviewing was employed as a major source of data collection in the study. On the other hand, the methods of collecting qualitative data are not limited to interviews. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) have raised a criticism of “the interview society” and put it:

The predominant technology of social research is the interview. Notwithstanding the celebration of methodological pluralism, the use of observational methods, the use of audio and other recording, interviews of various kinds are relied on disproportionately (p.309).

In addition to the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, the method of observation was used to examine the research questions fully. The method of observation responded to the

third research question—what would make a difference in professional learning, in that it can make what actually happens in learning opportunities more visible. Considering the participants' tacit and taken-for-granted understanding on learning, relying on what they say that they do in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews is not necessarily a good guide to what actually encourages and discourages professional learning within their current working context. While interviews have been a central role in qualitative research, some researcher have some doubts about interview-only research (e.g. Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Angrosino, 2008; Flick, 2009; Padgett, 2008; Sanger, 1996). Relying heavily on the interview data can lead to limiting an alternative interpretation of it. Flick (2009) has advocated the combination of observation and interview as a way of counteracting the inherent weakness in the method of observation—which is “all phenomena can be observed in situation” (p.232). Observation can allow for complementing the qualitative interview data and exploring how something factually works in a setting under study. Through making an observation in a range of learning opportunities in which the participants in the study were involved, I expected that the observation data would complement the data from the focus groups and one-to-one interviews.

3.1.2 Intention of participatory inquiry

Furthermore, my research is different from “the one-sidedly qualitative approach” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000: 600). I conducted the research with the intention of participatory inquiry in a way that organized the research team for the study, and also involved the participants of the study in the process of the interviews. In what follows, I describe this point in more detail.

There are several terms in use that describe participatory and action-oriented research approaches, which are conducted by not only academic researchers but also those who have been traditionally researched. Those terms include action research; participatory action research (PAR); action science; cooperative inquiry; and practitioner research. Reason (1994) has classified “participative inquiry” which put a great emphasis on participation into three approaches: co-operative inquiry; participatory action research; and action science and action inquiry. While each approach has different research traditions, they have in common its fundamental feature—they “share a willingness to challenge more traditional concepts of what constitutes expertise, research processes, and ownership” (Lunt and Fouché, 2009: 226). As well, Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) have pointed out that “what most distinguishes action from other approaches to research is a kind of shared resistance to some conventional views about research” (p.593). Thus, participative inquiry seeks to transfer control of knowledge creation from “external” researchers to “internal” practitioners and/or community members themselves. In addition, participative inquiry is action-oriented in its

implementation and differentiated by such an action purpose from a traditional approach whose primary aim is to research a subject. Therefore, participative inquiry is defined as having a double objective:

One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research, adult education or socio-political action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge... (Reason, 1998: 71)

McIntyre (2008) has highlighted four key principles in the field of PAR as follows (p.1):

- A collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem;
- A desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation;
- A joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved;
- The building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning implementation, and dissemination of the research process.

Within my research, a cyclical process of action research, which is “look, think, act” (Stringer, 1996), was not fully completed. Shaw (2011) classifies participatory inquiry into two large categories: one is that “personal or political change” is regarded as the primary purpose of the research; the other includes “the development of understanding and knowledge” as part of it (p.30). On this category, my research falls into the latter one, considering the fact that the main purpose of the research was to understand the issue of professional learning after qualifying as social workers, which has been under-examined in the context of Japanese social work. In this study, I use the term not participatory action research (PAR) but participatory inquiry to describe an approach to exploring the active participation of researcher and participants collaboratively in knowledge production, while the research is considerably influenced by PAR as I will mention further below.

There are three reasons that I conducted the research with the intention of participatory inquiry. For one thing, the involvement of social workers themselves in the process of the study can lead to the deeper understanding of my research focus because of an assumption that they have a deep level of tacit knowledge on their own professional learning. While the participants of a study are “treated as passive subjects rather than active agents” in a traditional research (Reason, 1999: 208), Reason highlights:

We believe that ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice (p.208).

I expected the participants to play an active role in the research process; Participatory inquiry can allow them to have the opportunity to speak their own ideas, perspectives and experiences on their learning as social workers within the study.

What is more, participatory inquiry can allow not only the generation of knowledge but also making a contribution to the setting under study. In a traditional research study, there is some doubt about the usefulness of research knowledge created only by researchers as “outsiders’ (Reason, 1999). It may be argued that such a research is not for participants but for the sake of researchers themselves. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) have argued that PAR is more about building a relationship between theory and practice and “involves learning about real, material, concrete, and particular practices of particular people in particular places” (p.564). Participatory inquiry has the potential to co-create open spaces where the researcher and participants can involve in knowledge construction during the research process. As a social work researcher, I expected to engage myself in the research not that benefits only the researcher, but that the participants as well as the research team member can use for future action in their own work settings.

The final point is related to the researcher's positionality in the study. The issue of researcher's positionality tends to be discussed based on the assumption that the researcher has either an “insider” or an “outsider” status in a study. Both insiders and outsiders find themselves facing different dilemmas, as Anderson et al. (1994) put it:

Academics (outsiders) want to understand what it is like to be an insider without ‘going native’ and losing the outsider’s perspective. Practitioners (insiders) already know what it is like to be an insider, but because they are ‘native’ to the setting, they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider’s perspective (p.27).

However, the boundaries between an insider and outsider status are not so clear in an actual research setting. Researchers often take on multiple roles, both insiders and outsiders at some level; their positionality also shifts during the research process (Merriam et al., 2001). Herr and Anderson (2005) discussed the researcher's positionality in action research and situated a continuum of it from an insider to an outsider in relation to the setting that is being studied (p.31):

- Insider (researcher studies own self/ practice);

- insider in collaboration with other insiders;
- insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s);
- reciprocal collaboration (insider-outsider teams);
- outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s); outsider(s) studies insider(s).

While they acknowledged the difficulty in locating a researcher's positionality among those categories, they pointed out that "the degree to which researchers position themselves as insiders or outsiders will determine how they frame epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues" (p.30).

On the continuum of positionality above, I was involved with the observations as an "outsider in collaboration with insider" to the setting under the study. While some researchers have discussed the possibilities and difficulties of the insider/outsider status (e.g. Ergun and Erdemir, 2010; Kauffman, 1994; Sherif, 2001), many studies are conducted by collaborations among insiders and outsiders (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). As mentioned earlier, I had worked for KISWEC as an insider which was a main setting for the study—which gave me an extensive knowledge of the context of the research setting. By involving myself in participatory inquiry, I expected to turn my position into a potential advantage in bringing both social workers' perspectives as an insider and my perspective as an outsider into the research, in that it can lead to a deeper understanding of the research focus. On the other hand, there could be ethical issues with the observations in the light of my positionality, which will be taken up later.

3.2 Data collection

With regard to writing a qualitative research paper, Silverman (2010) points out that what is needed is to include the researcher's natural history involving the research (p.334-336). In what follows, I describe how the data collection was carried out in Japan.

3.2.1 Recruitment of the participants

In terms of sampling, I adopted qualitative sampling strategies—what is known as 'theoretical' (Mays and Pope, 1995) or 'purposive' (Kuzel, 1992) sampling—in order to ensure sufficient variation within the participants of the study. As Barbour (2007) puts it: "purposive sampling relates to the anticipated use of the selected criteria in making comparisons once the data have been generated" (p.58). The criteria for selecting the research participants were social workers who had around ten years of practice experience after they had qualified. That was because they were assumed to have more extensive learning experiences as frontline practitioners, rather than novice practitioners who were in their first few years of practice. Taking dropouts into consideration, the target for

recruitment was around 40 experienced social workers. It was intended that the target for the focus groups be six groups, and for the one-to-one interviews be around twenty.

In what follows, I describe how the participants in the study were recruited in detail. In order to proceed with recruiting the possible participants, I started by organising the Research Team (hereafter RT). I first consulted with Shin (whom I gave the pseudonym), who took over my position in KISWEC after I had left my job for pursuing a PhD in the UK; he also worked as a social worker for one of the sheltered workshops for those with learning disabilities run by KISWEC. Moreover, Shin was involved as a core member in the learning group—named as “Meeting for Case Study about Families”—in which I conducted the observations as will be described later. I had also kept in touch with Shin by email after leaving KISWEC, since occasionally I was asked for some advice by him about his job. Considering these points, I thought that Shin would be a suitable person whom I asked to become a core member of the RT. When I asked for his cooperation on my research, he willingly accepted my offer. After Shin became a member of the RT, I started to recruit the possible participants in the interviews with his support. As described, Shin took over my position in the course for certified social workers in KISWEC; the course had started in 1989 when the system of certified social workers was set up for the first time in Japan. KISWEC had a network of graduates in the course—whose number made a total of about 300. Moreover, a reunion event was held once in a few years. While working as the chief instructor of the course, I had built up relationships with many of the graduates. Therefore, I decided first to seek participation from the network of graduates in the course for certified social workers as the main sampling frame for the part of the interviews. In order to get access to the network of graduates for recruitment into my study, Shin’s support was needed because he was responsible for managing the list of graduates in the course. With his support, I sought their participation in the research through the mailing list of the graduates. This recruitment was repeated several times over a few months. As a result, I could recruit a total of fifteen participants among them, which accounted for about half of the participants recruited.

At the same time that I recruited the possible participants in the interviews, I proceeded with organising the RT. The criteria for selecting the member of the RT, including Shin, was as follows: social workers who had over ten years of practice after they had qualified; expressed a willingness to join and cooperate closely in the study. In addition, I made an attempt to recruit the member in a range of practice fields, so that the study would reflect different views of the RT. As a result, the RT consisted of five members. As shown in Table 3.1, the members were four male and one female. In age, four members were aged between 40 to 49; one aged between 50 and 59. With regard to field of practice, one member worked in Learning Disabilities, two in Health and Disabilities, and two in Community Work agency.

Among the members other than Shin, two of them were recruited from the graduates in the course for certified social workers in KISWEC, based on the above criteria. The reason that I chose them as the member was that both of them got actively involved in the reunion event for the graduates; they were also assumed to be enthusiastic about professional learning, considering the fact that they joined various professional development activities which included the professional development programme offered by KISWEC after they had qualified.

Another one member, Masa, was recruited because he had been involved as an instructor in the managed workshops commissioned for social workers and their supervisors in the public social welfare office of Kyoto-City that was organised by KISWEC. Therefore, I had established a relationship with him. Masa also organised the learning group for social workers in a range of fields as a core member—named as “Study Meeting of Social Work practice”—where I conducted the observations, as will be described later. When I asked him to become a member of the RT, he accepted and further provided me with help in recruiting the possible participants among the learning group. With his support, I emailed the members of the learning group to ask them to participate in the interviews. Consequently, I recruited five participants from the learning group, and also the last member of the RT. After recruiting four members of the RT—who were all male as described above, I tried to recruit a few female members in order to attain gender balance. While consulting with Shin and Masa about who should be a female member, I decided to ask Haruka who was female and a core member of the learning group—“Study Meeting of Social Work practice”—to join the RT. At first, I sought her participation in the interviews not as a member of RT. However, it turned out that she was thinking of undertaking a PhD programme in a Japanese university as well as getting actively involved in different professional development activities. Therefore, Haruka seemed to be suitable as the member of the RT. She willingly accepted my offer to join the RT. Though I kept looking for one more female member after Haruka joined the RT, I could not recruit another female member. The RT ended up being comprised of five members: four male and one female.

In recruiting the remaining participants in the interviews, I received considerable help from the RT. Each member had built their own professional network with social workers in a range of fields. Having found that the participants who were recruited at that point worked mainly in such fields as Learning Disabilities, and Health and Disabilities, a “snowball technique” was used to have a diverse range of kinds of social workers in terms of service specialism (Brace-Govan, 2004). Through the extensive network of the members of the RT, I tried to purposefully recruit the participants who worked in other fields. Finally, after an effort I succeeded in assembling thirty possible participants overall with a wide range of practice

experiences and fields. In these ways, the RT played the role of gatekeeper to considerable degrees in recruiting the participants in the study.

Table 3.1: Summary of the Research Team

Gender	Female: 1 Male: 4
Age	40-49: 4 50-59: 1
Practice experience	11-15 years: 2 16-20 years: 1 over 21 years: 2
Field of practice	Learning Disabilities: 1 Health and Disabilities: 2 Community Work: 2

The participants

The participants of study were a total of 26 experienced social workers who had around ten years of practice after they had qualified. Though 30 participants were supposed to attend the focus groups, 4 of them were not able to attend because unexpected things happened: being sick; family matters; and getting into trouble with their service users. As shown in Table 3.2, the participants in the study were fourteen female and twelve male. In age, fourteen participants were aged between 30 and 39; nine aged between 40 and 49. In terms of their field of practice, they were from a wide range of social work agencies and settings. Twelve participants worked in Health and Disabilities field; six in Learning Disabilities; three in Children and Families; two in Mental Health; two in Community Work; and one in Probation field. The majority of them worked in non-profit organizations, while four of them worked in public organizations—whose practice fields were Children and Families, and Probation.

All those who involved in the study were all Japanese—the participants; the member of the RT; the other social workers who attended the professional development programme provided by KISWEC; and the member of learning groups in which I conducted the observation. Therefore, the whole study was conducted in Japanese.

Table 3.2: Summary of the participants in the interviews

Gender	Female: 14 Male: 12
Age	30-39: 14 40-49: 9 50-59: 3
Practice experience	8-10 years: 12 11-15 years: 8 16-20 years: 4 over 21 years: 2
Field of practice	Mental Health: 2 Learning Disabilities: 6 Children and Families: 3 Health and Disabilities: 12 Community Work: 2 Probation: 1

3.2.2 Data collection procedures: Engaging with the participants

Data collection was conducted from May 2013 to August 2013 in Kyoto, Japan; a variety of data was gathered over a four-month period. In what follows, I describe how the data was collected dividing into the following three parts—interviews, observations, and research team.

To begin with, I describe how the interviews were conducted. As mentioned before, the target for the focus groups was six groups; also the target for the one-to-one interviews was around twenty. When I recruited the possible participants in the way described in the previous section, I asked all of the social workers—who gave positive responses to my request—for their interest in being involved in not only the focus groups but also the one-to-one interviews. That was because I had expected that if I selected some participants for the one-to-one interviews, other participants who were not selected might have negative feelings about not being selected. It had been intended that if too many of them expressed a willingness to participate in both the focus groups and the one-to-one interviews, I would select the participants of the one-to-one interviews among them in order to ensure of the sufficient diversity of the data in terms of practice fields. If, however, too few possible participants gave any favourable responses, I would select a few participants from each of the focus groups and recruit them to take part in the one-to-one interviews before and/or after the focus groups were carried out. This was explained in advance to all of the possible participants who gave positive responses with the information sheet as appended in Appendix 1. Consequently, sixteen participants expressed a willingness to participate in the one-to-one interviews as well as the focus groups—which was about half the participants. Considering the fact that it had different kinds of social workers in the light of their practice

fields which will be described later, I decided not to recruit other participants to attend the one-to-one interviews.

Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted in the study. The number of participants for each focus group is shown in Table 3.3. Though I intended each of the focus groups to be comprised of five participants, four participants could not attend the interviews because unexpected things happened as described. Due to this, the number of participants was rearranged in some groups, where possible. In the focus groups, finding suitable times for the participants was difficult as most of them had a tight working schedule; while in the one-to-one interviews I could accommodate my schedule to each participant's. Concerning group composition, I organised each group to have the participants in different fields as much as possible so that it could reflect their diverse views on learning. Furthermore, some of the participants who worked for the same agency or organization were allocated into different focus groups, in order to encourage them to speak more openly about their own learning experiences.

Table 3.3: Number of Participants in the focus groups

Group 1	5
Group 2	5
Group 3	3
Group 4	3
Group 5	6
Group 6	4

All the focus groups were conducted in a room in KISWEC, which was used mainly for the learning programme provided by KISWEC. The focus groups were of around 120 minutes' duration including a 10 minutes' break. Before the focus groups started and during a break, the participants were provided with some tea, coffee and snacks so that they could feel more relaxed.

All of the focus groups were moderated by the researcher himself. In the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, digital voice recorders were used to collect accurate information and allow the researcher to concentrate on communicating with the participants after getting their informed consent, as the issues of ethical considerations will be described in detail later.

Also, I took a memo during the interviews, which was useful to organise field notes that I kept after conducting the interviews.

Topic guides

When conducting the focus groups, I used a “topic guide” to organise the discussion well as appended in Appendix 3-a. While it is variously known as a discussion guide (Greenbaum, 2000), an interview guide (Morgan, 1997), and a moderator guide (Greenbaum, 1998), Krueger (1998) has classified interview strategies for focus groups into two types: a “topic guide” and a “questioning route”. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), while the topic guide is “an outline with a list of topics or issues to be pursued in the focus group”, the questioning route is “a sequence of questions in complete, conversational sentences” (p.38). Krueger (1998) has also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each approach; he has suggested that the questioning route is more advisable for a novice interviewer than the topic guide—since topic guide requires a moderator to have an advanced skill. In the study, the topic guide was more suitable in the light of my participatory inquiry intentions as described earlier, in that it can give the participants a chance to express their views and experiences on learning more openly rather than the questioning route in which an operator follows a sequence of questions to be asked. Furthermore, the skills of the moderator need to be taken into consideration in conducting focus group interviews. The personal qualities as a moderator have an impact on focus groups, as Krueger (1994) has pointed out that “the open-ended questioning, the use of techniques such as pauses and probes, and knowing when and how to move into new topic areas require a degree of expertise typically not possessed by untrained interviewers” (p.36). As mentioned before, I had taught social work practice which includes communication and groupwork skills at the course for certified social workers in KISWEC; therefore, I decided to use the topic guide to get the most out of the focus groups in a way to prompt the participants to interact with each other. As Barbour (2007) advocates that during the focus groups discussion, “a few brief questions and well-chosen stimulus material will be sufficient to provoke and sustain discussion” (p.82), I decided to ask the participants the following three questions, as Appendix 3-a shows:

- 1) In what sorts of situation have you felt the need to learn as a social worker?
- 2) In those situations, how do you consider you have addressed the need to learn?
- 3) Could you explain in detail about your one specific instance where you felt learned something which has significantly affected you as a social worker?
 - How do you consider you learned through the experience?
 - What do you consider you learned from the experience?

These were relatively comprehensive topic guides, not schedules as such. In conducting the focus groups, I anticipated that “groupthink” could have an implication for discussions

(MacDougall and Baum, 1997), in that some participants might hesitate to express their views on a topic discussed in order to conform to the other participants' thoughts. In the first and second question, I first asked the participants to make their individual list of answers on paper as an individual task, and then to explain their own list. As Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest, "the list can be used simply to identify the range of responses. Or, the list can be used to move to a deeper level" (p.42). It was intended that this task could avoid the participants moving to group consensus too soon. After a short break was taken, the third question was discussed in the second half of the interview. Through these questions, I expected to explore a wide range of views on learning experiences in the discussions.

Moreover, about one week before the interviews were conducted, I sent a memo to the participants with a reminder about it in order that they could have more time to reflect on the topics—it said that I would ask them to describe how they see different kinds of professional learning as a social worker; to talk about examples. This suited my participatory inquiry intention in a way that the participants are treated not as passive but as "active agents" (Reason, 1999: 208).

Pilot testing

Krueger (1994) has emphasised the importance of pilot testing in focus group interviews. One way for pilot testing is "to invite selected representatives of your target audience to comment on your questions as well as other aspects of the study" (p.68). Since the member of Research Team (RT) met the requirements of the interviewees set out for the study, I expected them to serve the pilot testing. Before conducting the first focus group, I held the meeting with the RT to receive their feedback on the questioning strategy for not only the focus groups but also the one-to-one interviews. Through the meeting, I found the need to change some words and phrases used in the topic guide, in order to make meanings of those words and phrases shared by the participants.

After modifying the questioning strategy to reflect the feedback from the RT, the first focus group was conducted. In this group, some of the participants told about their learning experiences in more formal opportunities such as professional development programmes provided by professional associations and their organizations. Though I had anticipated this to some extent before conducting the focus groups, it made me realise that some of them had an underlying assumption that professional learning refers to such a formal learning rather than informal learning. It also became apparent that many of them actively engaged in the discussion and communicated with each other when they talked about their own learning experiences. On the other hand, when one member talked of beliefs and opinions, the communication tended to follow a pattern of the researcher to the member and vice versa. As described earlier, I intended the focus groups to help the participants to learn from each

other's learning experiences as social workers—which could lead the participation to be a learning experience for each participant. Reflecting on these, in the subsequent focus groups I tried to press the participants to talk of instances of their different kinds of learning experiences—not just of formal learning experiences. I also tried to provide them with encouragement for member to member communication to happen in a relaxed way. In these ways, one participant's comment often encouraged other participants to provide their own similar and/or different experiences in the discussions. The participants built a picture of how they see learning as social workers through the different kinds of learning experiences each of them provided. Many of the participants often seemed to gain something through interacting with each other; they commented that they had few opportunities to talk about their learning experiences with fellow social workers in their day-to-day practice, when I asked them for a brief comment about their experience in the last phase of the focus groups. It can be said that the participation in the focus groups provided the social workers with an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences. As such, in retrospect the first focus group played the role of pilot testing to a considerable degree.

One-to-one interviews

While proceeding with conducting the focus groups, I conducted the one-to-one interviews with 16 participants in total after each of them attended the focus groups. The dates of one-to-one interviews were arranged not long after the participants attended the focus groups so that it was likely that they could remember their experience of the focus group interviews well. The venue for the one-to-one interviews was different to each participant. Some of the interviews were conducted in a room in KISWEC; others were carried out in a participant's workplace or a meeting room for hire—where it allowed the participants to get easy access to. As shown in Table 3.4, the participants of the one-to-one interviews were a range of social workers in terms of their age, practice experience, and practice field.

Table 3.4: Summary of the participants in the one-to-one interviews

Gender	Female: 10 Male: 6
Age	30-39: 8 40-49: 5 50-59: 3
Practice experience	8-10 years: 6 11-15 years: 6 16-20 years: 3 over 21 years: 1
Field of practice	Mental Health: 1 Learning Disabilities: 4 Children and Families: 2 Health and Disabilities: 7 Community Work: 1 Probation: 1

Table 3.5: One-to-one interviews participants

Name	Gender	Age	Practice experience	Field of practice
Miyuki	female	50-59	17 years	Health and Disabilities
Harumi	female	30-39	12	Health and Disabilities
Toshie	female	30-39	16.5	Health and Disabilities
Mayumi	female	30-39	10	Health and Disabilities
Ko	male	40-49	15	Health and Disabilities
Tomoe	female	40-49	11	Mental Health
Yukio	male	30-39	12	Learning Disabilities
Hisa	male	40-49	16	Probation
Satoko	female	30-39	11	Learning Disabilities
Akira	male	30-39	8	Health and Disabilities
Aoi	female	30-39	8	Health and Disabilities
Takashi	male	50-59	Over 21	Learning Disabilities
Yumi	female	30-39	10	Community Work
Jo	male	40-49	13	Learning Disabilities
Tamae	female	50-59	10	Children and Families
Mari	female	40-49	8	Children and Families

Interview guides

The one-to-one interviews were of 60-90 minutes' duration. In the one-to-one interviews, I intended to evidence fully the instances of learning experience the participants provided in the focus groups—because there was not enough time to do it in the focus groups. I carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews by using an interview guide as appended in Appendix 3-b. While being variously known as “guided conversations” (Lofland and Lofland, 2006; Rubin and Rubin, 2011), or “guided interview” (Rogers and Bouey, 1996), Patton (2002) points out that:

The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and establish a conversational style – but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined (p.343).

While structured interviews may allow the data to be generalised to some degree, they can entail the lack of spontaneity in interactive conversation between interviewers and interviewees—which can as a result limit the data constructed in the interviews. My interview guide was designed to be adaptable to each participant, reflecting the data collected through the focus groups. As Denzin (1989) has highlighted that “open ended interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings and interpretations cannot be standardized” (p.42). Likewise the focus groups, the memo was sent to the participants in advance of the interview for the reason as given earlier in the section of the focus groups; it said that I would ask them to describe the learning experiences provided in the focus group in more detail and also to talk of other learning experiences that they considered had a significant influence on themselves as a social worker.

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the participants to describe their experience in the focus groups. I found this useful to help me to conduct the subsequent focus groups. For example, some participants gave feedback on the wording of questions about which they considered that they might have different assumptions. In the one-to-one interviews, I tried to be a “consciously active interviewer” as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) put it:

The consciously active interviewer intentionally, concertedly provokes responses by indicating—even suggesting—narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents for the respondent to engage in addressing the research questions under consideration (p.39).

In the interviews, I tried to treat the participants slightly more as “peers”, in a way to tell them my own experiences and other participants’ experiences provided in the previous interviews that was related to the issue discussed. By doing so, I sought to encourage the participants to explore more deeply the subjects. I also asked the participants to elaborate on their experiences through pressing them for concrete descriptions, not just their beliefs and assertions.

Observations

In addition to the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, the observations were conducted to complement the data gained from the interviews. In qualitative research, the issue of how to get access to the field is crucial (e.g. Angrosino, 2008; Flick, 2009). Bailey (1996) has suggested that “gaining entry is a complicated process, and the particular route one takes to gain entry affects the rest of the research” (p.50). In conducting the observations, I chose Kyoto International Social Welfare Exchange Centre (KISWEC)—that I used to work for—as the main research setting. The reasons for this were as follows. The setting of KISWEC gave me the opportunities to collect more extensive data for the research. As can be seen in Appendix 4, KISWEC provided not only pre-qualified but also post-qualified social workers with the professional development programmes; while many of other similar institutions provided either pre-qualified or post-qualified programme for social workers in Japan. Some of the participants in the study had attended the professional development programmes provided by KISWEC before; two participants attended the programme during the study as will be described later.

Moreover, KISWEC provided eight facilities for the disabled which included sheltered workshops for those with learning disabilities, having a staff of about eighty in total which included about fifty social workers with a wide range of practice experiences. For further details of the organizational structure of KISWEC, see Appendix 4. With regard to professional development, KISWEC provided their staff with the following opportunities— They could attend any professional development programme offered by KISWEC with financial aid and practical support from their own organization. Four participants in the study worked for those sheltered workshops run by KISWEC. As described later, I made the site visits to one of their workplace for which two of them worked. Considering the fact that developing rapport is essential especially in conducting an observation (e.g. Angrosino, 2008; Flick, 2009; Padgett, 2008), the relationships established with KISWEC and some participants led to practical advantages in the study. Thus, KISWEC offered an optimum setting for the study.

In connection with a period of observation, I got involved not only in formal learning opportunities, but also in the complex area of informal learning in the following ways. As shown in Table 3.6, in terms of the former, I attended the professional development programme on family therapy offered by KISWEC with its permission. That programme had a total of 8 sessions from May to July on a weekly basis. As described, two participants of the study attended the programme with whom I conducted both the focus groups and one-to-one interviews. In the programme, I not only observed sessions but also talked about learning experiences especially with the two interviewees before and/or after sessions, and also during breaks.

Concerning the informal learning opportunities, I engaged in the activities of the three learning groups organised by the participants of the study and/or the member of the Research Team; though I had access difficulties in some learning groups organised by the participants since those were exclusive to its member. In the interviews, many of the participants talked of their learning experiences in various informal learning opportunities such as a learning group organised by fellow social workers and/or other helping professions. Therefore, through getting involved in different kinds of learning groups with its members' permission, I sought to complement and contextualise the data gained from the interviews. Though these learning groups had been organised for different reasons, it seemed that they had common aims to share each member's practical experiences and build a professional network beyond their work setting. These opportunities allowed for observing interaction within the learning groups and discussing diverse experiences with not only the participants in the study but also other members of the learning groups.

Besides, I made the site visits to the sheltered workshop run by KISWEC—for which two participants worked who attended both the focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The visits were made once a week for a month—which was four visits in total. Through the site visits, I tried to gain contextual information about the situation in which they practiced as frontline practitioners. During the visits, I observed ordinary activities undertaken by the staff, which included a break for lunch, coffee. Also, I had a chance to join purely informal meetings organised by them after work, where I could talk with them in more relaxed way.

Table 3.6: Summary of the observations

<p>Formal learning</p>	<p><i>Professional development programme on Family therapy:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 8 sessions - Two interviewees of the study attended the programme.
<p>Informal learning</p>	<p>Learning meeting: attended a total of 5 meetings</p> <p>a) <i>'Study Meeting of Social Work Practice'</i>: 2 meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The meeting was held once a few months. - The member was all social workers in a variety of practice field. - Three interviewees of the study were the member of it - Two members of the research team were the core member. <p>b) <i>'Off-time Meeting for Case Study'</i>: 1 meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The meeting was held once a few months. - The member was all social workers in a variety of practice field. - One interviewee was the key member of the meeting. <p>c) <i>'Meeting for Case Study about families'</i>: 2 meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The meeting is held once a month. The meeting had been taken placed over 10 years. - The member includes not only social workers but also other helping professions such as counsellors, school teachers etc. in a variety of practice field. - Two supervisors of it had taught the professional development programme on Family therapy in KISWEC above for about 20 years. - Three interviewees were the member. - One members of the research team were the key member.
<p>Others</p>	<p>Site visits to the sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities run by KISWEC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Four visits made - Two participants worked for it

Research Team (RT)

The Research Team (RT) was organised for the study, which consisted of five members who met the criteria set as described earlier; the member of RT did not participate in the interviews. The primary role of the RT I expected was “peer debriefing”. Flick (2007) has put peer debriefing as a strategy “to collect second opinions, different views and diversity in the perspectives on the material and research process” (p.35). As such, peer debriefing can contribute not only to enhancing a diversity of views on the study, but also to improving the quality of research by minimising the researcher’s bias, as some authors advocate it (Flick, 2007; Padgett, 2008; Ezzy, 2002). I expected that peer debriefing with the RT could allow

myself to be aware of different perspectives about the study that might not otherwise be able to be obtained.

During the fieldwork, I held a total of three meetings with the RT. The first meeting was held before carrying out the interviews to discuss the questioning strategy for the focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The second meeting was held after half way done with the interviews, which gave the researcher the opportunity to share experiences of fieldwork and exchange ideas on the study. Lastly, I held the third meeting after almost finishing the fieldwork, where I discussed fairly early findings to examine how those relate, or do not relate, to their own experiences as social workers—this allowed the researcher to get different perspectives on the initial findings.

3.2.3 Ethical considerations and procedures

Ethical approval to commence the fieldwork (including contacting the possible participants) was granted from the Department of Social Policy and Social Work Interim Ethics Committee in the University of York. Participant information sheet and informed consent form were also approved by the committee. Copies of these documents are included in the Appendix 1 and 2. In the following section, I discuss ethical considerations and procedures for the study in detail.

Interviews: Focus groups and one-to-one interviews

As Kent (2000) notes, there is a need to obtain informed consent in order to protect the right to exercise self-determination for interviews. Before starting the interviews, I obtained voluntary informed consent from each of the participants. The informed consent form was translated into Japanese, being given to the participants at the beginning of the interview session and clearly explained. I brought two copies of the consent form: One copy to be signed by each participant and then kept by the researcher; the other for the participant to keep, gaining explicit consent to the following ethical issues likely to arise with the study.

First, in conducting the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, the researcher used two digital voice recorders to collect accurate information and enable concentration on communicating with the participants. Before starting the interviews, I explained the participants about the right to ask for stopping the voice recording anytime during the interviews. It was also described that if requested to do so, I would change the way of recording into note-taking.

Second, before conducting the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, I gave the participants the fullest possible advance explanation of how I would use the data and asked for agreement

to include the information they provide with the exception of the following case: the identities of the participants are revealed; their information is factually incorrect; it could be seen to place them at risk in some way—this case will be described in detail later. The use of any data which could lead to an identification of the participants and their organizations has been avoided or modified in order to guarantee their confidentiality and anonymity by the use of pseudonyms in this thesis. Only I as principal investigator and PhD co-supervisors had access to the data per se. The research team member had no access to the data per se. They did not participate in the interviews as mentioned; therefore they did not know who the participants were in the interviews.

Third, some of the participants worked for the same agency or organization—which could lead to the risk that the participants could disclose information gained in the focus groups. For example, some of them might tell a bad and upsetting experience of their agency's training in the focus groups; then that information might be disclosed—whether intentionally or not—to their manager(s) or supervisor(s) who are assumed to be in a position to have an impact on their career progression. Therefore, I allocated them into different focus groups to minimise the risk of disclosure of their information and also encourage them to speak more openly about their experiences. In the beginning of the focus groups, I explained to all participants the risk of disclosure of information with the informed consent form, asking them to keep what was discussed in the focus groups confidential and then obtained individual written consent.

Observation

There could be ethical issues with the observations in KISWEC as a main research setting. As described, I attended the professional development programme on family therapy and also made site visits to the sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities. The majority of staff in KISWEC and the sheltered workshop knew that the researcher used to work for KISWEC—there could be possibility that some of them might regard me as a “whistle-blower” who informs their manager and supervisor of information that could be seen as endangering their career progression. Therefore, organizational consent needed to be secured so as to guarantee the confidentiality of the staff. In advance of conducting the fieldwork in KISWEC and the sheltered workshop, I held a meeting with them to allow all of these ethics concerns to be discussed and for acceptable safeguarding practices to be put in place. In the meeting, I made my role clear to them in order to make sure that there were no inadvertent risks of unwished-for disclosure.

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Thematic narrative analysis

In the interviews, the participants talked of their learning experiences that they considered had a significant influence on themselves as social workers. In analysing their narratives provided, I found the need to see their lived learning experiences in a holistic way as they experienced in their own working context. Therefore, I decided to employ “thematic narrative analysis” (Riessman, 2008) to interrogate the stories of the participants’ learning experiences.

When trying to analyse qualitative data, we often move to thinking of “themes” almost automatically, as represented by grounded theory (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1998). However, this is only one approach to analysing data—though being most prevailing—that approach has its potential limitations. Analysing thematically means that we tend to break the data up into very small “chunks”, as Riessman (2008) highlights:

In narrative analysis, we attempt to keep the “story” intact for interpretive purposes, although determining the boundaries of stories can be difficult and highly interpretive. ... Narrative analysts do strive to preserve sequence and the wealth of detail contained in long sequences (p.74).

In the analysis of the data, I tried to preserve the sense of the “story” of the participants’ learning experiences. For instance, the social workers I spoke to described their learning experiences in diverse opportunities as something that is “turning point”, “eye-opener”, and “perspective-alerting”. In analysing the data, I asked myself what characteristics their stories can have. According to Riessman (2008), thematic narrative analysis pays attention to context “by historicising a narrative account”, and is also fundamentally “case centered” approach (p.74). In these regards, thematic analysis proceeds on the assumption that meaning can always be understood in that same way—it involves seeking to theorise across cases. Kvale (1996) has noted that reducing texts to “a mere collection of words” can lead them to “no longer open up to a horizon of possible meanings, to be explored and developed” (p.182). For example, in the interviews some of the participants talked about their routine work in describing their learning experiences. What is meant by routine work can be different to each of them. Such a word that seems simple and familiar can lead us to assume that we know what it means and not think about it enough. In order to address this issue, McCracken (1988) highlights:

The investigator must put off “readerly” acts of meaning construction. He or she must come to the text with a certain disingenuous wonder, refusing to supply the assumptions and understandings with which we are normally so quickly and unconsciously forthcoming (p.44).

Thus, rather than breaking up the data, I tried to look to see how the participants talk about something associated with their learning differently with a careful eye on the language, especially “metaphors” that the participants used (McCracken, 1988: 44).

The social workers I spoke to reconstructed their learning experiences depending on the context in which the interviews were carried out. While the thematic narrative analysis attends to more the “told” rather than the “telling” (Riessman, 2008: 54), I also asked myself how they spoke—in what “voice” they talked in the interviews. For example, some of them used a collective voice—e.g. “we”—to speak for other members in the focus groups. Paying attention to how they speak in the interviews is important in that it can allow for finding out that the participants suggest what their learning experiences mean—which is what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) call “indigenous coding”. It can be said that the participants suggest an analysis to us. This takes us to the discussion of the relationship between what participants seem to think and how they talk, and how we think about what they have told us. In analysing their narratives, I attended to the categories of meaning that the participants gave to their experiences in the interviews, not simply translating those into researcher’s categories.

3.3.2 Data analysis procedures

This section describes how the data analysis procedures were carried out including a discussion of the use of the qualitative data analysis software. As mentioned before, all the interviews were recorded by two digital voice recorders just in case with the participants’ consent. In terms of the issue of transcription, Shaw and Holland (2014) put it:

Unless you have very clear propositions that you are looking at, then selective transcription is in effect selective analysis, in which you are deciding what is important before you have properly looked at the data. Because you are working with qualitative material such as semi-structured interviews, this points to the probability that you do not have specific postulates in advance so do not know what will be relevant and what not (p.215).

Therefore, instead of doing transcription selectively, all the recordings of the focus groups and one-to-one interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher himself. Although

the interviews were the main source of data in this study, the data obtained from the observation work in different learning opportunities was used in methodologically inclusive ways through the research process that have been identified by Suri and Clarke (2009): Informed subjectivity and reflexivity; purposefully informed selective inclusivity; audience-appropriate transparency. For one thing, additional data from the observations gave insight into the context in which the participants described in the interviews they experienced learning as social workers. Through the thematic narrative analysis, I was able to draw on observations in order to make some contextual details explicit. Furthermore, I drew on the contextual data gained from the site visits to the sheltered workshop run by KISWEC as described, so as to sketch out the learning experiences in a holistic way—that had significantly influenced two participants who worked for it, which will be presented in the section of discussions, Chapter 8. This will allow the reader to comprehend the context in which learning took place as they described.

After transcribing all the interview data, the data were analysed in the framework of thematic narrative analysis—which was carried out in Japanese. To begin with, I chose one focus group and one one-to-one interview which seemed to have “much to tell me, but hold some puzzles” for me (Shaw and Holland, 2014: 223). Those sets of data were coded for themes. After coding the data, I classified the coding according to topics, developing tentative analytic ideas. Then, I moved to working on other cases that seemed to “not easily fit” with my tentative analytic framework (p.223). In doing so, I sought to “examine the unexpected, the puzzling, and the incongruous”, rather than to “search for expanding confirmatory notions” (p.223). This brought up further questions to be explored—which repeatedly involved searching for words or set of ideas in the data. By repeating these processes, the framework for analysis was gradually developed. Then, I conducted detailed coding through applying the themes identified to the other data of the interviews with the aid of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software): MaxQDA. In doing so, the themes were checked for emerging patterns, for variability and consistency, and for characters of the narratives told by the participants. During the data analysis, I asked myself the following questions: Can the themes identified exhaust all I can say about and from the data?; How do I draw a picture of the ideas?

Furthermore, the data analysis entailed looking at relevant literature. As Drisko (1997) has pointed out:

Qualitative research is a powerful means to identify and describe ‘local theories’... researchers should compare qualitatively derived local theories to the interpretations and meanings framed by formal theories on similar content (p.193).

Returning to relevant literature was helpful to explore further issues raised in analysing the data. According to Riessman (2008), in thematic narrative analysis, prior theory and research—that “generally eschewed in the early stages in a grounded theory study” (p.74)—guides inquiry process. In this study, for instance, the literature on “expertise” and “professional identity” talked about by the participants was examined for the issues that can have implications for their learning; then I returned to the data in order to look out for every apparent use of those ideas. In that way, looking at relevant literature can allow for discouraging the researcher voice to dominate the interpretation of the data.

While the CAQDAS can allow us to store, manage and encode the different kinds of data in an easy way, there has been considerable discussion about the use of CAQDAS. Drisko (2013) notes that “at the cutting edge, computer software offers whole new vistas for qualitative research, expanding the types of data it addresses and the forms through which knowledge is developed and communicated” (p.284). On the other hand, some researchers have expressed their scepticism about it, as Coffey et al. (1996) put it:

The qualitative research community should not endorse the computer-based code-and-retrieve strategy as the automatic approach to management and analysis (Section 7.7).

Dey (1993) also pointed out that “instead of studying the data in situ, the data are ‘fragmented’ into bits and the overall sense of the data is lost” (p.64). Fielding and Lee (1998) claimed that “the practical benefits of computer-based methods have been exaggerated” (p.69). Although utilising MaxQDA in the data analysis, I tried to be mindful of the potential limitations inherent in the use of CAQDAS.

With regard to the way of presenting the interview excerpts as will be in the section of findings and discussions, I followed the suggestion made by Kvale (1996):

Verbal transcriptions of oral speech, with its repetitions, digressions, pauses, “hums”, and the like, are difficult to grasp when presented in a written form. Interview excerpts in a vernacular form, in particular in local dialects, provided rough reading. To facilitate comprehension, the subject’s spontaneous oral speech should in the final report be rendered into a readable, written textual form (p.267).

In the writing-up stage, the interview excerpts were translated from Japanese into English by the researcher himself. In some cases, I needed to reconstruct the participants’ speech in that I changed the order and integrated words, so that it can allow for clearly showing what the

excerpt is meant. Through the process of translation, I found it challenging to translate the colloquial expressions without eliminating their nuance. I often ran into difficulties in finding appropriate expressions for some words, ideas and ways of thinking with which the participants talked about their experiences as social workers. For example, “expertise” was a recurring theme in the data—which was expressed in different ways. Through the process of finding appropriate expressions for such words, it involved myself repeatedly returning to the original data and questioning if I understand what statements can mean.

This chapter has described the choices underlying the research design, the data collection procedures and the methods of analysis employed in the study. The limits of the study will be discussed in Chapter 9, Conclusion. In the next section, I will present the findings of my empirical research how the experienced social workers learn in their working context.

Part 3

Findings

Chapter 4

Professional ways of being: ‘Am I really a Social Worker?’

When I asked the participants to join the study, at first some of them refused to do it because they regarded themselves not suitable for the study, in spite of the fact that they had around 10 years of practice experience after they had qualified as social workers—which was set as the criterion for the participants in the study. During the interviews—both focus groups and one-to-one interviews, many of the participants expressed hesitation to some extent in calling themselves “social workers”. The interviews revealed more than their learning experiences in that it became clear that talking about actual learning experiences prompted the participants to reflect on their professional identity as social workers, or to recall their past reflection on it. Through the interviews, many of the social workers talked about challenges and struggles they confronted as front-line practitioners in various ways. The findings show that these challenges and struggles were closely related to their professional identity as social workers to a considerable extent. Here I will use the term “*professional ways of being*” (Dall’Alba, 2005; 2009; Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009) , to refer to professional identity.

The social workers in the study found themselves learning a lot within such challenges and struggles in their own working context. To put it another way, how the social workers dealt with challenges and struggles shaped their learning as professionals. It may be argued that we cannot understand their learning unless we set each person’s learning experiences in the context of their way of being a social worker. Some account of how the social workers in the study saw those challenges and struggles seems to be necessary for understanding their learning as professionals. In this chapter, I will examine challenges and struggles in being social workers in the context of Japanese social work.

4.1 Uncertainty in practice

As mentioned, in the interviews some of the participants hesitated to refer to themselves as social workers, as noted by one social worker, Mayumi: “*Though I have had around 10 years of practice experience in the sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities after I qualified as a social worker, I would probably say that I have not identified myself as a social worker*” (1-to-1). This resonates with Takuya’s comment that “*I was qualified as a social worker about 10 years ago, however, I feel like I have got just the qualification. I mean that what I do in my daily practice seems far different to what social workers are expected to do as professionals*” (FG). In these comments, we can see a dissonance between their assumptions about the role of social workers and what they practise in actual work settings—which caused them to have a hesitation in referring to themselves as social workers, and even to identify themselves as a

social worker. Here the question seems to arise as to how the participants saw the role of social workers as professionals. In the following example of Yukio who had worked for a sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities, he posed a challenging question in considering the role of social workers in his working context:

I am wondering that from a viewpoint of service users, what it's like to be a professional social worker. (...) I often wonder if our service users and carers see us as professionals, I would say, who have particular expertise (FG).

Yukio seems to suggest deep doubts about professional identity as a social worker. He called into question that social workers have professional expertise in facing service users and/or carers in day-to-day practice. Many participants in the study echoed Yukio's comment to some degree as it represents challenges and struggles they faced as social workers in day-to-day practice. While the challenges and struggles expressed by the participants vary widely according to their own working context, from the data it became obvious that those were involved in "uncertainty" embedded in day-to-day practice in different ways. It may be argued that uncertainty can be a central notion to understand challenges and struggles in being social workers. In what follows, we will concern ourselves with the issues of uncertainty from the two aspects identified: role of social workers; value-based practice.

4.1.1 Role of social workers

The issue of identity has been embedded in social work since its dawn of history. There has been an ongoing debate about how to define what social work is and what social workers do, though I have not made the issue a central theme of this study. The findings indicate that the social workers I talked to had been confronted by the same issues through their career—which can have a considerable implication for their learning as professionals. We begin by considering how the social workers defined themselves as professionals.

Invisible work

Social workers play multiple roles in practice according to a working context. This can blur the role of social workers, as expressed by Akira: "*Social workers coordinate resources available, and also develop relations among others, so I would say what we actually do in practice tend to be invisible*" (1-to-1). In the study, many of the participants noted that they often felt that their role was rendered invisible to some degree. In the example of Mari who worked as a school social worker in a middle school, she pointed out the fact that the role she delivered was something that is difficult to be seen by others in her work setting:

It is just a student who plays a leading role, and also it is a family that supports the student. Moreover, then the school gives help to them. In that way, I just find myself playing a supporting role, coordinating role, I would say that I am just the person behind the scenes (FG).

Though how much the social workers felt uncomfortable with the nature of invisibility in the role of social workers, many of them described that the nature of invisibility embedded in the role of social workers can lead to less recognition being received as a professional among helping professionals. The findings show that working with other helping professions in day-to-day practice tended to lead the social workers to reflect on their professional role in different ways. The following extract from Tomoko—who worked for a mental health institution—captures the point well:

In the mental health field, I work with other helping professions such as medical doctors, nurses and counsellors in day-to-day practice. In such a situation, I strongly feel there is a need to have my firm belief about what social workers are (FG).

* * * * *

When I come to think of the fact that other helping professions might have some doubt about what social workers do, and even doubt about if social workers are really needed or not, I really find myself needing to learn more, and also to think hard about our expertise as a professional (FG).

Thus, the nature of invisibility in their professional role challenged and questioned them; such challenges had considerable implications for their way of being a social worker. Yukio described his personal belief about the role of social workers:

I am wondering if there would be any differences between qualified social workers and unqualified social workers. Through our daily work, I often find myself considering that sort of thing. (...) Of course, if you had some practice experiences, there would be a difference with someone who has little practice experiences. However, when it comes to how well you can communicate with others, I feel like it comes down to something about not your practice experience, but the value of yourself. I am wondering if I face service users as a qualified social worker, or just as a person without such a qualification (FG).

Yukio expressed doubts about that he has particular expertise as a professional. Through his career as a social worker, Yukio found himself basing his practice not on expertise but on himself as a person. The findings reveal that many of the participants had doubts to some degree that they have special expertise as professionals. In considering the role of social worker further, there seem to be several important points in the following extract from Satoko describing her learning experiences in the study leave in the US:

In the U.S, when I talked with a school social worker, I felt that there was a big difference between social workers in the U.S and social workers in Japan. That is because, I suppose, in the U.S social workers seem to establish a professional identity. Compared to a situation in Japan, I kind of felt hesitant to say that 'I am a social worker' with confidence in front of them. Frankly speaking, I found myself not having any expertise as a social worker while I had worked for about five years (FG).

Through those learning experiences in the U.S, Satoko became aware of the fact that she had less expertise than social workers in the US who seemed to her to have professional identity. That led her to feel uncomfortable with referring to herself as a social worker. Satoko

explained further about the differences of the role that social workers delivered between in the US and Japan that she found:

Especially in the U.S, I think that the main role social workers are expected to take on is interviewing, counselling, and coordinating. Social workers appear to be more specialised, so I would probably say, what social workers should do seems very explicit. In terms of other helping professions, for example, speech therapists do only speech therapy and the like. Each of the helping professions has a distinctive role and then provides service users with distinctive services. (...) In the social work field in Japan, social workers usually are required to perform multiple roles. Among the whole workload I've got in my organization for those with learning disabilities, the proportion of tasks of interviewing or counselling is really small (FG).

For Satoko, the role of social workers in the US appeared to be more clear and explicit about a “boundary” with other helping professions, compared to the role she played in her day-to-day practice. This seems to suggest to us that the vague boundary between the role of social workers and of other helping professions can bring about the nature of invisibility in practicing social work—which can lead some of the social workers to hesitant to refer to themselves as social workers without a doubt.

Gap between existing and developing identity

In terms of the role of social workers, there is an important point here to note that while the social workers brought their identity which had been developed to their practice, they established it through engaging in practice over their career. It seems to make good sense that professional identity is not only something that emerges through their practice, but also something that shapes their practice. Many of the participants highlighted that with regard to the role of social worker, there is a gap between what they learnt in universities and what they actually undertook in their working context. One of the social workers, Mayumi—who had worked for a sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities—described the gap between her assumption about the role of social worker and the role she delivered in her day-to-day practice:

In my job, I have little opportunity to play a coordinating role. In our organization, my main role is to support and enable our service users to engage in working, so it is really important to make sure that they can earn wages (I-to-I).

For Mayumi, to coordinate services for service users is one of the main roles that social workers are expected to deliver as she had learned in a university or professional development programme. However, she did not found herself playing that role in her work setting—which discouraged her to identify herself as a social worker as described earlier in this section. This point seems to be clearly reflected in the account of Satoko:

The thing is, I think, the huge gap between what we learnt in universities and what we need to do as social workers in an actual practice setting. That seems to lead us not to find our way after working as social workers. I would say it is just like, I ask myself what is my

identity as a social worker, or ask myself if I am really a social worker. In my case, I tried to understand that what I learnt in the university is an only part of the role I need to take on in the actual practice setting (FG).

Thus, we can see the dissonance between their existing identity which had been developed before starting their job in universities or vocational institutions for qualifying as social workers, and their developing identity through engaging with actual practice in their own working context. It can be argued that such a gap may challenge and question their existing assumption about the role of social workers, and even discourage them to develop their professional identity as social workers.

4.1.2 Value-based practice

Having discussed challenges and struggles related to the role of social workers, we now move on to the other aspect of uncertainty that the social workers were faced with in their day-to-day practice: value-based practice. In the interviews, the social workers I spoke to described themselves as finding it really challenging to engage in a case where they are in conflict with others. The findings indicate that such a case tended to involve in a clash of values on which each related person put on their own part. It can be argued that how the social workers deal with such a tension embedded in their day-to-day practice is closely interrelated with their professional way of being. I will examine how the social workers see the nature of their practice driven by values in an actual work setting through the following two aspects: value conflicts; uncertainty about evidence.

Value conflicts with others

It will be useful to divide value conflicts with others in day-to-day practice into the following three types: fellow social workers; other helping professions; and service users and carers. We begin by considering value conflicts with fellow social workers. The findings show that many of the social workers found it challenging to deal with value conflicts with fellow social workers in day-to-day practice. Takashi described his experience where he had found himself in serious conflict with his co-workers over the plan that his organization would develop a community care system for severely disabled people:

When we discussed that plan, we needed to handle serious conflict among our co-workers. For example, over the issue of to what extent people with high medical needs can live in the community. Some co-workers expressed considerable doubt about the fact that such severely disabled people can really live not in nursing care facilities, but in the community. As a matter of fact, nobody was sure about that, although we wanted to support severely disabled people to live in the community setting (FG).

Takashi was responsible for settling the conflicts within his co-workers; therefore he found himself on the horns of a dilemma. This tension among the co-workers seemed to involve to

what extent each of them placed value on the idea of normalisation—that makes it possible for people with disabilities to live in regular circumstances, but rather than living in institutions. While some co-workers including Takashi tried to provide a support that allowed severely disabled people to live in the community, others were opposed to that plan since they felt deeply uncertain about it. He described this as a fairly tough experience through his career as a social worker.

In another example, Mayumi encapsulated the situation in which the social workers concerned were involved in a serious disagreement over a case in which a service user with learning disabilities needed to make a decision about whether to live in her house by herself with community care services, or in a nursing care facility, after her mother who had taken care of her had gone into a nursing home because of the decline of her health:

We held many meetings with some social workers in a community support centre for the disabled, the service user herself and her relatives. In every meeting where we made sure of what she wants to do, she expressed her needs differently. I find it really natural that service users' needs would change with things being unpredictable. She seemed to feel stressed about the fact itself that she needed to decide what she should do (FG).

In the meetings, there was a serious conflict between the social workers concerned about the ways to support her, as expressed that “it was as if we were fighting with each other” (FG):

On one hand, some social workers found it really difficult for her to live by herself. That was because, for example, she tended to make friends with strangers in town and then take them into her house, and she also tended to spend all her money. So, they maintained that it would be better for her to go into a nursing care facility. On the other hand, other social workers insisted that she could live by herself with adequate community care services provided (FG).

Mayumi noted that “I honestly didn't know which way would be better for her” (FG) in serious tension among fellow social workers. Thus, value conflicts with fellow social workers challenged Mayumi on her way of practice as a professional.

Next, I consider value conflicts with other helping professions. The evidences show that many of the social workers tended to find themselves in conflict with other helping professions as well as fellow social workers in their working context. The following extract from Aoi seems to capture the point well, who had worked for a social care organization for older people as a care manager:

I find it really important for each helping profession to share a basic idea or sense of something about what support is needed for service users or carers in day-to-day practice. If so, I find it possible to cooperate with each other based on such a shared idea. On the other hand, in a case where we don't share it with each other, I need to seek a compromise with other helping professions, which I find is the toughest part in being in cooperation with them in practice (FG).

Aoi had a role to coordinate community services for older people in need, which required her to cooperate with other helping professions such as medical doctors, nurses, and care workers in day-to-day practice. Aoi highlighted that such a value conflict with other helping professions often flared up in day-to-day practice:

I find things get more complicated when issues of value are involved. As a result of that, it sometimes occurs that community services are not provided well for service users, who we should pay the closest attention to as professionals. That is the most stressful thing for me (FG).

Each helping profession places a different value in engaging in practice. In such a working context, as discussed in the earlier section, the social workers tended to see their role as something vaguer than other helping professions' role—which led the social workers to feel challenged and questioned as professionals. Mari—who had worked as a school social worker at a middle school—seems to be explicit about this point in the following example; she described her experience in the meeting with a head teacher and one teacher who was in charge of coordinating:

Through getting involved with children as a school social worker, I often find them to grow fast, so time is really precious for them. (...) I told that there would be some possibilities to make things change, so let's work on something as soon as possible. However, I was asked by the head teacher and other teacher, 'what's the hurry?' At that time, I couldn't answer back firmly (FG).

Mari found this experience to challenge an assumption about her way of practising as a social worker. In this example, there seem to be value differences in a sense of "time" for children. While Mari put emphasis on the need to act immediately to make a difference to the case, it seemed to her that the head teacher and the teacher did not acknowledge the need. Thus, as shown in the example of Aoi and Mari, many of the social workers found value differences among helping professions in engaging in day-to-day practice, which led them to feel challenged and questioned as professionals in different ways.

Having discussed value conflicts between fellow social workers and other helping professions, now we move on to the last type of value conflicts: service users and carers. The data demonstrates that many of the social workers tended to find themselves in clashes between what they value as professional and what service users/carers value. Satoko remarked on her experience of value conflicts with service users and/or carers:

Each family has their own sense of value and way of thinking about how they should support their child with learning disabilities as a carer. (...) To take an example, I'd say an issue of what it means to be independent for those with disabilities, I find that issue really difficult to address. Many of our service users live with their family, so we have to consider for whom being independent is. So, when we consider how service users can get independent, we need to understand how their family think about that as well as how service users want to be (1-to-1).

When it comes to the issue of independence for people with learning disabilities, Satoko found herself in a situation in which what she values as a social worker can be in conflict with what service users and their family value. Moreover, Satoko pointed out that “*what service users want doesn’t usually match up with what their family want*” (1-to-1). Many of the social workers echoed Satoko’s comment in that in such a situation they found it difficult to achieve a balance between these conflicting values—which led them to feel confused about their role as professionals. This point seems to be illustrated explicitly in another example. Aoi engaged as a care manager with a service user who refused to see a doctor regularly, despite the fact that he had serious kidney trouble. In addition, the service user had little money enough to be provided with community services as a result of the fact that he chose to spend all the money from his pension on alcohol or the like:

Although I am required to deliver a role as a care manager to coordinate community services for older people in need so that they can keep their lives stable, in that case I couldn’t quite fulfil that role. (...) He often told me that there was nothing he wanted to do, so he was ready to die (FG).

Aoi described this experience as ‘*something that I found myself being at a loss what to do*’ (FG). Engaging in this case caused her to challenge her underlying assumption about the role of social worker:

While facing that case, I found myself rethinking what he really wanted to do. He told me that he wanted to drink alcohol and didn’t want to refrain from eating what he wants. He also told that he had no family or relatives, so if he kept refraining from what he wants to do, he wouldn’t think that there would be a happy future waiting for him (FG).

Aoi described herself as being caught in a real dilemma between what she should fulfil as a social worker and what the service user wanted to do in his rest of life. In the end, the service user was discovered by care workers just one day after he had passed away. While she reflected that this experience gave her chances to consider the issue of how older people deal with their own death, she described herself as being still not sure if she should have supported him to see a doctor for his health as much as possible.

We have examined different value conflicts with others that the social workers found in day-to-day practice. As discussed, value conflicts can vary greatly according to a working context. It can be argued that such value conflicts with others led to their underlying assumptions about their way of practice and further professional “ways of being” being challenged and questioned in different ways.

Uncertainty about 'evidence'

Now that one aspect of value-based practice—value conflict with others—has been discussed, in what follows I consider the other aspect—uncertainty about evidence. The findings indicate that the social workers found themselves in a situation that causes them to be uncertain about “evidence” on which their judgements are based in day-to-day practice, as expressed by Mayumi, who had worked for a community support centre for the disabled:

I was wondering about information I got directly from a service user, so I made sure of that information by asking a social worker who worked for the organization that service user attended. As a result, it turned out that what I got from the service user is different to information the organization had. (...) I find it really tough to deal with such an issue (FG).

In engaging in day-to-day practice, evidence that practitioners look for and utilise as resources in making judgements can vary widely. This point was echoed by many of the social workers in that they tended to feel uncertain about evidence, as encapsulated in the example of Toshie who had worked for a community support centre for the disabled.

When I write case records, I find myself writing only some part of information about service users to which I pay more attention or that I catch, even though I try to understand service users thoroughly in interviews. I would probably say that I seek information just related to something that seems to me to be an issue for service users. On the other hand, it would be likely that I focus on an issue itself in a wrong way (FG).

Toshie described herself as coming to develop such an awareness of uncertainty about evidence that she finds in her way, through getting involved in a professional development programme organised by a professional association:

When I talked about a case in such an opportunity, I got quite different feedback about it from social workers who worked in different fields, such as the field of older people. I find that social workers tend to get greatly affected by the field where they work. Therefore, social workers understand things from their own point of view, I mean that a social worker in one field put particular stress on one aspect of things, but little on other aspects according to practice fields (FG).

This awareness led to her way of practice being challenged and questioned as a professional: *“I found myself becoming keenly aware of my incapacity, in ways that I don’t really understand things in practice. That made me feel powerless” (FG).* Thus, Toshie was uncomfortable to a considerable degree with uncertainty about evidence on which her judgements are based in day-to-day practice; though how much the social workers felt uncomfortable with uncertainty about evidence was relative to each of them. Social work practitioners base their judgements on various kinds of evidence in different ways. As shown in the previous section, what practitioners put a value on as professionals can have an implication for their judgements in a given situation. Mari described her experience where she had worked as a social worker in a non-profit organization that provided family reunification programmes for abused children who were in an institution for children, and their family:

Although each staff member tries to share information about children and their family, I find that a staff member who is in charge of children tends to see a case from the viewpoint of children. On the other hand, a staff member in charge of family sees it from the viewpoint of family. (...) Despite pursuing the same aim of family reunification, we often become aware of the fact that we see things in different ways (I-to-I).

As summed up well by Mari, evidence can be understood in relation to a working context—which can lead to uncertainty about evidence in day-to-day practice. The above examples seem to demonstrate that how evidence is gathered and weighed in making judgements in day-to-day practice can be relative to each practitioner. It can be argued that the social workers rely on their assumptions about evidence as the basis of their judgement. This point seems to be reflected in the assumptions of one social worker that *“After all, I find that the more experienced you are, the more alternatives you can consider. So I always find myself reaching a conclusion that it is all about the practice experiences you have”* (Tomoko/FG). Tomoko’s assumptions about professional expertise seem to be closely connected to her way of being a social worker. As such, uncertainty about evidence can involve the social workers reflecting on their professional ways of being in different ways. The question of uncertainty about evidence on which practitioners’ judgements are based in day-to-day practice will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 7, in the section of discussions, from a different angle that what different kinds of knowledge practitioners use as resources in making judgements as professionals.

In this section, we have discussed how the social workers are involved in uncertainty embedded in their day-to-day practice through two aspects of it: the role of social workers and value based practice. As discussed, the issue of uncertainty can entail uncertainty about their identity as social workers and of social work practice. It should be noted that those aspects are inextricably linked as part of a whole of the issue of uncertainty. In the next section, we consider the subject of challenges and struggles the social workers faced in the light of uncertainty in a wider context.

4.2 Standardised way of practice: From ‘invisible’ to ‘visible’

In the interviews, the social workers I talked to described a range of constraints they faced in their working context. The findings suggest that these constraints involved the issue of uncertainty to a considerable extent in a way that makes an attempt to eliminate uncertainty embedded in social work practice in a wider context. Here let us look carefully into how these constraints can have implications for their day-to-day practice.

Social workers’ practice is shaped to a considerable degree within state-run systems—which impose different kinds of constraints not only on organizations where they work but also on

social workers themselves, because these organizations rely on funding coming from the state. In other words, these constraints are an integral part of how social workers practise in an actual work setting. Social workers are required to deal with changes in policies associated with their daily practice. The findings show that the social workers had been working in increasingly changing environments, which involved regulating processes and procedures of practice. Mayumi described the implication of a community support system for the disabled that had been reformed by the state:

Under the new community support system for the disabled, we must comply with the rules imposed, which require organizations to make how they provide services for their service users clearer. In that way, social work organizations need to disclose information about their services (1-to-1).

Before the community support system for the disabled, as some of the social workers in social care field pointed out, how social work organizations provide services remained “invisible” to some extent to each other. Mayumi also described the positive aspect of the system:

I suppose that social work organizations would share their information to make sure if their way of practice accords with the rules. (...) That would allow social work organizations to build up an extensive network in the community (1-to-1).

It may be argued that the current climate of regulation involves making processes and procedures in practice “visible” not only in social care for the disabled but also in other fields. As suggested by Mayumi, this can be viewed as a shift from “tacit” rule to “explicit” rule—which aims at a standardised way of practice. This shift can be seen in the language of accountability. In the sense of organizational accountability, it can be argued that various regulations entail a quest for certainty in a way to manage the way of practice. Such a standardised way of practice can involve practitioners having less autonomy in structuring their practice. The findings reveal that social work organizations tended to place conflicting demands on the social workers, which can lead to their way of practice being challenged in different ways. On one hand, social work organizations tried to minimise the cost of practice as much as possible, as remarked of by Yukio that “*In recent years, social workers have increasingly been employed part-time especially in social care for the disabled, which I suppose is because of the issue of cutting labour costs*” (FG). On the other hand, the social workers were pressured into increasing efficiency in providing services. Miyuki’s comment highlights this point well:

Under the Long-Term Care Insurance system, the services we coordinate for older people in need allow our organization to make a profit from the Insurance system. That is, if the elder isn’t provided with any care services, our organization can make no profit at all. However, there are some older people who just want to have someone who they can go to for advice. In terms of such a case, I often find myself being put under increasing pressure from our management, in that if we don’t coordinate any care services available for them, we don’t make no profit for that case (FG).

What the example of Miyuki makes clear is that her organization expected her to make outcomes of services provided measurable in the form of the number of case and the amount of money made. Under such a circumstance, Miyuki found herself as a social worker in a dilemma between what she valued and what she was expected to do by her organization. Many of the participants echoed that they practised as frontline practitioners under such constraints in different ways. It can be argued that such constraints are part of how the social workers work in their actual working context.

In addition, the findings imply that these current climates of regulation should be placed alongside another aspect that social workers must comply with certain professional requirements in terms of professional development after qualifying. In addition to the fact that social workers need to change their way of practice according to different kinds of regulations imposed, they are required to meet professional expectations to continue learning as professionals formed by the professional community that includes their organization and professional associations. In such a working context, the majority of the social workers in the study found it challenging to fulfil all requirements imposed on them. Keiko illustrated this in her account:

Our duties have been increasing year by year as related policies changed, so we need to deal with those. Also, we need to improve our knowledge and skills as professionals in such a working environment, but actually I don't have enough time and yet cannot afford to deal with all the things (FG).

In these ways, social work practice involves the social workers facing the issues of uncertainty within a range of constraints of their working context. The findings suggest that such issues can discourage some of them to work as professionals, and even cause them to think of quitting their job. However, it should be noted that how much the social workers found the issues of uncertainty challenging varied widely among them. In the next section, we examine how the social workers tried to respond to the issues of uncertainty embedded in practice in their own ways. The issues of uncertainty in practice will be discussed further in related to the language of accountability in the section of discussion.

4.3 How do social workers address uncertainty in practice?

In the previous sections, we have discussed what can account for challenges and struggles that the social workers I talked to faced in their day-to-day practice, and also how those had implications for their way of practice and further professional ways of being. Here let us return to the central question of learning for the social workers. The findings show that the ways to address the issues of uncertainty varied widely among the social workers. For example, most of them tended to get actively involved in a wide range of learning activities.

Those learning activities include professional development programmes, learning groups organised by fellow social workers and/or other helping professions, reading a book among them. It can be argued that learning experiences described by the social workers were closely related to how they tackled the issues of uncertainty within their own working context. To put it another way, the ways in which the social workers deal with the issues can shape their learning experiences. In what follows, we look at how the social workers addressed challenges and struggles differently in the light of uncertainty through the following three types identified: quest for certainty; accepting uncertainty; and balancing certainty and uncertainty.

To begin with, in trying to deal with issues of uncertainty, some of the social workers put more emphasis on “certainty” in that they appealed to models of intervention as a “formal knowledge”. Jun, who had worked in the mental health field, expressed how difficult it can be to assess service users’ needs:

In order to do person-centred planning, I find it really important for practitioners to try to assess service users’ needs in a very careful way. If not, it can be likely that without knowing it, we try to take control of service users in our convenient way. Careful assessment can lead us to identify different needs for service users (FG).

Jun also argued that it seemed to him that the fellow social workers in his former workplace were unclear about evidence that they used in assessing service users’ needs in day-to-day practice, in that they tended to base their judgments only on their past practice experiences. Those led Jun to feel uncomfortable to a considerable degree about uncertainty in practice, and further to think of quitting a job. In those situations, Jun encountered the behavioural approach in a professional development programme he attended. The behavioural approach strongly appealed to Jun; consequently it made Jun decide to go to a graduate school so as to learn the behavioural approach in more depth. Jun encapsulated the reason why the behavioral approach was of particular interest to him:

In the behavioural approach, there is, what’s called as ‘behaviour support’. That is something about the ways to help the service users achieve what they want in a careful way. I’ve found that kind of philosophy, as it were, can fit well into the idea of person-centred practice. In the behavioural approach, we need to support service users based on the cycle of practice, that is, plan-do-evaluation. Such an idea of the behavioural approach seemed to me to provide a practical solution to my doubt, that practitioners shouldn’t make their judgements just based on their past experiences (FG).

Jun found the behavioural approach providing practitioners with explicit “rules” to follow: “What appeals to me about the behavioural approach is that as long as you follow the procedures of it, even though you are a novice practitioner, you can get an expected result” (FG). Thus, Jun addressed the issues of uncertainty in practice by questing for “certainty” with the model of

intervention of the behavioural approach. It also seems that Jun avoided the need for expertise in that even a novice practitioner can do it.

On the other hand, the findings show that some of the social workers accepted uncertainty in practice in that they appealed to their “personal beliefs” about the way of practice and of being a social worker, as expressed in the example of Tsubasa, who had worked as a community social worker:

When it comes to the role of social workers, I've found myself coming to realise that it can't be possible, or being fairly difficult to make fundamental changes to service users' lives. I mean, what we can do is just walking through them. (...) After all, service users can't be like what practitioners want them to be. Of course, I try to do my best as a professional, but I've come to realise that what we can do for service users is to offer available options that could make their way even a little forward (FG).

Tsubasa described himself as fostering his belief about the role of social workers through his various practice experiences he had. Tsubasa also talked of his experience in the case meeting about a service user with mental health problems:

Even though we discussed, as thoroughly as possible, a service plan for a service user with mental health problems with practitioners concerned, it can be possible that the service user does unexpected things, and then things get uncontrolled. In those kinds of situations, I often see practitioners being unable to accept that sort of thing, and then feeling really confused (FG).

Through experiencing uncertainty embedded in day-to-day practice, Tsubasa also described himself as coming to see that “it is a capacity as professionals that we can try to accept such kinds of thing” (FG). In this way, it may be argued that Tsubasa tried to address the issue of uncertainty in practice by accepting it as part of practice that social workers engage in, but rather than questing for certainty in order to eliminate uncertainty.

Having discussed the two types of the ways in which the social workers dealt with the issues of uncertainty in practice, I now turn to the last type. As discussed above, while some of the social workers—such as Jun—put more value on certainty, others—such as Tsubasa—accepted uncertainty differently. The findings suggest that some of the social workers tried to find a balance between certainty and uncertainty in their own way—which can shape their learning in their working context. This point seems to be reflected in the example of Joe:

In the routine of everyday practice, I find myself tending to see as if I fully understand service users since I have worked with them for a long time. I mean, based on my experiences with them, I tend to follow a pattern that seems to work well towards this kind of case, or service user. (...) However, I have had many experiences where that kind of approach really flopped (FG).

Through experiencing the cases that did go wrong just by following the pattern that went well in his past experiences, Joe described himself as learning that “before everything, I should

face a service user without preconceived ideas, but with an attitude that I do not understand a service user well” (FG). On the other hand, while Joe became aware of the fact that the pattern of approach can turn into an obstacle to understanding service users and carers, he acknowledged the potential effectiveness of it: “I don’t intend to deny that following a pattern can work in practice. I find myself seeing following a pattern as one of strategy” (FG). In the light of learning as a social worker, Joe described himself as finding it important to try to “find evidence to support what I’ve noticed in day-to-day practice, through attending various workshops and training, and also learning groups” (FG). As such, Joe seems to try to find a balance between questing for certainty and accepting uncertainty in addressing the issues of uncertainty in his working context.

Thus, how much the social workers I talked to felt uncomfortable about the issues of uncertainty inherent in their day-to-day practice and then how they dealt with the issues can be relative to each of them. As shown in the above examples, through addressing challenging and struggles they faced as front-line practitioners, they tried to find a comfortable balance between what they value and a range of constraints in their working context. Viewed in this light, it seems to make good sense that the ways to deal with the issues of uncertainty can shape how the social workers learn in their working context. Furthermore, their learning is closely related to their way of being a social worker. Here let me stress again that we cannot understand their learning without setting each person’s learning experiences in the context of their way of being a social worker. As such, uncertainty is an important feature in considering how learning takes place. In the following chapter, we will be examining thoroughly how the social workers learned in their working context.

Chapter 5

Experience + Opportunity + Reflection = Professional learning?

The preceding chapter has demonstrated that learning experiences described by the social workers I spoke to are interconnected with their way of being a social worker. The ways in which they dealt with the issues of uncertainty embedded in their day-to-day practice shaped, and were also shaped by their way of being a social worker—which can lead to learning experiences being shaped in diverse ways. This chapter will describe what constitutes professional learning for the participants as experienced social workers, through drawing on the data from the interviews and observations. The findings highlight that there are three components of professional learning: *Experience*; *Opportunity*; and *Reflection*. Before describing each of the components, we consider how the participants saw their learning experiences which they considered had significantly affected them over their career as a social worker.

5.1 How do social workers see experience of learning? : Change in understanding

In the interviews—both focus groups and one-to-one interviews, the participants were asked to describe particular learning experiences which they considered had significantly affected them as a social worker. While the learning experiences described by them varied widely, all of them talked about how their understanding changed to different extents through these particular learning experiences. In considering a wide range of learning experiences, it may be helpful to draw on the conception of “Epiphany”, developed by Denzin (1989), as a way of illuminating them. Denzin describes epiphany as a “moment of revelation in a life” (1989: 47)—which is explained further that “epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives” (1989: 70). He highlights that what these experiences mean is always explored in a retrospective way. The learning experiences talked by the participants in the interviews appear to bear metaphorical meaning as an “epiphany” in varying ways. As Shaw and Holland (2014) put it, “Interviews do not only elicit some personal, tacit or hidden meaning. They also participate in making new meanings” (p.125). In what follows, we shall explore the meanings of the learning experiences that were given through interaction between the participants and the researcher in the interviews.

Through the particular learning experiences, all of the social workers in the study described themselves to find different perspectives on something associated with practice, though those key experiences were referred to in different ways: experiences of “*eye-opener*”, “*perspective-alerting*”, and “*turning point*” among others. The findings show that they

regarded those learning experiences as something about a “trigger” that allowed them to see things from different perspectives to the past one they had. Their perspective changes that the participants reflected on varied widely depending on their learning situation. Through exploring those learning experiences, there seems to be two different levels in the light of change in understanding: 1) particular change; 2) generalised change. In the next section, I illustrate each level of perspective changes in learning experiences in more detail.

5.1.1 Particular change in understanding

Through particular learning experiences, the social workers described themselves as finding a different perspective on something associated with their day-to-day practice in the way that they learnt something new, but that fitted into their present way of thinking. Tomoko who had worked in the mental health field noted that she had been remembering the practical advice that her experienced co-worker gave to her:

The advice given by her which has been impressed is that you should give a positive feedback to service users even in a word when you greet them. For example, ‘Have you changed your hairstyle? That is good on you’ or whatsoever. I remember that advice very well even now, so I have tried to be conscious of giving a positive feedback to service users in daily practice (FG).

That advice given by the co-worker might seem to be something small, however, Tomoko saw it as having an impact on her way of practising social work to a large extent, in that she found herself acting on her advice in her day-to-day practice.

Other participant, Akira, expressed how what he learnt in the training course on Family Therapy in KISWEC led him to get a new perspective on his way of practice:

Two years ago, I attended the training course on the Family Therapy in KISWEC. At that time, the words stressed by the instructor which have influenced me a lot is that, you should pay more attention not only to the words clients expressed, but also what and how they actually do. That is because people tend to use words that are beneficial to themselves. The idea has really made sense to me. I mean that anyone tend to look at what people say carefully, but it can often be the case that clients do not actually try to take any action, even though they give a satisfying word to me. Since then, I always try to pay close attention to their behaviour as well as the words they say in everyday practice (I-to-I).

As clearly remarked of by Akira, while he learnt something new in the course, he found what he learnt to fit well into his way of thinking. Thus, through particular learning experiences, the participants found themselves getting different perspectives on their way of practising social work. It may be argued that such a change in understanding is something about the smaller kind of perspective change that can fit with their assumptions about way of practice, if not always comfortably fitting.

5.1.2 Generalised change in understanding

Contrary to particular change in understanding described above, many of the social workers in the study highlighted their learning experiences where they got a different perspective in the bigger sense of something that led to their existing way of thinking being undermined or challenged. The data suggests that those experiences involved changing their whole framework of understanding as a social worker. Such a “generalised” change, as it were, had major implications for how they saw their way of being a social worker. Some of the social workers pointed out that they found themselves taking another look at their role as a social worker through their learning experiences. Hisa encapsulated his most significant learning experience as a probation officer:

For me, what I have learnt ‘solution focused brief therapy’ is a great turning point in my career. I find that learning solution focused brief therapy has changed fundamentally the way to progress with my work, conduct interviews, and moreover a way of looking at a case (FG).

Hisa reflected that his learning experience about the Solution Focused approach at a training course brought about changes in understanding in the broader sense, in that it challenged his assumptions about his way of practice in his day-to-day practice:

What I learnt is that in the idea of the solution focused brief therapy, briefly speaking, you get clients to have an image about what they want to achieve in the future without exploring their problems, just like what they did in the past. And then, you support them to go toward what they want to do by themselves. That idea is diametrically opposite to the one we had. The skills required in the solution focused brief therapy is not so different from the ones we are familiar with in a daily practice, but the idea behind it is completely different (FG).

Hisa highlighted that the idea of the Solution Focused approach did not fit comfortably into his existing way of thinking at first. However, through trying it out in his actual practice, Hisa noticed that it worked well to make a difference to his clients. Those series of experiences challenged and questioned his framework of understanding:

In the idea of the Solution Focused approach, it is possible to work towards a solution as little time and energy as possible. In the training course, the lecturer explained that you can find a solution with only a few counselling. At first, I found it really doubtful (laughing). However, after that, I actually gave a client counselling with the Solution Focused approach, I found it working well in practice. I had thought that it was really difficult to help clients and communities to change as Toshi has told just now, but when I actually tried the Solution Focused approach in practice, it worked well. I’d say I was greatly shocked by that fact (FG).

Furthermore, his awareness of such changes in understanding encouraged him to learn more about the Solution Focused approach and to explore it further through ongoing engagement in practice: “Since then, I have learnt the Solution Focused approach by myself, and also attended some workshops to study it more. I still feel lack of skills and knowledge on it, so I want to develop those more” (FG).

In another example, Mari, who works for a middle school as a school social worker, noted how much she had been affected through learning Family Therapy at the course provided by KISWEC. Unlike many professional development programmes that she had attended, through the training course on Family Therapy, she experienced a considerable change in her understanding:

Through learning Family Therapy, I have experienced change in my way of thinking. I have attended various professional development programmes so far, and I had thought I learnt a lot of knowledge as a professional at each of the programmes. However, that was the first time when I've found the idea sinking deep into my mind (FG).

However, Mari expressed that she was not able to understand the key idea in Family Therapy well when she learnt for the first time:

In the course, I could not understand the system theory which forms the basis of Family Therapy in the beginning. In the system theory, you see things as a system at any level, which I found difficult to understand. I would say that I felt as if I was using different parts of brain I had not used before (laughing). During the course, I tried an exercise where based on a genogram with only a basic information about a family, we imagined freely what could be likely to happen in that family. The course instructor explained that the exercise was not for guessing an answer, but for encouraging you to think as many options as possible (FG).

Similar to the example of Hisa above, Mari pointed out that the idea in Family Therapy did not easily fit into her existing way of thinking. She referred to these leaning experiences as “a shock to me in the way that challenged my way of thinking” (1-to-1). While Mari did not understand a new perspective fully at first, she found it to get to reframe her way of thinking through ongoing engagement in practice. The following example illustrates that point explicitly:

In actual practice, when I make an assessment of a family in a case, I have come to draw a genogram of that family since then. Based on that genogram, I try to treat a family as a system, and then think about what should be needed to make change happen in that family. I mean, about alternatives for change in that family. In interviews, I try to get a service user to think about alternatives for change by himself or herself. Also, I have come to see my position as a school social worker within my working system, I mean, in which there are stakeholders that include Education Board, middle school, parents and students. I am employed by the Education Board and usually work in the middle school one or two days per week. Thinking of such a working context, unless I see things in practice as a system, I believe I cannot provide more effective support for the school and students (FG).

Thus, these series of learning experiences had a great impact on her way of practice as a school social worker, as remarked that: “Now I have found the idea of Family Therapy to be based on my way of practicing” (FG). Mari also described that the new perspective brought about changes in understanding “as a person” as well as a professional: “I have felt as if my attitude as a social worker greatly changed by those learning experiences. I mean, that includes my attitude as a person” (FG). Although it must be noted that Mari meant that her change in her

learning experiences included personal one, this suggests to us that the social workers may find that change in understanding can have an influence on their lives outside their professional work. As such, there may be permeable boundaries between “professional” and “personal” learning. This point will be taken up later again in a different way.

As discussed so far, the learning experiences described by the social workers can be a “trigger” that allowed them to see things from different perspectives. Those perspective changes in learning ranged from particular change to generalised change—which can entail change in understanding of way of practice and further of being a social worker. In the next section, I will consider three components of professional learning identified that can lead to such changes in understanding as social workers.

5.2 EXPERIENCE (Component 1)

In this section, I illustrate three components of professional learning which were identified as essential for social workers to experience change in understanding: *Experience*, *Opportunity* and *Reflection*. These components are not entirely distinct from each other. Professional learning should be seen as a holistic experience with each component inextricably interwoven. Among these three components of professional learning, I will examine *Reflection* in the next chapter.

5.2.1 Cumulative background experience

Component 1, *Experience*, describes how professional learning involves the interconnection of cumulative background experience that the participants have over their career. When it comes to experience, we may think of it as something immediate and present as well as past. However, here I use the term experience, to refer to past experience as only one kind of experience. The social workers I talked to had built up a large stock of experience over their career. The findings highlight that their learning did not take place in an isolated situation, rather their learning experiences were more than a single learning situation. Their cumulative experiences range widely in that they can include diverse experiences not only as a “professional” but also as a “person”.

Akira, who had worked for a social care organization for older people, described his motive in deciding to attend the training course on Family Therapy in KISWEC as mentioned earlier, where he found a new perspective about how to see a family:

Akira: The reason why I decided to attend the training course on Family Therapy is that while I have addressed cases of elder abuse, I had been feeling acutely that I needed to look not only at the elderly themselves but also at their family in working on such cases as

a social worker. I mean that there is a fundamental need to have a broader viewpoint about a family. Therefore, I happened to know the course on Family Therapy in KISWEC, I made a decision to attend it.

Taka (the researcher): Before you knew Family Therapy, you had been recognising the need to look at a family as a whole through your practice experiences. Is that right?

Akira: Yes, exactly. Then, I learnt Family Therapy for the first time. At that time, I found that was exactly the thing which I kept seeking for. I have felt that there is a need to have an extensive knowledge so as to understand Family Therapy well, so I want to keep learning it over my career as a social worker (1-to-1).

In a series of learning experiences described by Akira, his cumulative practice experiences with older people played an expanded role in deciding to attend the course, in that he had been aware of the importance of treating a family as a whole. Those experiences had considerable implications for changing his way of understanding a family through learning Family Therapy at the course.

There is one more point to note in the light of experience. Some of the social workers highlighted how personal experiences had a great impact on their learning. The following extract from Miho captures the point well.

In fact, as I gave birth to my baby about 6 months ago, I've found myself understanding the irreplaceable existence I should look after. When I come to think of the fact that I would leave the baby with someone or leave her in a nursery, I've found myself coming to comprehend that I had not been able to make out how carers and families felt about that they left their family member with others as they asked me for support. I've been convinced it is really important if someone would be a responsible person, when you leave your family member with others (FG).

As shown in Miho's comment, she reflected that her personal experience where she had a child made her get different perspectives on how her carers might feel for their family—which caused her to become aware of the professional responsibilities that she is expected to fulfil in a different way. In another example, Tamae echoed the point as this excerpt demonstrates:

I have had an experience where I had a telephone counselling when I was in need. At that time, a counsellor told me, 'I cannot help you'. That word shocked me, I mean that I got up the nerve to make a call to the counselling, but I felt refused by that word. I found that experience has had a great impact on me. So, when I deal with a call from a service user or someone, I try not to say such a negative thing. For a start, I listen carefully to what a service user try to say, and then in a case where we cannot deal with the issues in our department, I refer the service user to a proper department or organization with a sufficient explanation, so that the service user gets a grasp of the situation (FG).

Tamae drew an important lesson from this “bad” experience as a client in a telephone counselling—that it can be possible that a service user interprets words used by professionals in a different way from them. She highlighted that this learning experience had

been having a marked influence on her way of practice in that she tried to pay careful attention to how to communicate with service users.

The above example of Miho and Tamae seems to suggest to us that there can be thin boundaries between professional and personal experiences in the light of learning that the social workers considered to have implications for them. It can be argued that a diverse range of professional and personal experiences are interconnected with each other with the boundaries between them blurred. The point I would like to emphasise here is that there seems to be two directions to understand the boundaries of professional learning. One is something about learning from personal lives; the other is about learning influence into a person. In both ways, professional and personal experiences are closely intertwined with each other. Viewed in this light, it seems best to depict learning experiences described by the social workers as a “unity” with fuzzy boundary between professional and personal experiences.

5.2.2 Learning transition

In component 1, *Experience*, the key point is that professional learning involves an open-ended process without any starting and ending point over a career as social workers. The findings highlight that in a particular learning opportunity the participants did not think that they learnt something important associated with their practice at that point in time, especially when they learnt something new to them, however, they often found themselves realising what could make sense to them in hindsight. The following extract from Mari captures the point well:

I learnt that it was important for a school social worker to make an assessment not only of a case, but also of a school itself in workshops and the like. Only recently have I come to understand what that really means. I mean by that is, we, school social workers, need to understand a system of a school, how the school think, how the teachers work, and what the relationships between them are and so on. Without the understanding about those points, I would say that it is really difficult to move something forward in the school, even though I talked about a case with a coordinator who was responsible (1-to-1).

As summed up by Mari’s words, she became aware of how important it is to understand a school as a system as a school social worker, through subsequent experiences in her actual working context. In that way, even though the social workers did not find themselves learning fully something associated with their practice in a certain learning experience, it can be a powerful reminder when they reconsider it through their subsequent learning opportunities.

The aspect of learning transition seems to be drawn well in the description of Harumi’s learning experiences—where she had a study leave in Demark for about 10 days, in order to learn the way to address the cases of elder abuse:

I had a study leave in Denmark after I had worked as a social worker for about five years. At that time, I felt like seeing the fact that what I had learnt in the University was realised there. I mean, for example, the principle of service user-centred that might seem to be kind of ideal. Through those experiences in Denmark, I've found myself being able to connect what I had learnt in the University with what I actually do in practice for the first time. In that way, those experiences in Denmark have had a great impact on me (1-to-1).

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Taka: Based on the practice experiences you've had as a social worker, did you feel that you could finally understand what the things you had learnt in the University might mean?

Harumi: Yes, exactly. When I was an undergrad student, I felt that sort of theory was quite useless in actual practice. Also, before going to Denmark for the study leave, I had put more value on what I learnt in actual practice rather than sort of theory. However, I found that the experiences of study leave in Denmark made me rethink about the principle of service user-centred (1-to-1).

Through her learning experiences in the study leave in Denmark, Harumi found herself fully realising what the idea of service user-centred can mean in retrospect, while she had underestimated it at that point in time when she learnt it in university. The findings highlight that even though the social workers did not see that they fully realised what learning experiences can mean to them at a point, through subsequent learning opportunities, it can be possible that those learning experiences come to make sense to them in hindsight over their career. Here it must be noted that in a series of learning experiences described by Mari and Harumi, it is difficult to identify what would be a starting and ending point. Both of the examples make it clear that professional learning involves a continuous process. It can be argued that through their career the social workers relate one experience to another one among a diverse range of cumulative experiences as they practice in their working context. One learning experience can provide inspiration for subsequent learning. To put it another way, it seems reasonable to suppose that certain learning experiences are not sufficient in themselves to lead to subsequent learning. Rather it should be seen that they are necessary, but not sufficient without "something else" for learning to take place. In that way, their experiences of learning are not a single learning situation but interconnected process over time.

The question then arises as to what can become a "trigger" for learning to take place. Also, this question seems to drive us to the further question whether such a trigger for learning can be manageable or not. These questions will be discussed further in the next section.

5.3 OPPORTUNITY (Component 2)

In Component 2, *Opportunity*, I examine through what kind of opportunity the participants can experience a change in understanding, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The findings show that their learning experiences were widely diverse; therefore, it seems helpful to sketch out learning experiences described by the participants as three types of opportunity: learning through engagement in practice; formal learning; and informal learning. Before turning to an examination of each of the opportunities, a few remarks should be made concerning this distinction between them. Here I do not want to overemphasize the distinction since it is not necessarily something about a qualitative one. What counts as a learning opportunity can vary considerably according to the social workers I spoke to. The following example of Miho, who had worked for a social care organization for older people, seems to highlight well how her practice experiences and different learning opportunities were closely interconnected:

Looking back on my learning experiences, I found myself learning a lot when I reflected on what would be causes of a case which went well or wrong. If anything, I found myself learning a lot when things went wrong. In such occasions when I felt impatient as a professional, I sometimes attended a training course and workshop which was of interest to me, and then I sometimes found something I learnt in those opportunities fitting into what I had sought for. I mean, for example, a lecturer explained the things that I had not been able to put into words well. Or, I found out in a book the things that I had wanted to express. I suppose, I have repeatedly been learning something in those ways as a professional (FG).

Here we have several important process and actions in the light of professional learning. As discussed in Component 1, *Experience*, professional learning involves accumulated experiences. Among those background experiences, Miho made a judgement about things going well and wrong which led her to reflect on them retrospectively, which will be further explored in the next chapter. Through that process, she also made a judgement about whether different kinds of learning sources (books) and contexts (practice and training courses) would fit well together. Her learning involved these different process and actions—which cannot be predetermined. As such, it seems to make good sense to treat such various opportunities not as a distinct one but as a unified entity with each type of learning opportunities overlapping as the social workers experienced. In what follows, I explore carefully how the participants constructed their learning differently in their own working context.

5.3.1 Learning through engagement in practice

Everyday learning through engagement in practice seems to deserve explicit emphasis in considering what opportunity can be a trigger for learning to happen. As shown in the above

example of Miho, practice experiences prompted her to learn something associated with practice in her own way. This was reiterated by the majority of the participants in different ways, as expressed by Satoko: *“I suppose, I have learned many things through direct interaction with service users and carers. I find that has had a significant influence on me” (1-to-1)*. Here when I speak of engagement in practice, I do not wish to imply that the social workers necessarily engage in practice within their own work settings. The findings demonstrate that there was considerable variation in everyday learning the social workers perceived in their actual working context. In exploring further what can count as a learning opportunity for the social workers in day-to-day practice, there seems to be an important point in the following extract from Joe, who had worked for a social care organization for people with learning disability:

When I come to think of how learning took place, I find that through engagement with service users and carers in practice, I have come to make sense of something important as a professional. Their words and behaviour made me aware of something important in practice, especially when something seemed to go wrong. (...) I mean, I sometimes wonder if I should have done it in a different way, or have given more careful consideration to it in everyday practice. Through trying to find out the possible reasons why something went wrong in that way, I find myself being able to become aware of something important as a professional (FG).

Joe saw a case that went wrong as a learning opportunity to reflect on his way of practice; he highlighted the importance to pay close attention to words and behaviour of service users and/or carers, in order to be aware of what could cause things that went wrong in day-to-day practice. As shown in the above example of Miho as well, reflection on things going wrong can allow the social workers to question their way of practice—which can lead them to see things from different perspectives through various learning opportunities. In this section, we look closely at how the social workers experienced a change in understanding through a case that they counted as going well or wrong.

Learning from mistakes

Many participants described themselves as learning more from a case that went wrong than from one that went well in their day-to-day practice. This point seems to be reflected well in the following example of Akira, who had worked, as a care manager, with the woman who was suspected of committing abuse of her mother-in-law at their home:

After I got the report of abuse by their neighbours, I visited her with my supervisor in order to confirm the fact if abuse took place or not. Of course, we did not tell her that we got the report of abuse to keep confidential, and just asked her if she felt any concerns as a carer. Also, we asked her to show us the room for her mother-in-law. Our series of action caused her to have ill feelings towards us. She seemed to feel that we suddenly visited her like police and she was suspected of something. As a result, she appealed to the complaint body run by Kyoto prefecture. Then, things got worse, I mean, we resulted in being in even unintended situation. So, we needed to hold many meetings on that matter with my boss and some people in charge of the city. In those meetings, we were blamed for our action

by them, like being sharply asked why you did that at that time. However, I suppose they were just being wise after the event. After the event, you can say anything about how we should have done with that (FG).

After that event, Akira had been trying to communicate with her for a few months so as to apologise to her for their way of dealing with her. While she kept refusing to receive their apology and even directly contact Akira and his supervisor, she accepted it in the end. At that time, Akira got a letter from her that was addressed only to him, but rather not to his supervisor, through the managing director in his organization who visited her as a responsible person. Akira described what was written about in the letter:

In that letter, she did not find fault with me, but gave me advice that you should be a good social worker. In addition, she stated in the letter about my supervisor who visited her with me. Actually, my supervisor was living with her mother-in-law and taking care of her, too. I would probably say, my supervisor was in states similar to her. So, when we visited her, my supervisor said to her, 'I really understand your feelings'. She stated that those words really made her angry. She believed that you couldn't understand so easily how she felt in her home, even though you were in similar situations. Also, she said in the letter that she would like to talk not with my supervisor but with me. When I had visited her to talk to her before the event happened, I had just listened to her and could not give her any useful advice. All I did for her as a social worker was just listening to her and worrying about how to deal with things together every time I visited her. However, she found such my attitude towards her really useful (FG).

This experience caused Akira to reflect on his way of practice in that he tried to explore what caused the case to go wrong and also what could make it differently in retrospect.

I've got feelings towards her that I should have believed her more. I feel like I just followed a manual in that case. If I had believed her and also the fact that I had built up a relationship of trust with her, I could have dealt with the case in a different way (1-to-1).

Relating this case to what he had learnt in a training course on counselling, Akira also encapsulated what he found himself learning through this experience:

Through that experience, what I really learnt is that some words you say could seriously hurt feelings of service users and carers, even though you have no such an intention at all. Some words could become a weapon like a knife for them. When I say something to them, I find it really difficult to understand how they feel. So, I believe that it is fairly important to communicate with them well so that I get them to understand what I intend to say (FG).

Thus, this experience had a great impact on Akira as he saw this experience as his “one of the most influential experiences” (FG) through his career as a social worker. Akira described himself as reflecting on this experience repeatedly through subsequent learning opportunities. It may be argued that this experience can be something about a reference point for Akira among his cumulative experiences in that he reflects on his way of practice, as he noted: “I try not to say to service users and carers that I understand how you feel. Even though you have experienced similar things, I find it not possible to understand their feelings fully” (1-to-1).

Learning from successes

While more of the social workers I spoke to tended to regard things that went wrong as a valuable resource for learning, some of them spoke about a case that they counted as going well, as reflected in the assumption of one social worker that *“I find that we, social workers tend to see a case of mistake in practice as more important opportunity for learning, but I really find myself learning a lot from a case of success as well”* (Takashi/FG).

Keiko illustrated her learning experiences through the case which she found went well in practice. Keiko had worked for a community support centre for disabled people, which played a main role to coordinate community services for them in a particular area. Keiko was involved in a case in which a service user who was a severe anorexic was provided with community services at her home 24 hours a day. She described herself as learning a lot from that case in terms of the way to develop a support system within related agencies:

In that case, a medical organization served a significant role in a way that the related agencies could consult with a medical doctor about anything associated with her medical care. As a result, I found in that case all the related agencies faced in the same direction in terms of her care (FG).

Reflecting on this experience, Keiko expressed what counted this as something that significantly influenced her as a social worker: *“Through the case, what impressed me the most was that the related agencies could involve in the case with their motivation for supporting her maintained to the same extent”* (FG). She went on to say that how that case was different to other cases in which she had been involved:

In that case, while our organization coordinated community services for her, the medical organization tried to play a leading role to build a support team which included care workers who delivered care in actual practice. (...) I can just coordinate services available for her, but the related agencies wanted to get a feedback about, for example, a diet and how to deal with her strong psychological dependence, which I couldn't handle as a social worker. In that case, the medical organization dealt with that sort of thing associated with medicine, which I found led to the related agencies being put at ease in providing community services for her. Also, I found that sharing responsibilities between the social workers in the medical organization and our organization went well in that case (FG).

Keiko pointed out how challenging she found it to coordinate as a social worker not only community services themselves but also related helping professions in day-to-day practice:

In other cases, it is really difficult for a medical organization to take as much time as in that case, I would say that it is difficult to develop such a support system in which a medical organization gives an advice about something associated with medicine in the same way as in that case. That is why, I suppose, the more difficult a case to deal with, the more related agencies feel uneasy about a case. That may discourage them to provide community services in such a difficult case (FG).

Keiko remarked of this experience as something that can encourage and motivate her as a social worker in everyday practice—where she found that “*there are many more cases going wrong*” (FG). Keiko also described that this experience allowed her to explore a difference of case going well and wrong in day-to-day practice—which can lead her to reflect from different perspectives on what could cause differences in dealing with things going wrong. As the example of Akira in the previous section, we may see that this experience plays a role of reference point for Keiko in reflecting on her way of practice in different ways.

As discussed in the examples of Akira and Keiko, through engagement in practice, whether a case went well or wrong, the social workers found themselves experiencing a change in understanding. Those learning experiences involve challenging and questioning their underlying assumptions about something associated with their practice—which can give them a chance to understand and approach their practice differently to varying extents in their working context. Here I would like to lay great emphasis on the fact that learning experiences through engagement in practice can encourage the social workers to get involved in various learning activities, which can lead to subsequent learning with a range of experiences interconnected over their career, which will be examined in the next section.

5.3.2 Try at planning for learning

Having discussed one of the learning opportunities: learning through engagement in practice, I go on to the other types of learning opportunity, formal and informal learning opportunity. Before turning to discuss each opportunity, again it must be noted that the distinction should be seen as a united entity, rather than a distinct one. The evidences show that the social workers were actively involved in a wide variety of learning activities—which ranged from formal activities such as professional development (PD) programmes, to informal ones which include a learning group and purely informal meeting organised by their fellow social workers and/or other helping professions. According to their learning needs, many of them actively engaged in different learning activities in their own way within an actual working context. Joe was explicit about the purpose of his learning activities:

Considering what I lack as a social worker, I try to attend a training course that seems to be of interest. In there, I can interact with fellow social workers or other helping professions beyond my workplace. In that way, I find myself trying to create opportunities for learning (FG).

Joe’s comment was echoed by many of the social workers, though which learning opportunities fit into them is relative to each of them. It can be argued that while it is difficult to plan or manage how learning through engagement in practice occurs by its nature as discussed, the social workers may try to plan for learning through getting involved in various

learning activities. In what follows, we discuss how the social workers experienced a change in understanding in formal and informal learning opportunity in turn.

Formal learning opportunity

The majority of the social workers noted that they had attended a variety of professional development (PD) programmes which was provided by their organization, professional associations, and learning providers such as KISWEC. Such PD programmes vary differently. Some programmes were mandatory in ways that the social workers must comply with certain professional requirements, while others were not. In addition, some programmes were funded by their organization, while many of the social workers attended a self-funded programme. It should also be added that some programmes were within working hours, and others were outside it. Many of the social workers found themselves learning through attending such PD programmes. Tamae, who had worked in the field of children and families, described her learning experience in the one-year training course that was provided by KISWEC for novice social workers:

Earlier in the training course, I didn't seem to understand well what I studied, but later in the course, I found myself coming to understand that people tend to be able to try to do something they make a decision themselves, but not trying to do something practitioners push them to do (FG).

Tamae noted that this learning experience had a considerable impact on her way of practice as a social worker, in that she always seeks to remember in day-to-day practice what she learnt in the training course:

When I have a talk with service users about their issues in day-to-day practice, I try not to give them a possible solution, but to ask a question differently that can encourage them to notice something and make a decision to do things they may find not so difficult to try. I probably think the training course gave me a chance to notice such an important thing (FG).

In the light of formal learning opportunity, I take one more example of Akira that illustrated his learning experience in the one-year course on counselling that he had attended after work:

I had been thinking of a need to study counselling in more depth as a social worker since I learnt social work at university. (...) What I learnt through that course is that I am different to others. (...) I mean, while it seems to me that some people tend to see having empathy with someone as that you can understand his feelings from your own viewpoint, I've found that it means, rather that you understand his feelings as he feels (1-to-1).

Akira described himself as finding it “really important for helping professions to tell the differences between how you feel and how service users feel” (1-to-1), in order to keep a professional distance. Through this learning experience, Akira found himself experiencing a change in understanding about how to dealing with his own and others’ feelings:

After I became well aware of that, I've found myself coming to be able to deal properly with whatever service users, or people involved say. I mean, if someone feels angry about something, that necessarily doesn't mean that I am responsible for that. Even in the same situation, other might not get angry with me. That awareness has had a great impact on me (I-to-I).

Thus, this learning experience had a significant implication for his way of practice and of being a social worker. Here it should be added that Akira talked of his learning experience—discussed in the previous section as the example of *Learning from mistakes*, while linking it to what he learnt in the course on counselling. Akira was explicit about the fact that his learning involved interconnected experiences over time. What is important in considering professional learning, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, is that we should view different parts of learning experiences as a continuous process. The findings suggest that through an ongoing learning process the social workers related past experiences to the present situation they are faced with—which can lead to learning in that their understanding of way of practice can change.

Informal learning opportunity

The evidence shows that many of the participants got actively involved in a learning group organised by their fellow social workers and/or other helping professions. That kind of learning opportunities involves the social workers reflecting on their practice and developing professional network beyond their own work settings. Akira described his purpose of trying to involve in various learning activities in the following:

The reason I get actively involved in a professional development programme and learning groups is that I want to keep myself motivated to work. (...) When I go back to my workplace from those activities, I often feel discouraged by my co-workers who seem poorly motivated, so I find myself getting motivated through attending a learning group. That sort of thing is really helpful for me (I-to-I).

Akira described himself as feeling uncomfortable with his workplace in that he found it difficult to share with his co-worker his concerns associated with practice in an open way. Many participants in the study echoed this point in a way that they tended to feel uncomfortable with sharing something about concerns and anxiety in day-to-day practice within their own work settings. It may be argued that informal learning opportunities can be something that meets their learning needs that they considered was not responded to well in their own work settings or formal learning opportunities. This point will be taken up further in the next chapter and the section of discussions, Chapter 8.

Learning group

Here let us devote a little more space to looking more closely at how informal learning contexts happen beyond their own work settings by taking, for example, one learning group

named as “Study meeting of social work practice”, that two participants in the study joined. The ways in which a learning group is organised to encourage practitioners to learn from each other varied according to a learning group in various aspects. For example, in terms of member composition, while some learning groups had only social workers, others included not only social workers but also other helping professions such as counsellors. Also, some groups were open to new possible participants, but others were limited only to existing members. When it comes to frequency of meetings, there were differences among the groups—from once a month to once a few or longer months to have a meeting.

“Study meeting of social work practice” had been organized by some key members who had known each other, who included two members of the research team. The study meeting had over 30 members in total who were all social workers in a variety of practice fields. The meeting was held once a few months with the average number of participants being half of the members. The chance to start it was that some key members tried to create an opportunity where social workers can learn from each other. They described themselves as wanting to make an opportunity to learn and support each other in a free manner, but rather than a formal learning opportunity such as PD programmes—in which what and how they would learn are set up beforehand as they had experienced a lot over their career. The study meeting was organised in the following way: One member played the role of the presenter and reflected on his/her own practice experience as a social worker and shared their reflection with other members. In the meeting, the member was expected not to give a negative feedback to the presenter, but to try to understand how the presenter thought and felt in his/her place so that the meeting can become supportive and be an opportunity to get different perspectives to their own practice each other; this was because many of the members had some opposite experiences in some other learning opportunities. A presenter needed to share his/her reflection on practice experiences in the following aspects: job contents; how does he/she feel satisfied with his/her job as a social worker?; how does he/she find his/her job challenging?; does he/she have any unforgettable experiences where he/she learnt something valuable?; and questions about any concerns he/she is faced with.

Yumi was the presenter of the meeting that I joined for observation—who had worked for Kyoto city council of social welfare for about 10 years as a community social worker, involving organising and overseeing various services and supports provided for those with disabilities. She also participated in the focus group and one-to-one interview after this meeting. Here let me take a simple example of something about how the group actively worked. Yumi described herself as feeling satisfied with her job especially when she directly interacted with service users. On the other hand, she noted what she found really challenging was:

I often have a feeling of powerlessness in everyday practice, especially when we can't provide service users with the services and supports that seem to be needed for them. I understand that the role we are supposed to deliver is to provide the services and supports regulated by certain laws, but I believe that social workers need to play a more active role to help a service user have a voice, and also to develop services that have not yet been provided in the existing system.

Yumi's reflection prompted some of other members to reflect on their own experiences and share those with other members:

I sometimes find that our job would not be rewarding in a way that we cannot expect a tangible reward for what we provide service users. For example, our salary is usually low even though we need to be faced with serious issues in our society. So, I often feel how difficult to motivate myself.

* * * * *

I often find it challenging to handle the relationship with a service user. I mean, I wonder how much close the relationship should be in order to build a healthy relationship with a service user and carer as well. It is not easy to find a good balance between a close and distant relationship.

These reflections led Yumi to share her reflection about what encouraged and discouraged her to keep working as a social worker:

It is vital for me to talk with some reliable co-workers and fellow social workers about difficulties I am faced with. It is really important to have opportunities to express my feelings and relieve stress in a comfortable relationship. Without those support, I would not be able to manage it. Actually, I used to work in a workplace where I found it difficult to express my feelings openly and share those with my colleagues. At that time, it was really hard for me.

In the interviews that were conducted after this study meeting, Yumi described her experience in the meeting:

It was really a great opportunity to reflect on my practice experiences. While I prepared for the presentation, I have noticed that I had many feelings that I had not understood well. (...) I have felt the entire member very supportive. I would say that such a warm atmosphere helped me to get relaxed enough to talk about my experiences openly. I got much helpful feedback from them, and also was encouraged to do my job as a social worker. I felt like I got different viewpoints from them (1-to-1).

In a supportive environment, Yumi found herself sharing her reflection on her practice experiences openly with other members, which allowed her to see her ways of being a social worker from different perspectives:

In the social work field, I suppose that it is difficult for social workers to view themselves in a positive light. That is partly because despite the fact that we have loads of tough work to do under a chronic shortage of manpower, our salary is usually low. (...) Through sharing with the members, I saw the fact that I liked to do my job in a new light. I find that was the greatest reward I received in the meeting (1-to-1).

The meeting gave Yumi a chance to share her own and other members' various experiences as social workers, though many of the members found it difficult to do that in their own work settings. In this way, the meeting seems to lead her to experience a change in understanding about her way of practice and further of being a social worker.

Purely Informal meeting

It is also noteworthy that some of the social workers in the study spoke about the value of a "purely informal meeting", as it were, in that they can share their experiences with others in a more relaxed way. Here I take an example of this kind of informal learning opportunity that I joined after the learning meeting described above finished. This purely informal meeting happened as a result of the fact that something about the meeting was suggested between individuals just after the main meeting finished, but rather than that the members knew in advance that it would take place. In the purely informal meeting held in a nearby bar, there were about ten members of the learning group, who included Yumi. While they were having food and drink, they shared what they thought and felt about the main meeting, exchanging some useful information related to their work—which included, for example: *"That person would help you about that issue"*; *"I know some social workers who are very familiar with that kind of thing"*; and *"That professional development programme would be of interest to you"*. They seemed to talk more freely each other than the main meeting, as one of them expressed: *"I find myself getting motivated by talking and sharing various practice experiences with each member. I find this meeting after the study meeting really good opportunity to have a casual chat with the members more freely"*. As such, it can be said that a purely informal meeting involves offering an opportunity to learn with and from other practitioners regarding something related to practice in a different way to a learning group discussed above. Further discussion about informal learning opportunities will be presented in the next chapter.

5.3.3 Other opportunity

Learning through playing a teaching role

There are other opportunities described by the participants where they found themselves experiencing a change in understanding considerably as social workers. The findings demonstrate that some of the participants saw playing a teaching role as a valuable opportunity for learning. They described themselves as having an opportunity, as experienced frontline practitioners, to give a lecture on social work in universities or professional development programmes organised by professional associations and learning providers. Harumi speaks about her learning experience where she gave a lecture in a university as a part-time lecturer:

When I needed to teach social work in the university, I studied some theory of social work again that I had learnt when I was an undergrad student. Looking back, that opportunity made me reconsider myself as a social worker. I mean, through that opportunity, I found myself taking a step back from everyday practice and thinking back how I had been working as a social worker. At that time, I reviewed the code of ethics, and even felt like finding out that it was packed with everything needed for social workers (1-to-1).

While studying again theories of social work in preparing for a lecture, Harumi found herself getting an opportunity to take a step back from everyday practice—which led her to reflect on her way of being a social worker. She also noted that she revised her understanding of the code of ethics, which she considered that she had not properly appreciated when she studied it in the university.

This was echoed by the following example of Mari. She encapsulated how she saw her learning experiences as a trainer in a professional development programme for social care workers for older people:

When I came to take up a position to teach in a professional development programme, I found there was an immediate need to have substantial evidence based on my actual practice experiences. I would say, while I was explaining things to social care workers in such a programme, at the same time I felt like learning a lot myself too (FG).

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I think preparing for a lecture is the most difficult part. When I prepare for it, I try to read new materials, and also reflect on my practice experiences to be included into a lecture. After making those efforts for a lecture, I find myself learning a lot right when I give a lecture to those who attend it (FG).

In order to give a convincing explanation to others with easily understandable words, it is essential for practitioners themselves to understand well the contents of what is explained—which include not only a theory related to social work but also their own practice experiences. That can involve the social workers putting something “tacit” of their cumulative experiences into words. Some of the social workers expressed that playing a teaching role in such an opportunity as professional development programmes allowed them to become aware of the fact that they did not actually make what is tacit explicit well. Trying to explain something to someone can allow practitioners to deepen their understanding and further see things from different perspectives. Thus, it can be argued that the social workers learnt about their own work by taking on a different role in universities or professional development programmes.

So far, I have tried to show what counted as a learning opportunity for the participants. They found themselves learning something associated with their practice in a diverse range of opportunities over their career as social workers. What kinds of opportunities can become a trigger for learning to take place is, as the findings reveal, something that is an individual

construct in their own working context. In that way, it seems reasonable to see that a trigger for learning can be difficult to manage by its nature.

5.3.4 Learning from/with others

In the light of learning opportunities, there is one more important point to note that learning experiences described by the participants involved interacting with others in the overlapping types of learning opportunity discussed in the previous section. Those others can include fellow social workers, other helping professions, service users and their families/carers among others. The findings reveal that some of the participants thought of such others as key persons through their certain learning experiences. Through engagement with such a key person in various opportunities, they described themselves as experiencing a considerable change in understanding. In what follows, I examine whom the participants considered as a key person in different learning experiences.

Learning from/with professionals

Most of the participants highlighted that they learnt something significant associated with practice through active engagement with helping professionals in their working context. Those helping professionals include fellow social workers and other helping professions. In what follows, we consider who can be regarded as a key person.

Yukio placed great stress on this aspect of learning, who had worked for a social care organization for people with learning disability:

I have often heard about the fact that we, social workers learn from service users in various ways, but I find myself learning through my co-workers each other as well. For example, through observing how they interact with service users and what they tell in a meeting or so. I think that is how I have learnt a lot in day-to-day practice (1-to-1).

The learning experience through interaction with professionals seems to be drawn clearly in the example of Harumi:

When I worked for a nursing home as a social worker, I was told by my supervisor that I didn't pay close attention to service users themselves. I don't remember the exact details of that, but that words made me aware of the fact that my attention towards service users wasn't enough. I remember that very well even now. She was the only person who gave me that sort of advice in a supportive way. (...) When I come to think of that experience, it seems to me that she realised fully where we social workers should direct our attention for service users. (...) When I face service users, I often bring that experience to mind. So, when it comes to learning experiences for me, that experience first rose before my mind (1-to-1).

Looking back on that experience, Harumi also expressed: *"I feel like that at that time I was so busy with work to be done that I just dealt with everyday work without thinking twice"* (1-to-1).

The words given by the supervisor gave Harumi a chance to take a step back from everyday work, which led her to reflect on her way of practice and notice that the advice was the case. Harumi described herself as taking that learning experience as a reference point which she should return to as a social worker.

The findings also confirm that many of the social workers found themselves learning from not only their fellow social workers as stated above, but also other helping professions in different ways. Such helping professions include medical doctors, nurses, and counsellors. Tomoko illustrates this explicitly in her description of learning experience, who had worked in the mental health field:

When I had difficulties in working as a social worker, a nurse went to work for our organization, who had been working for a mental hospital for a long time. I found myself learning a lot from that nurse, especially in terms of medical knowledge such as schizophrenia, which I thought is really difficult to understand well without working with in actual practice. Before that, I would say I had just worked with service users in an intuitive way. However, the nurse explained to me about the likes of what would cause a service user to behave in that way, with convincing evidence for that. Those experiences helped me a lot to understand gradually what mental illness is like (FG).

Tomoko found herself deepening her knowledge about mental health through interacting with the nurse with extensive practice experiences in the mental health field, which she considered were different to what she had learnt from their fellow social workers in the organization in that she got a different perspective on “evidence” that professionals base on in making judgments in day-to-day practice. She described that this learning experience had a considerable implication for her way of practice as a professional.

Professional role model

We have discussed who some of the participants considered as key persons through interacting with fellow social workers and other helping professionals in various opportunities. The findings show that some of the participants regarded such a key person as a professional “role model”. Though a key person as a role model was remarked of in different ways, it will be useful to consider such a role model through the following two types: *reference* and *motivating model*.

Reference Model

When the participants felt inexperienced as social workers especially in their first few years after they had qualified, the majority of them described themselves as copying the way of practice directly from experienced fellow social workers in their work settings, as described expressed by Mayumi:

I tried to see my experienced co-workers as a role model who worked together in the organization. I wanted to become able to do the likes of what they do in practice. I find that a primary role that a practitioner should deliver is to manage care services for service users, and also deal with their carers, I would say, who are mainly their mother. When I had just started to work for the organization, I didn't know well what autism is actually like. So, I found myself learning very basic stuff such as how I should make responses towards service users, through observing how my experienced co-workers practised (1-to-1).

This aspect of learning was echoed by many participants. The social workers found themselves learning through paying careful attention to the way in which not only fellow social workers but also other helping professions practise in day-to-day practice—which included the way of communication with service users and carers in face-to-face and even on the phone, and the way of making themselves understood in a meeting among others.

In another example, Mari noted that she got considerably influenced by the instructor—who taught Family Therapy in the training course at KISWEC as described earlier in this chapter, and also got involved in the “meeting for case discussion” which she joined every month:

His way of thinking was really new to me. That was distinctly different from the ones of others with whom I had got involved, so I was wondering what his way of thinking was like. Those learning experiences gave me a shock (1-to-1).

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He is kind of a master for me, as it were. I want to be able to have a broader perspective like him, in that way, for me he is a role model as a helping profession (1-to-1).

Mari described herself as seeing the instructor as a reference point in that she checked how much closer she got to the instructor's way of understanding through an involvement with him in subsequent learning opportunities. Thus, it can be argued that some of the participants regarded some other professionals as a reference model—that is something that they can copy directly and further that can provide an approach that they find helpful.

Motivating Model

In motivating model, the participants saw a key person as someone who can encourage and motivate them to practise social work. Satoko seems to illustrate this explicitly in her account of learning experiences during the study leave overseas:

Satoko: The most impressive thing is, when I asked social workers some questions like 'what do you work for as a social worker?' and 'what is your identity as a social worker?', they promptly gave a clear answer with confidence. I felt like that they were really different from social workers in Japan. I mean, if I was asked the same question, I would not be able to say a clear answer immediately in that way. Considering my co-workers, they don't seem to be able to give a clear answer to those kinds of questions either. It seems to me that there are fundamental differences in a professional mindset, as it were.

Taka: Among the answers they gave you, do you have any impressive one for you?

Satoko: (...) One answer is from a head teacher at a special support school in Denmark. When I asked him for what a special support school existed, he answered that it would be a rich society where the vulnerable can be valued, so a special support school is really essential for our society. In those days, even in Japan, the word of 'inclusion' was becoming popular in the social work field, so some people made a claim that children with disabilities should be included in a mainstream school (FG).

The words that some professionals put in had a great impact upon Satoko in that she reflected on her way of being a social worker. Satoko noted that through these learning experiences, she found herself taking another look at the role of social workers:

I had never had thought of relating my regular job to a level of society until then. I did see only a small part of the job I take charge of. Of course, I tried to put my great effort on providing our service users with good services, but I had hardly thought what my job could have a meaning to our society. (...) Hearing that, I believed that they have a positive attitude toward their work, the pride of a professional, and above all convincing idea about what social workers should do in their society (FG).

For Satoko, the interaction with some professionals in those learning experiences seems to lead to her underlying assumptions about the role of social workers being challenged to a considerable degree. Such a change in understanding allowed Satoko to develop her identity as a social worker, and further energised her to practise social work. Thus, the social workers experienced a change in understanding through active engagement with helping professionals in varying ways. The key persons whom they considered as had significant implications for their way of practice and further professional ways of being, in that the key persons provide a role model for them to make reference to and get motivated as a social worker.

Learning from/with service users and carers

In the previous section, I have discussed that helping professionals as key persons can have an influence on learning. Here it should be noted that who can be a key person is not predetermined, but something that emerges from an actual working context. A key person whom the social workers regarded as is not limited to helping professionals, but can include service users and carers, friends other than helping professionals among others. Many of the social workers encapsulated how they learnt something that left a deep mark on them from service users and carers in day-to-day practice. This point seems to be reflected in the following example of Joe in a social care organization that provided services for severely disabled people:

While I had a casual conversation with a mother whose son was named Taro, who was 25 years old man, I told her, 'Taro is really lovable, isn't he?' And then, she said to me ironically, I mean, that just sounded so to me, though I am not sure if it was true, that 'You are really affectionate. It took me over 20 years to see Taro in such an affectionate way.' At that time, I learnt that I should never use this kind of words (FG).

This experience came as a great shock to Joe in that his taken-for-granted assumption was questioned. This had a considerable impact on his way of practice and of being a social worker, as highlighted by Joe: “*Since that experience, I have tried to base my practice on the idea that I can’t thoroughly understand people, who can keep changing. That is why I have to try to make an effort to understand them as a professional*” (FG).

As having discussed, many of the participants in the study placed great stress on the fact that they experienced a change in understanding through involving with others whom they saw as key persons. Who the social workers count as key persons is something that is individually and socially constructed as it can emerge from interaction of some kind in their particular learning context. We also should draw attention to the fact that as discussed in component 1, *Experience*, they realised who were key persons and what the interaction with him/her can mean to them through their career in hindsight. Here it seems to remain an unsettled question why key persons can emerge in some cases but not in others, or why some learning experiences are regarded as something that has a considerable impact on the social workers, but not other experiences.

In the following chapter, I will be examining how the involvement with others in a diverse range of ways can have an implication for professional learning in more detail through addressing the last component of professional learning, *Reflection*.

Chapter 6

Reflection (Component 3): Taking a step back from everyday practice

In the preceding chapter, we have discussed how the participants in the study saw their learning as something about changes in their understanding in diverse ways. Also, three components of professional learning have been identified that can lead to such changes in their understanding: *Experience*; *Opportunity*; and *Reflection*. Having examined the first two components in the previous chapter, this chapter addresses the last component of professional learning: *Reflection*. I will explore how reflection involves professional learning for the social workers to experience different changes in their understanding as professionals in their working context. To begin with, I consider what the social workers value in their learning. Then, I examine what would make a difference in prompting them to reflect on their way of practice and further way of professional being. Finally, I illustrate different approaches that they use to address the dissonance between what they value in learning as professionals and learning expectations from professional communities that include their organizations and professional associations.

6.1 Getting ‘Away’ from where you are now

6.1.1 Seeing practice from different perspectives

I begin by going into how the social workers in the study saw reflection in day-to-day practice. In the interviews—both the focus groups and one-to-one interviews, reflection was a constantly recurring theme in that the majority of participants described reflection differently in talking about their particular learning experiences. They highlighted the importance of reflection in their day-to-day practice, as summed up by Harumi: *“I learnt how important it could be not to work just hard, but to stop and think a little bit about my daily practice” (1-to-1)*. Many of them pointed out that reflection involves themselves taking a step back from everyday practice in various ways. Akira noted this point in the account of his learning experiences in a learning meeting whose member was not only fellow social workers but also other helping professions:

In the learning meeting, I often find myself having different perspectives that I haven’t got. That makes me more aware of the fact that I have just a narrow perspective on a case. I mean that the longer I engage in a case, the more difficult I get different perspectives on that case (1-to-1).

This point was repeated by many of the social workers. Takuya expressed that he gained alternative perspectives on his case that he had struggled with, through getting feedback from his colleagues:

When I tried to deal with that case on my own, I completely overlooked some aspects of the case. Feedback from my colleagues gave me a chance to become aware of some different perspectives. I would probably say that I didn't have a bird's-eye view of the case. I noticed that I had seen only small part of the case (FG).

In the example of Akira and Takuya, we can see the important point in the light of reflection. As discussed in the previous chapter, through diverse learning experiences the social workers found themselves getting different perspectives on something associated with their day-to-day practice at different levels. That can vary from “particular change” in understanding—which easily fits into their present way of thinking, to “generalised change”—which challenge their existing way of thinking. Whether a change in understanding is specific or fundamental, they seem to place great stress on getting “away” from where they are now in different ways. Akira noted that getting different perspectives led him to be “*stirred up in the place where I stand now*” (1-to-1) as a social worker in that his underlying assumption about his way of practice is challenged:

In the learning meeting, I got the opportunity to tell about my way of practice and also something about my belief as a social worker. I found that opportunity really precious, because I got a lot of useful feedback from fellow social workers, who were different kinds of social workers in terms of practice experience and service specialism. Through those feedbacks, I found myself getting new perspectives on myself as a social worker (1-to-1).

Thus, Akira saw the learning meeting as an important opportunity to get “away” from where he is, in that it can give him a chance to reflect not only on a case itself that he deals with, but also on his way of being a social worker. As highlighted by Takuya in the words, though it may be impossible to “*have a bird's-eye view*” of their way of practice and even professional way of being, taking a step back from everyday practice can lead the social workers to see something from different perspectives to varying extents.

Here there is one more aspect to note in the light of reflection. In an attempt to consider reflection or reflective practice, it seems not to be able to ignore the well-known distinction made by Donald Schön (1983; 1987)—which is between “reflection-*in*-practice” and “reflection-*on*-practice”. While reflection-*in*-practice takes place in the middle of action, reflection-*on*-practice involves the post hoc process of making meanings of an action, as examined in the section of literature review, Chapter 2. In the example of Akira and Takuya, they seemed to involve post hoc reflection on their way of practice rather than near-simultaneous reflection in practice. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, professional learning involves a continuous process without any starting and ending point. The participants related one experience to another among a diverse range of cumulative experiences as professionals, which led them to see an event from different perspectives. In that way, it may make good sense to see that the learning experiences described by the

participants entail the intertwined reflection in that it can be made before, during, and after an event.

6.1.2 Awareness of possibilities for change

As discussed, many of the social workers placed great stress on getting different perspectives on practice in the light of reflection. However, it must be noted that such a change in understanding does not necessarily involve finding any immediate solutions in a difficult situation such as value conflicts with others as discussed in Chapter 4—which many of the social workers tended to find challenging as professionals. Mari described herself as experiencing a change in understanding about a difficult case in the “meeting for case discussion” she joined, through getting feedback from other members:

Mari: In the meeting for case discussion, I can often get different perspectives from other members that I did not have about a case. Through those opportunities, I can become aware of my weak points. I mean, there are any points which I tend to miss when I make an assessment of a case. So, I find that learning really helpful whenever I join the meeting. When I am getting involved in a case, I find myself looking at the case only from my viewpoint. That is why I want to know how others see the case differently and if there would be any possibilities for change in that case.

Taka: You mean that, getting different perspectives about a case in the meeting can make a change in practice?

Mari: That is true. For example, I try out any possibilities for change suggested in the meeting. Of course, I don't know if that idea would work well or not, but I find it worth trying out. Especially when I find a case getting stuck, it is really helpful to get different perspectives about that case. That can give me a chance to have another look at how to approach that case. On the other hand, through a feedback from a member, I sometimes recognise again that the family of that case is significantly difficult to change (1-to-1).

Mari saw getting different perspectives on a case that got “stuck” as a significant step to make it different to some extent. Seeing a difficult case from different perspectives can lead to awareness of possibilities for change. This seems to raise the question of the relationship between reflection and action. As noted by Mari in the words, noticing different possibilities of a case may encourage social work practitioners to deal with a difficult situation they are faced with in day-to-day practice. It can be argued that through trying to get away from where they are now, they explore alternatives for making a case or situation different to different extents.

On the other hand, we must draw attention to the fact that many of the social workers described themselves as finding it difficult to have different perspectives on their practice in their own work settings. Let us now consider this issue in detail. The findings suggest that there were dissonances between what the social workers valued in learning as professionals

and what they experienced in their actual working context. Mayumi described those differences in the following example:

In our institution, many of our colleagues have been working over many years. So, in the case discussion, it often happens that one colleague who had taken charge of a case before tells about something like, 'That is the way the carer in that case usually does. I had tried to talk with that carer about an issue'. I suppose that these are influenced to larger extent by the character of our institution. I would say that many of our service users keep attending the institution for a longer period, like 10 years, 20 years and more. In such a working environment, I find it really difficult to get a new perspective on things (1-to-1).

In the sheltered workshop for which Mayumi had worked, social workers were involved with the same service users with learning disability for a longer period. Here an important point is being made by Mayumi in the light of what she valued in practice. Mayumi seems to imply that having more information about a case might not necessarily lead to making it different in some way, but rather might prevent practitioners from exploring alternatives for it. This point was echoed in the remarks of Toshie:

We are supposed to have a case discussion with our colleagues once a week, where we report each case we work on. In there, we don't usually get any different opinions about a case. (...) Even in the case discussion with other institutions concerned, we don't tend to get so different opinions about the case. (...) After all, we discuss a case based on the information we have found. I would say that tends to cause us to draw a similar conclusion (FG).

While many of the social workers highlighted the importance of getting different perspectives of their practice, as shown in the example of Mayumi and Toshie, some of the social workers described that their own work settings tended not to be associated with a change in perspectives. This may suggest to us that what the social workers value in learning is that their assumption about practice is challenged to different degrees. In this way, we may say that getting different perspectives involves practitioners getting “away” from where they are in the light of their taken-for-granted assumptions about practice—which may open up new possibilities that can make a difference to a case that they have difficulty in dealing with.

6.2 What would make a difference in reflection?

6.2.1 Getting 'Away' in a supportive relationship

As discussed in the previous section, in relation to reflection the social workers I spoke to placed a value on seeing their practice from different perspectives. As local work context can have considerable implications for professional learning, I now attempt to look carefully into what would be associated with a change in perspective in their working context. As described in the above example of Mayumi and Toshie, all of the social workers had a case discussion or case meeting in daily practice to discuss a case with not only their colleagues but also the helping professions concerned in other organizations. However, the findings reveal that many

of the social workers tended not to see such case meetings as a suitable forum for expressing themselves, as indicated in the comments of Harumi:

In my workplace, we have a case discussion where we need to make a decision about a case in some ways, like making a plan for a case. However, in there, I find myself being unable to express something about uncomfortable feeling about a case (1-to-1).

As made explicit by Harumi, what the social workers thought is expected of them in a case discussion is to come to a decision in some ways about a case. Here we can see the dissonance between what the social workers value in reflection and what they are expected to do as professionals in an actual work setting. Many of the social workers described themselves as facing constraints differently in expressing themselves in their own work settings. The findings indicate that they tended to feel afraid openly to share the troubles they had faced with their colleagues. The following comment by Jun seems to highlight a significant dimension of this issue:

When I show a case that I am in charge of in a case discussion, I feel like I need to have the courage to discuss it with my colleagues. That is because they seem to try to find my fault with it. So, I have so many experiences in case discussions that ended up negative. I would say that we hold a case discussion so that we can take a case further. However, it is often the case that the social worker in charge of a case is criticised by colleagues (FG).

Jun described himself as feeling uncomfortable with a case discussion in that discussions tended to focus more on what they did in a wrong way. This was echoed by other participants differently. In such an unsupportive relationship with others in their work settings, as shown in the example of Harumi earlier too, many of the social workers tended to have hesitation in expressing themselves in an open way. The following comment of Yukio seems to shed light on a different aspect of the issue of unsupportive relationship:

In the case discussion, although we try to share a case that I work on with all the staff, I would probably say that I find myself after all needing to make a decision about the case by myself. (...) If the case went wrong as a result of my decision, I wonder how I should do that, which is something that I often have on my mind in everyday practice (1-to-1).

Yukio described himself as feeling afraid to deal with a case only in his judgment without being backed by his colleagues. That caused him to feel standing alone at his workplace in that “I find that there is a gap between the staff who are responsible and others who are not” (1-to-1). This point was echoed in the remarks of Harumi. She described herself as feeling unsupported by her supervisor in being faced with a difficult case in her ex-workplace: “My supervisor tended to leave to ourselves in practice. (...) In the ex-workplace, I did never have a feeling that I was supported” (1-to-1).

These comments seem to reflect a lack of trust in other staff in their work settings. Though this seems to be the intangible atmosphere they sensed within their workplaces, the above examples suggest that an unsupportive relationship can be something that has negative

implications for their learning. In such an unsupportive relationship, they seem to be discouraged to interact openly with colleagues and/or supervisors, in order to avoid a risk of being seen to “fail” in practice. This could lead to constraining from getting different perspectives from others in their work settings.

Having discussed that an unsupportive relationship can have negative implications for their learning, the question then arises as to what circumstances would be most likely to be associated with a significant change in perspective as the social workers in the study value in their learning. In considering this question, the following example of Harumi seems to be useful, who talked of the case that involved elder abuse that an elderly service user had been under house arrest by her daughter:

When I struggled with a really difficult case, I had a chance where a researcher in a university gave me the offer to write a part of the book about that case with him. While I was reflecting on that case with him, I felt like I was supervised in a supportive way. I find that experience has had a considerable impact on me even now (1-to-1).

Harumi chose that case to reflect on with the researcher since she found the case to be most challenging to deal with at that time. Though Harumi, as discussed earlier, felt unsupported in her organization, she described herself as being able to express herself openly with him:

As a social worker, I would probably say that I was worrying about if I could manage that case. I found myself trying to hide those kinds of feelings. Through talking about the case with myself with his great supported, I for the first time became aware of my feelings of fear over that case. That experience helped me a lot to face the case (1-to-1).

Through interacting with the researcher as an outsider, her awareness of feelings of fear—that she reflected on had been hidden—was promoted. Within the supportive relationship with him, it seems that her assumptions about the case was challenged, which led Harumi to see it from different perspectives to the one she had kept. That change in her understanding made a difference to that case in that she was encouraged to face the case as a social worker. Harumi decided to hold a meeting with that family—which as a result, led to the case going forward in a different way. Harumi also highlighted that what she learnt through this experience was that “*Without experiences where you were supported as a social worker not only by the professionals but also others, I firmly believe that it might be really difficult to support people involved*” (1-to-1). As such, it may be argued that a supportive relationship can encourage social work practitioners to express themselves in an open way, in a way that they discuss their unresolved feelings such as anxiety and fear associated with practice; that can lead to their underlying assumptions about their way of practice and themselves as professionals being challenged.

As discussed, many of the participants tended to face different constraints upon expressing themselves openly in their work settings. However, we need to be careful not to infer that a formal support in the structure of their organization failed to be supportive to them, as some of the participants described themselves as feeling easy to communicate with their colleagues within their organization. Though a supportive relationship can be necessary for expressing themselves in an open way, it may not be enough to experience a significant change in understanding as the social workers value in their learning. The following extract seems to capture this point well:

Taka: How did you cope with something about your unresolved feelings associated with practice?

Mayumi: I expressed such kind of feelings within my workplace. I found my organization having a friendly atmosphere where we can freely share those feelings with each other. It's like, 'That case is really troublesome'. (...) However, I feel like I got little useful feedback that I had wanted from my colleagues when we shared a case that got stuck in the case meeting (1-to-1).

Even though Mayumi described herself as finding it easy to share her feelings with her colleagues in her day-to-day practice, she found it difficult to get different perspectives which she had not expected in her work setting. This point seems to be echoed in the remarks of Jun in a different way:

When you keep working in a same organization, it is likely that you have a narrow perspective on things in practice. (...) I have worked for different organizations, so I found out about something different about each organization from an outsider's viewpoint. I would say that each organization has its own perspective or way of practice, which has been maintained for a long period. When we discuss a case in a meeting, it is less likely to get a new perspective in there (FG).

As summed up by Jun, each organization has a different taken-for-granted understanding about the way of practice; this can make it difficult for social workers to become aware of their tacit assumptions only within their work settings. Some of the social workers described themselves as having little chances in which their underlying assumptions about their way of practice are challenged at their workplaces. It may be argued that unless their assumptions about practice are challenged or questioned in different ways, the social workers do not find themselves getting different perspectives as they value in their learning. Thus, when we think of reflection, being supported and challenged should be seen not as different but as part of a whole. Unless being supported is connected to being challenged, social work practitioners may not be able to experience a change in understanding. It can be argued that a supportive and challenging relationship as a whole enhances their learning opportunities, in that it can give a chance to become aware of some aspects of things in practice that social work practitioners might not notice without interacting with others in an open way.

6.2.2 Getting ‘Away’ in space

In the previous section, we have discussed that in the light of reflection, the social workers in the study placed a value on getting different perspectives through interacting actively with others in a supportive relationship. However, the findings suggest that many of them felt the gap between what they valued in learning and what they experienced in their actual work settings. In the following section, I consider how the social workers addressed this gap in their own way—which shaped their significant learning experiences involving a change in understanding. It seems to be reasonable to attempt to sketch out a diverse of approaches described by them through the following two points: “beyond” and “within” a work setting.

Beyond a work setting

Learning group/purely informal meeting

As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the participants described themselves as learning a lot from getting involved in a learning group and even a purely informal meeting organised by fellow social workers and/or other helping professions beyond their own work settings. To enhance their learning, there is a need to share their practice experiences with others in not only a supportive but also a challenging relationship. This point seems to be drawn well in the following example of Yukio:

Looking back on my experience, I feel like I got more honest feedback in a learning group and even more informal meeting, rather than in my workplace. I would say that what I got in such a meeting can give me some help. (...) In the informal meeting that is not for learning, we talk about something what is going on each other. In there, I never get negative feedback from the member about my practice (Laughing). While I am talking about the meeting right now, I have just noticed how important such an opportunity is for me (1-to-1).

As discussed earlier, Yukio described himself as feeling unsupported and uncomfortable with expressing himself openly in his organization. As reflecting on his learning experiences in the interviews, Yukio seems to become aware of the fact that the learning groups and informal meetings allowed him to share his experiences with the members without feeling afraid to be judged by them—which led him to get different perspectives to things in practice. Many others in the study repeated the importance of a learning group and purely informal learning organised by fellow social workers and/or other helping professions beyond their own work settings in the light of reflection, as shown in the description of Akira’s experience:

In the learning group, we share different opinions about issues that each member tackles at that point. I find it really valuable to be able to share with reliable fellow social workers. I mean that I often feel frustrated with engaging with other helping professions such as nurses in daily practice. However, I feel really comfortable with the member of the learning group, in ways that I’ve got a feeling that I can communicate myself with them. Having such reliable fellow social workers seems to give me energy in daily practice (1-to-1).

While Akira found uncomfortable with interacting with his colleagues and other helping professions in his work setting, in order to tackle that issue he developed an extensive professional network with fellow social workers beyond his work setting, and also organised the learning group which was held about every few months. Akira noted that he found himself expressing himself freely and further getting motivated for day-to-day practice in the learning group. Thus, many of the social workers tended to employ the strategy in which they engage with others beyond their work setting to get different perspectives. It is also noteworthy that others with whom they engaged include not only fellow social workers and other helping professions, but also friends other than helping professions. Akira put stress on interacting with his friends who worked for a private company:

I do want to keep a balanced sense. For that, I find it really important to talk with those who are other than fellow social workers. I would say that without knowing, we may have sort of unbalanced sense from their point of view. I believe that whether we become aware of such a difference of sense can matter a lot when we engage with service users in daily practice (1-to-1).

Through freely sharing his experience with friends other than helping professions, Akira found himself getting different perspectives that he considered was difficult to gain by interacting with only fellow social workers. This point resonates with Yukio's account:

When I talked with my friends who worked for a private company, I was sometimes asked about something basic, that is like, 'What do you need to do that kind of thing for?' Such a question made me think again about my work. (...) Although that interaction with my friends didn't mean to lead to problem-solving in practice, I feel like I got stimulated by that (1-to-1).

For Yukio, talking about his experiences as a social worker with friends other than helping professions gave him an opportunity in which his taken-for-granted understanding of his day-to-day practice was challenged and questioned. While he did not find any solution to issues he faced in practice, Yukio considered such opportunities valuable in that he had little chance within his work setting to rethink his underlying assumption in that way.

Social Media

The social workers I spoke to mentioned quite a few different relationships for reflection in their working context: colleagues in their agencies; fellow social workers and other helping professions in other agencies; and friends other than helping professions. In addition to a learning group and purely informal meeting, it should also be noted that some of the social workers used a social networking service (SNS) such as "Twitter" and "Facebook" to share their practice experiences with and get different perspectives from others beyond their work settings, as described by Harumi in her account of using Facebook:

When I post something associated with practice on Facebook, my friends on it usually give me some feedback. Through such feedbacks, I often find myself becoming aware of something different. I want more different ideas from them to keep flexible as much as possible. I feel like that is difficult only within my organization (1-to-1).

In the following example, Mari illustrated her strategy about what she should post on Twitter explicitly:

In terms of contents that I post, I try to post not my complaints about work, but what I reflect on practice. I hope that can help my friends who check my post to think something related to it. And then, some of them usually make a comment about my post, those comments make me rethink it (1-to-1).

Both Harumi and Mari described SNS as a valuable resource to share something about their practice with various people beyond their work settings—including fellow social workers, other helping professions in other agencies and friends who was not helping professions. They also found an SNS useful to build up a professional network. Both of them were actively involved in a learning group organised by fellow social workers and/or other helping professions, whose member also became a member of a group on social media used by them. They often used social media to share something associated with their practice with its members, which they considered was not encouraged in their own work settings. While the learning groups tended to be held once a month or fewer, social media enabled them to share their experiences with the member whenever they wanted. It may be argued that using social media can be complementary to a learning group and purely informal meeting in a way to increase learning opportunities. Interacting with others in a diverse range of ways can prompt the social workers to be challenged and questioned their understanding of their way of practice, which may lead them to become aware of alternative perspectives and further reflect on their professional ways of being. It also may be argued that reflection can be open-ended in that it would be just some certain aspects of things in practice that social workers reflect on. There can be other aspects of things that they might not be aware of however they try to see those with a “bird’s eye view”. As discussed, many of the social workers tended to employ different strategies to share with others issues that got stuck in their work settings, and see those from different perspectives. It seems to make good sense that such strategies they used according to their needs involve the way to get “away” from where they are in the light of “space”.

Within a work setting

Self-reflection

Having considered how the social workers engaged with others beyond their work settings in order to get different perspectives, here we examine the other approaches that the social workers developed within their work settings. The participants of the study had extensive

practice experiences in a wide range of practice fields. For that reason, some of them were in a position of supervisor in their organization. After being in such a position, they tended to find it difficult to share their practice experience with their younger colleagues. In order to deal with that issue, they used different approaches. The findings reveal that they engaged in an inner dialogue through interacting with text such as books. Harumi remarked of using “code of ethics” defined by the professional association of social workers in Japan as a kind of reference point:

I find it crucial as a social worker to think about what social workers should base their practice on. In that way, it is just the code of ethics that I always get back to, when I feel like getting lost in practice. Press of work often makes me forgetful of that (1-to-1) .

Harumi also illustrated the code of ethics for her as that “*I consider the code of ethics to be something like a basic guide or a great support. (...) I feel like being supported by the code of ethics not to lose my way in practice*” (1-to-1). Therefore, Harumi described herself as always keeping it on her desk at her organization to refer to it whenever she wanted. This was repeated by some others in different ways. Miho noted that she put on her PC in her organization, Seven principles of the social work relationships defined by Biestek (1957)—which tended to be taught as a fundamental principle that social workers should adhere to in the course of certified social worker in Japan:

I always find those principles quite true in day-to-day practice. For example, say about individualisation. (...) I always try to check those principles put on my PC. I would say that can help to warn myself, I mean, not to abandon the principles (FG).

In the same focus group as one Miho attended, Joe described his resource for self-reflection:

In my case, I keep ‘the Analects of Confucius’ at hand. Thinking of the reason for that, I realise that ‘the Analects of Confucius’ has been read for long, long years by people in the whole world. That probably means that it includes something like basic principles behind when we live our lives. (...) I sometimes find myself referring to ‘the Analects of Confucius,’ for example, during a break. That is something like a traffic sign for me, in ways to say that you should stop there, and the like. Through doing that sort of thing, I try to reflect on my practice (FG).

Thus, some of the social workers I spoke to described themselves as using different texts in their own way as a resource to reflect on practice by themselves within their work settings. Through referring to different resources, it seems that they go inside their head and have a constructive inner dialogue about issues they are faced with in practice. It may be argued that such an inner dialogue can involve themselves getting “away” from where they are in day-to-day practice, in that they question their way of practice by themselves.

6.2.3 Getting ‘Away’ in time

In the previous section, we have discussed the diverse ways in which the social workers sought to get “away” from where they are in the light of reflection, through illustrating the aspect of space: beyond and within their work settings. In this final section, we look into the other aspect of something that would have implications for reflection, that is, “time”. Before focusing attention on the point I want to make here, let us start by considering the issue of time constraints. In the interviews, all the social workers described themselves as living busy lives with work. Some of them pointed out that there was little chance for reflection in their work setting because of their daily busyness. The following extract from Miho captures the point well:

I believe that it is really important to afford time for reflection. I used to stay much more time at my ex-workplace rather than at home. I had felt like I was always pressed so much by work. (...) At that time when I had been pressed by work, I didn't have time to reflect on my practice and myself as a professional. After I got back home from work, I just slept like a log and went to work as soon as I got up. Looking back on those days, that used to be about my daily routine (FG).

Looking back on her experience, Miho highlighted the importance of affording time for reflection in day-to-day practice. Many of the social workers echoed this comment in that they tended to find little time to think long and hard about their practice in their everyday practice. Keiko noted that she tended to feel that she “cannot afford to appreciate any feedback from others not only in my organization but also in a related organization with little time to think about practice in everyday practice” (FG); therefore, Keiko stressed the need to “find a way to afford to think about my practice” (FG). However, it seems that we need to be careful not to infer that reflection absolutely requires a considerable amount of time. Though many of the social workers described themselves as feeling stressed with their increased workload, all the participants did not see time constraints in their day-to-day practice as a serious problem for reflection. As discussed in the previous section, in order to get different perspectives many of the social workers sought to make time for reflection in their busy schedule in diverse ways. It may be argued that a lack of time to think does not necessarily discourage the social workers to reflect on their practice. Trying to get away in the light of space can involve the social workers taking time for reflection in their working context.

Let us now turn to the point concerning the aspect of time for reflection. When we consider the aspect of time for reflection, in addition to the issue of the amount of time that practitioners can spend as described in the above example, there may be a need to draw our attention to the other point involving a period of time. The findings suggest that a period of time can make the social workers ready for reflecting on their practice experiences. The following extract from Yukio captures this point well. When he had worked for a sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities for about five years, Yukio had negative feelings

for his colleague who he considered had good skills in supporting service users. Yukio described that experience in a reflective way:

At that time I couldn't positively evaluate the way in which that colleague practised. (...) Looking back on that experience, I had feelings that I wanted to try what the colleague practised. On the other hand, I would probably say that I didn't have enough skills and knowledge to do that as well as I didn't afford any more time. I also felt frustrated with the fact that some colleagues expressed criticism over what I did, while they had a high opinion of what that colleague did (1-to-1).

These reflections about his feelings for the colleague were brought about after a period of time. That Yukio felt marginalized in his organization seemed to make it difficult for him to reflect on his uncomfortable situation. Yukio pointed out that he could not afford to reflect on his experience in the middle of how things had gone. Yukio described this experience as that “I found that experience really valuable for me” in that he learnt about “how important it is to be open to any feedback from others” (1-to-1). As such, reflection may require a period of time for practitioners to be ready to learn reflectively from their practice experience. Here this seems back to the concept of “reflection-on-practice” made by Schön—which entails the post hoc process of making meanings of an experience, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. It can be argued that professional learning involves a continuous reflection made before, during and after an event without any starting and ending point.

In this chapter, I have discussed how *Reflection* can have an implication for professional learning as one component of professional learning along with other two components: *Experience* and *Opportunity*. It should also be added that many of the social workers I spoke to found the participation in this research project itself to become a learning experience in that the interviews gave an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and further to see those from different perspectives through interacting with others. I will return to questions of reflexivity in the final chapter, Conclusion. This chapter ends with a comment from Yukio:

I've had little chance to reflect on my long career as a social worker, so I find this interview to be a good opportunity for that. In my daily practice, I would say that it is what I did yesterday, or at the longest last week, that I try to think about. Having reflected on my whole career through this interview, I feel like I have come to see myself in a different way. I realise again the importance of reflection (1-to-1).

Part 4

Discussions

Chapter 7

Uncertainty in being social workers: Life-world of social workers

In part 4, we will explore the crucial issues that arose from the empirical findings of the research presented in the section of findings, Part 3. Here those issues will be integrated with the literature to draw a broad picture of professional learning for social workers in the context of Japanese social work. Through this part, we will consider the ways in which insights from the study can go some way towards enhancing our understanding of professional learning for social workers.

In the section of findings, it has been revealed that the social workers I talked to were faced with “uncertainty” firmly embedded in their day-to-day practice in a range of ways. Being social workers involves themselves in dealing with the issues of uncertainty in their working context. As discussed in the section of findings, how much they felt uncomfortable with and how they addressed the issues of uncertainty varied widely from one social worker to another. It may be argued that uncertainty in practice can be a mirror in which practitioners can look at themselves as professionals. In this chapter, the issues of uncertainty in being social workers will be examined through relating to the discussions in the literature and illustrating the points by referring back to particular examples of how this is evident in the findings.

7.1 How is ‘uncertainty’ conceptualised?

The issues of uncertainty have been differently discussed and also conceptualised in a wide range of fields of practice. One thing, however, is certain that an uncertain nature can be entailed in any practice involving human activities. Central to the issues of uncertainty is an underlying assumption about a dichotomy between uncertainty and certainty—the notion of uncertainty can be contrasted with certainty, though it can be possible to be dogmatically uncertain in a way that has no doubts about one’s uncertainty. It seems that we can see this kind of dogmatism about uncertainty in strong claims to relativism. It is explicitly acknowledged about the uncertain nature of social work practice, as the issue of uncertainty has been highlighted in the social work literature (e.g. Fook, 2007; Howe, 1994; Hugman, 2005; Ife, 1997; Parton, 1994). Although the way in which issues of uncertainty are understood and addressed varies differently, they can be broadly divided into two opposing stances: quest for certainty; appreciation of uncertainty—tensions between those two opposing stances is highlighted in a context of professional practice (Mullavey-O’Byrne and West, 2001). In what follows, we look at the issues of uncertainty from each stance.

7.1.1 Quest for certainty

In today's rapidly changing working environments, there has been a need for professionals to face uncertainties at various levels. Evetts (2006) views risk and uncertainty as significant features in classifying professions, noting that professions are "the structural, occupational and institutional arrangements for work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies" (p.135). In a context of professional practice, there has been a view where uncertainty is regarded as something that should be managed and controlled, or even avoided—which is strongly reflected in the evidence-based-practice movement. Such a view on uncertainties is based on a scientific investigation with a primary focus on "evidence". The search for certainty is underlain by what Beck (1992) has termed "the risk society", which has had considerable implications for professional practice in a range of fields in that professional autonomy is challenged by the idea of risk management to be accountable. The movement of the quest for certainty has been prompted through regulating the way of practice at different levels—which entails managing risk and error, being aimed at enhancing the certainty of "outcomes" in the heightened risk society.

Increasing regulation of the way of practice also implies the lack of trust for practitioners (Evetts, 2008). Littlechild (2008) noted that distrust of social workers "has been clearly evidenced by the increasing tendency of government to issue reductivist checklists for social workers to follow" in the UK (p.666). Those checklists require social workers to assess potential risk on a set range of predetermined criteria, in order to try to prevent uncertainty, or minimise it as much as possible in everyday practice. The findings confirm that there has been a substantial shift from "invisible" or "tacit" rules, to "visible" or "explicit" rules in the context of Japanese social work—which required the social workers to follow in their day-to-day practice, as described in Chapter 4. It can be argued that this shift leads to a standardised way of practice, while imposing restraints on practitioners' discretion in their working context. As such, social work practice has been increasingly under scrutiny with a primary focus on outcomes—which are measurable and assessable. As Healy (2009) highlights, it is required for professionals to "provide evidence of their capacity to manage risk through reference to a scientific evidence base" to maintain professional credibility (p.402). On the other hand, "professions that are reliant on interpretivist or critical approaches to knowledge development, such as social welfare professions, are vulnerable to devaluation" (p.402), though of course there are many who would not agree that social work relies in this way. Under these managerial environments, what social workers are expected to deliver as professionals seems to be to comply with "standardised" procedures. However, social work practice involves practitioners dealing with uncertainties and ambiguities due to the complex and multi-layered nature of their work—which is centred on human relationships and entails assessing other's thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Thus, the attempt to control risk and

error, arguably, can be limited in that professionals would dismiss another possible aspect of something associated with practice, if not part of the listed criteria (Littlechild, 2008).

7.1.2 Appreciation of uncertainty

In contrast with the stance that uncertainty is viewed as something that should be managed, limited and controlled, there has been alternative perspective where uncertainty is seen as a significant resource for creativity. There has been a growing body of literature that considers uncertainty to be part of day-to-day practice and even to be necessary for making practice creative, rather than to be managed (e.g. Andresen et al., 2001; Fish, 1998; Higgs and Titchen, 2008). These changes of recognition for issues of uncertainty are traced by some back to Schön (1983). Schön highlights that professional decision-making necessarily involves degrees of uncertainty and acknowledges the importance of artistry and creativity. In the social work field, there has been extensive literature that recognises and describes the uncertain nature of social work practice (e.g. Fook, 2007; Howe, 1994; Hugman, 2005; Ife, 1997; Parton, 1994). It can be argued that they attempted to define the nature of social work by reference to uncertainty firmly embedded in day-to-day practice, as Healy (2004) highlights that social work have been “characterised by conditions of constant change and uncertainty” (p.104). Ife (1997) maintained that “the capacity to cope with change, uncertainty and crisis will be the most important attribute of a social worker” (p.30-31); he also argued that acceptance of uncertainty in practice can allow social workers to engage in creative practice. As such, it is drawn the marked contrast between these two perspectives in the light of how the issue of uncertainty is seen in a context of professional practice. The alternative view of uncertainty highlights the need to acknowledge professional “artistry” and “creativity”—which leads us to draw on a broader concept of expertise that practitioners should develop as professionals.

Here let us take an illustrating example of how social workers regard uncertainty in their everyday practice. Spafford et al. (2007) argued that as a result of conducting a qualitative study with social work, optometry and medical students to see how they responded to the issue of uncertainty in each work setting, “social work students viewed the acknowledgement and examination of uncertainty as a touchstone of competent social work” (p.155), rather than viewing it as a deficiency to be overcome. They pointed out that to develop professional identity as social workers involved the social work student in accepting uncertainty “as a normal and expected part of their work”; therefore they “were encouraged to identify and address their areas of uncertainty” (p.165), while the optometry and medical students saw uncertainty as something to be a deficit as professionals and therefore to be avoided. This way of viewing uncertainty seems to have much in common with the view of Fook et al. (2000)—they noted that “social workers operating with expertise accommodate the

complexities of the environment in several ways. They are able to work competently with complexity and uncertainty” (p.142). As such, the ability to deal with uncertainty in day-to-day practice is seen as a significant attribute for expert social workers, which entails fostering creativity and viewing change as an opportunity (Fook et al., 2000).

However, these views on uncertainty were called into question by White (2009). White conducted a study with child health social workers, noting that “many social workers in statutory settings do not have the time to notice uncertainty in their work” (2009: 233). She suggested that they were under pressure to make quick decisions with assessment tools to be required to follow within a limited service system—which caused them to “often feel very sure” of their professional reasoning (p.222). These different ways of viewing uncertainty in a context of professional practice may be caused by narrow understanding of uncertainty. Helsing (2007) highlights that “uncertainties themselves are inherently neither positive nor negative”. If uncertainty itself is something neutral, what we need in addressing the issue of uncertainty may be to broaden our understanding of multidimensional professional activities undertaken by social workers.

We have discussed how the issues of uncertainty are conceptualised through examining two opposing stances. As shown in Chapter 4, the majority of the social workers I spoke to described themselves as feeling uncomfortable with uncertainty about their own identity as social workers; and uncertainty of value-based practice, though how much they felt uncomfortable or comfortable with uncertainty varied widely. The degree of discomfort with uncertainty can have considerable implications for their way of practice. As demonstrated in the section of Chapter 4: *How do social workers address uncertainty in practice?*, the ways in which the social workers addressed the issues of uncertainty within their working context shaped their diverse learning experiences in varying ways. It can be argued that the way of dealing with the issues of uncertainty closely reflected the way of viewing those and further of defining themselves as social workers—that is, their professional ways of being.

7.2 What accounts for uncertainties?

Social work practice entails multidimensional activities in that it involves interaction with people’s thoughts and beliefs at different levels. Social workers bring their diverse range of experiences and knowledge to their day-to-day practice—which is demanding and uncertain in a way that has no predetermined solution to complex issues. In considering further the issues of uncertainty in everyday working lives as social workers, it will be useful to examine multidimensional practice by reference to the knowledge base of social workers in an actual working context.

7.2.1 'Knowing' in practice: What can social workers know?

Social work practice involves practitioners taking multiple factors into consideration in making judgements in their working context. As the basis for their judgements, practitioners rely on their own assumptions about knowledge. It can be argued that how social workers view knowledge as professionals shapes their day-to-day practice and also is shaped through a wide range of experiences—which can include not only practice experiences but also personal experiences, as shown in Chapter 5. Their assumption about knowledge represents how social workers see their professional expertise and further how they define themselves as professionals. Continuing disputes about the role of social work and social workers have considerable relevance to the arguments about which form of knowledge social workers should use as “professionals”. There are different positions in the light of “what constitutes the knowledge base of social work and how this can be applied to the dilemmas regularly encountered” in everyday practice (Trevithick, 2008: 1212). It may be argued that discussions about professional expertise are parallel with ones about a tension between certainty and uncertainty as discussed in the previous section. In considering the issue of the knowledge base of social workers, it must be noted that “the nature of what constitutes knowledge is a matter of some disagreement, and this is a significant matter in considering when and how any form of knowledge may be used” (Sheppard, 2004: 18). In what follows, we examine different ideas of knowledge that social workers utilise as resources in their everyday practice.

Formal knowledge

In a given practice situation, professional action is based on individual judgments—which are built on a knowledge base derived from a diverse range of sources. The knowledge base of professionals can often be broadly divided into “formal” and “informal” knowledge. The former refers to scientifically established knowledge and also includes policy-related one—which can be represented in an explicit and visible way. On the other hand, the latter refers to knowledge gained from diverse experiences—which can take a tacit form in a way that is difficult to standardise or formalise. In the discussions about the nature of social work and its application, there have been disputes about if these two different kinds of knowledge can be harmonised with each other. This can have considerable relevance to the knowledge gap between theory and practice which has been a recurrent theme in the social work literature (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012; 2014).

One perspective which puts an emphasis on formal knowledge is that professional practice requires social workers to make a judgement and act based on a “scientifically” established knowledge in order to be accountable. From that viewpoint, social work practice is often seen as not scientifically informed, and as not having a distinctive knowledge base. Therefore, the

use of scientific knowledge in practice is regarded as a core trait that defines a profession—which is underlain by the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement (Gambrill, 2007; Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002; Sheldon, 2001; Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009; Thyer, 2004; 2008; Thyer and Myers, 2011; Thyer and Wodarski, 2007; Williams, 1993). Sackett et al. (1996) have defined EBP—that has its roots in evidence-based medicine—as being about “the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients” (p.71). Sheldon (2001) has argued that our focus should be placed upon evidence that is produced in a conventional scientific way—that is, by the randomised controlled trial to test social work interventions—which some authors noted can contribute to informed practice (Nutley et al., 2003; 2007), and enhance professional accountability (Gambrill, 2007). This view reflects the evidence hierarchy, where randomised controlled trials are ranked at the top, followed by other types of studies such as observational, interpretive and descriptive studies, while case studies ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy (Evans, 2003).

Furthermore, acquisition of an established and specialised knowledge base is seen as allowing professionals to have a greater status in society (Dingwall and Lewis, 1983). In this perspective, there has arguably been fundamental disagreement that social work practice is based on individual value-based judgments—which lacks theoretical rigor. It can be argued that the movement of evidence-based practice represents that professional practice ought to be informed and justified by scientifically established knowledge, rather than relying on informal knowledge which can lead to inconsistent practice.

Vignette 1: Jun

The following example of Jun, who had worked for a mental health institution, seems to capture the point raised above well. Jun expressed:

In my ex-workplace, some co-workers who had more practice experience supervised inexperienced social workers like me not based on some sort of theory, I would probably say, but by intuition or skills developed just by their cumulative practice experience. (...) I found myself feeling a serious doubt that my co-workers made an assessment and intervention with clear evidence about why they did so. I would say that they seemed to act just on the spur of the moment (FG).

Jun casts serious doubts on the way of practice in which he considered his co-workers relied only on their “informal” knowledge developed by their own practice experiences:

I find it really important to give clear evidence in making an intervention, and then gain the consent of service users about that intervention. After that, we need to see what is going on in that case, and give a feedback to service users. I found myself learning of that sort of thing through engaging with other helping professions, like medical doctors and nurses. I have doubted why despite the fact that social workers are part of helping professions, social workers don't do the same thing as professions (FG).

Through comparing the way in which his fellow social workers practice with the way other helping professions do, Jun became aware of the fact that how “evidence” on which social workers based their practice can be uncertain. Jun’s description seems to well reflect his assumptions about the knowledge base that social workers should utilise in making judgments as professionals. In the light of learning, as discussed in the section of Chapter 4: *How do social workers address uncertainty in practice?*, Jun placed a high value on formal knowledge in that he quested for certainty with the model of intervention of the behavioural approach.

The findings suggest that consistent with international movements, formal knowledge was increasingly given precedence over informal knowledge in the context of Japanese social work—which required the social workers to base their practice on evidence in an explicit way to be accountable as professionals. These working environments led some of the social workers to have doubt about experiential knowledge that though being not evidence from scientifically established sources, they find useful and draw on in actual practice. They also described themselves as feeling guilty if they did not commit themselves to keeping their knowledge and skills up-to-date through professional development programmes. These seem to create a tension between what the social workers are expected to deliver as professionals by their organizations, professional associations and society, and what they put value on in day-to-day practice; that tension led them to feel uncertainty in the light of their role, as discussed in Chapter 4. As a result, that dissonance can have considerable implications for their way of being a social worker as well as the way in which they learn.

Informal knowledge

On the other hand, such a scientific knowledge base has been contested by many studies that have raised doubts about viewing expertise as directly applied scientific knowledge in actual practice. Those studies have challenged the centrality of scientifically established knowledge, highlighting the need to have a wider understanding of knowledge social workers use in making judgments in their everyday practice (Evans and Hardy, 2010; Parton, 2000; Payne, 2001; Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006; Sheppard, 1995; Webb, 2001). Here there seems to be the underlying assumption that the complex realities of practice can be distant from formal knowledge or theory. Professional practice draws on an intricate web of different kinds of knowledge, as Gray et al. (2009) put it: “Evidence is a form of knowledge. But... it is just that. Evidence is only one form of knowledge among many” (p.13). Practitioners base their practice not only on scientific knowledge but also knowledge derived from their professional and personal experiences in day-to-day practice. Eraut (1994: 54-55) highlights the need to broaden our views about a knowledge base of professionals:

Knowledge is still defined according to the criteria of the research community alone—as codified, published and public ... a much broader framework is needed for studying the creation of professional knowledge, and the situation looks very different if we move the academic research from the centre of the universe ... we should not underestimate the degree to which unsystematised personal experience affects the knowledge creation process.

This kind of knowledge has been called in different ways: “practical knowledge” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1987), “practice wisdom” (Scott, 1990), “professional artistry” (Schön, 1983), and “craft knowledge” (Calderhead, 1987) among others. Though there are differences among these concepts, all of them seem to represent that it is not only scientific knowledge but also different kinds of knowledge that professionals rely on in their actual practice. The informal knowledge—being derived from a diverse range of experiences including professional and personal experiences—is by its nature implicit, being difficult to be articulated. While the formal knowledge is placed an emphasis on making a rational judgment based on explicit evidence, the informal knowledge highlights the importance of “intuition” as a reliable knowledge source (Schön, 1983). As shown in the ongoing “science versus art” debate about the nature of social work, from the “science” perspective, practice-based knowledge that practitioners cumulate over their career are arguably overlooked as being subjective personal opinion or something about a possible bias in engaging in practice. On the contrary, the “art” perspective places a primary emphasis on practice-based knowledge as a valuable source of knowledge that social workers rely on. It can be argued that an art perspective has considerable relevance to the view that regards uncertainty as a significant resource for creativity as discussed earlier. In relation to the art perspective, Hugh England’s *Social Work as Art* (1986) is a standard reference. England argued that social work is an “artistic activity” in that social workers can be seen as an “artist” (p.83); he highlighted the importance of “intuitive use of self” through which they interpret the service users’ problems and bring about a positive effect on those. Here key to understanding this view is that there is a considerable emphasis on the “creative” or “artistic” aspects of professional practice—which involves human interaction between practitioners and service users that lies at the centre of professional role, as England put it: “The artists’ role is to be skilled in helping others experience meanings” (p.116). In this context, to develop a relationship with service users tend to be attributed to personal ability as professionals: “Good social workers know through their experience the value of their helping work with clients” (p.4).

Vignette 2: Tomoko & Takuya

In the following example of Tomoko, who had worked for mental health institution, she raised doubts about how her fellow social workers seemed to rely only on their practice experiences that they considered work well in their work setting:

When it comes to sort of expertise, it was just intuition that some co-workers relied on in practice. (...) They seem to put emphasis on the fact that they had been practicing in that way (FG).

This Tomoko's comment resonates with Takuya in his account about expertise as social workers.

When I started to work for the organization after qualifying as a social worker, there was one co-worker who had more practice experiences. His style of practice had a strong influence on our way of practice within the organization. In day-to-day practice, I found myself just following what that co-worker told us to do based on his own judgement. I would probably say that was how we practiced in the organization (FG).

Takuya described that co-worker as having a "charisma"—which implies that the co-worker was recognised as having a special "ability" to be creative in engaging in service users. These comments about expertise seem to reflect a strong emphasis on the value of social workers themselves in day-to-day practice, which can often lead to appealing to their "own" way of practice.

"Intuition" tends to come across as almost like "instinct", as one of the social workers noted that *"I'm wondering if it is an instinct that can have a meaningful impact on interaction with service users and carers"*. Putting an emphasis on intuition—allowing for make an interaction with service users creative—entails paying particular attention to practitioners' "intuitive use of self" (England, 1986), which as a result can follow that formal knowledge is placed less emphasis on. This can lead to what works and does not in practice being kept secret or "mysterious", as Takuya referred to as a "charisma", rather than being attempted to articulate. Shaw (2012) is critical of some ways in which writers have regarded the nature of social work practice as something artistic or aesthetic, referring to that as "the alchemy of intuitionism" (p.54). Shaw highlights the importance to recognise different kinds of tacit knowledge through reflective practice, in so doing "the significance of personal contact and practical knowledge sharing between social work practitioners will be brought out, and sources of trust and mistrust between social workers made clear" (p.54)—which may allow for avoiding a "romantic" view of informal knowledge. In considering further informal knowledge, the classic essay by Clifford Geertz (1983) on "common sense" will help us not to see informal knowledge in a romantic way. Geertz has argued that we should treat common sense as a cultural system which is "a relatively organized body of thought, rather than just what anyone clothed and in his right mind knows" (p.75). In order for a cultural system to be "empirically uncovered and conceptually formulated", there is a need to take "the peculiar

detour of evoking its generally recognized tone and temper, the untraveled side road that leads through constructing metaphorical predicates” (p.92).

Practical-moral knowledge

As discussed in the previous sections, the two kinds of knowledge—formal and informal knowledge—tend to be “either seen as competing or complementary” (Evans and Hardy, 2010: 114). When we see each form of knowledge as “competing”, our focus, as discussed in the previous section, is likely to be put more on that “which should take precedence in contested scenarios” (p.114). That stance not only inevitably draws critique from each of sides, but also may lead to a misrepresentation of the multidimensional activities social workers undertake in everyday working lives. It can be argued that the division between formal and informal knowledge is not sufficient to include all forms of knowledge within social work practice. There have increasingly been studies on expertise and knowledge for social workers, which highlight the need to have a wider understanding of the knowledge base of social workers (Evans and Hardy, 2010; Parton, 2000; Payne, 2001; Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006; Sheppard, 1995; Webb, 2001). In actual practice, it is not obvious which knowledge practitioners draw on as a basis of their judgments—as “research-based” and “practice based” knowledge is intertwined (Nilsen et al., 2012). Scourfield and Pithouse (2006) pointed out that social work practice is a mixture of “lay and professional knowledge” in an actual working context. They concluded that “the role of professional knowledge can be considerably less important in guiding practice than the way that professional and lay knowledge combine within organisational culture to impact on the lives of service users” (p.324). As such, regarding formal and informal knowledge as “complementary” rather than as “competing” may allow us to understand a diverse range of the knowledge base of social workers as it is. In this vain of studies, Pawson et al. (2003) have attempted to make different sources of knowledge for social work explicit, identifying the following five sources of knowledge:

- organisational knowledge derived from the management of social work and social care;
- practitioner knowledge from engaging in practice;
- policy community knowledge from wider policy context;
- research knowledge from relatively systematic inquiry into practice;
- user and carer knowledge from interaction with them and reflection on that experience.

This attempt seems to be helpful to understand a complex web of knowledge base social workers may utilise as a basis for their practice, unless we give precedence on either formal or informal knowledge in its extreme way.

Vignette 3: Tomoko & Takuya

The following examples of Tomoko and Takuya seem to illustrate well that they treated formal and informal knowledge as equally useful in their day-to-day practice. They attended the same focus group as Jun did. In the focus group, they discussed what kind of knowledge they employed in their day-to-day practice:

Though I recognise the need to use evidence as professionals, as Jun told right now, I don't find that we can just apply that evidence directly to our actual practice setting. Rather, while basing our practice on evidence, I find that how to approach a service user is relative to each of social workers. Looking back on about 10 years of my practice experiences, I would say that while I had learned evidence for practice improvement in various ways, I managed to develop my own way, for example, how to communicate with service users, as it were, using myself (Tomoko/FG).

These comments by Tomoko resonate with Takuya in his account about expertise as a social worker:

I find that when I make an intervention in practice, it is important to share something that can be based on with my colleagues. On the other hand, I have a feeling that I want to value my personality as a professional, in other words, the differences of the way of approach. Without sharing a base for intervention with my colleagues, I would say, about what sort of evidence is used, what goal we should work towards, and how to achieve that goal, our practice would go wrong (Takuya/FG).

Thus, some of the social workers seem to recognise the importance of utilizing formal and informal knowledge equally, though how they find a balance between those knowledge can be relative to each of the social workers. The findings demonstrate that the social workers developed a complex mix of different knowledge bases through a diverse range of learning experiences within their working context. It makes good sense that formal and informal knowledge are not something distinctive, but closely interrelated with each other through their learning experiences. It may be argued that practitioners see formal and informal knowledge as something “seamless” within themselves. Thus, the knowledge base of practitioners should be seen as a “holistic” entity with different nature of knowledge not competing but complementary, as Wilson et al. (2008) refer to as “a tangled web of knowledge” (p.99).

However, when we treat the knowledge base of social work practitioners as a holistic entity, the question still remains as to how they utilise their knowledge base in making judgements in a given practice situation. This point tends to be rendered implicit, as Tomoko noted:

I find it really important to imagine several possible scenarios in my mind in engaging with service users. I think the more experienced you are as a social worker, the more scenarios you can consider. So, we always draw a conclusion that it is, after all, practice experiences that have an impact on such scenarios within ourselves (FG).

Many participants in the study echoed Tomoko's comment, in that they tended to put a great emphasis on cumulated practice experiences in making judgements in day-to-day practice. As demonstrated in the section of findings, the social workers experienced different changes in understanding in a diverse range of opportunities—which had significant implications for their way of practice and further professional ways of being. It can be argued that practitioners bring themselves—not only being shaped through varying learning experiences but also continually changing through subsequent learning experiences—to their day-to-day practice. We cannot understand social work practice apart from who social workers are, that is, their professional ways of being. Here we need to recall that social work practice entails value-based judgement to different degrees in being faced with uncertainty embedded in everyday working lives. As discussed in chapter 4, when many of the social workers in the study faced conflict or tension between competing commitments, it concerned themselves with value-based judgements.

Vignette 4: Miyuki

In terms of such value-based judgements, the following reflective account was given by Miyuki, who had worked for a social care organization for older people as a care manager, whose role was to provide a community service for them in need:

I find that our assessment, as professionals, of how a service user meets death in the very last phase can be different to how a service user actually wants. That is just about a judgement we make as social workers in everyday practice. I have realised so strongly that sort of thing through one case of a terminal patient. In that case, a hospital made a suggestion to us that he might return to his house because he really wanted, but he would get back to the hospital probably not long after he have spent his time in his house, because he wouldn't be able to manage by himself. (...) He had no friends and family in that area, so we talked the matter over in our organization, like how we should work with him. He kept claiming that he wanted to stay at his own home very until his death. However, we really worried about, in our place, whether that can be really good for him. Then, one day before he passed away, he expressed his gratitude to each of us while he breathed with serious difficulty. That case made me think how I can support service users to meet death as a social worker (FG).

Miyuki described this case as one of the most influential learning experiences through her career in that: *“I am still wondering if our decision made that we should support him as much as possible without having him returning to the hospital was not wrong”* (FG). Here we can see a considerable tension between what she valued and what she considered was expected to deliver from the hospital over the way of support for the terminally ill patient. As such, social work practice can be intricately connected with value-based judgements to varying degrees—which can lead practitioners to find it challenging to achieve a balance between competing commitments in their working context.

In considering further moral aspect of judgement made by practitioners in day-to-day practice, the distinction between three kinds of knowledge made by Schwandt (1997) is useful: “knowing *that*” refers to theoretical knowledge—formal knowledge; “knowing *how*” represents knowledge of craft or skill—informal knowledge; “knowing *from*” is practical-moral knowledge (p.77). Knowing from is characterized by “choice, deliberation and ethical-practical judgement” (p.77), and “aims to actually move people, not simply to give them good ideas” (p.81). In this connection, Polkinghorne (2004) has developed an extended argument for understanding practice that involves value-based judgments in the caring professions through applying Dewey’s “theory of learning from practice”, while providing a thorough critique of the technical view of practicing care—in which a primary emphasis is put on explicit knowledge within the evidence-based practice movement in various fields. Polkinghorne highlights the importance of judgement in inter-personal interactions that is unstable and complex, noting that “value-relational” actions are carried out because “they are in themselves an expression of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other forms of value. They are done because they are the right thing to do, not because doing them is the way to achieve a predetermined end” (p.37). Polkinghorne argues that practitioners’ judgements need to be informed by “reflective understanding of the changing situations in which they are performed” (p.176). Reflective understanding involves:

An integration of previous personal and cultural learning, of imagined scenarios of responses to an action, and of emotional reading of possible actions in the situation. In reflective understanding the practitioner is attuned to the salient features of a specific situation and responsive to the nuanced changes that are occurring during an interchange (p.176).

Social work practitioners are required to make a decision in a complex situation where there is no single, straightforward and predetermined solution. Their practice is constituted from their understanding of a particular context and utilising their knowledge base according to that context. Formal knowledge can be often modified to fit a particular practice context in that it is combined with informal knowledge. Also, as shown in the above example of Miyuki, practitioners’ decisions made can entail moral or ethical aspects to a considerable degree especially in dealing with a tension between competing commitments in a working context. It can be argued that in a given situation how practitioners find a balance among different kinds of knowledge involves what they value, that is, their professional ways of being, as discussed so far. Takashi described himself as: “*What I find myself valuing as a social worker is that social work is something about art that is based on science and value. So, I see myself as a kind of artisan*” (FG). Glasby (2011) highlights a need of “a more inclusive and broader concept of ‘knowledge base practice’”; he notes that “seeking to combine insights from theoretical,

empirical and experiential sources may be one way of making different and better decisions about health and social care in the future” (p.96). Such an acknowledgement of the knowledge base can allow us to understand a diverse range of learning experiences described by the social workers in a holistic way as they learnt in their working context.

In this chapter, we have discussed the issues of uncertainty in being a social worker through relating the discussions in the literature to particular examples in the findings, and also what accounts for uncertainty through exploring the knowledge base of social work practitioners. How to deal with the issues of uncertainty entails the way in which practitioners utilise different forms of knowledge as resources in making judgements in their everyday practice—which can reflect their professional ways of being and shape their learning as social workers. In the next chapter, we will discuss a way forward to allow social workers to keep learning as professionals with a broader understanding about professional learning, which echoes the view of the knowledge base as a holistic entity with different forms of knowledge interrelated with each other.

Chapter 8

Finding a way forward: Professional learning as a way of being social worker

In this chapter, I discuss a way forward to support professional learning so that social workers can keep learning in their working context. In the first part, we consider a need of a broader understanding about professional learning, which reflects the knowledge base of social workers as a holistic entity as discussed in the previous chapter. The second part moves on to exploring ways in which we can encourage social workers to experience a change in understanding about their way of practice and further professional ways of being in their working context.

8.1 Towards professional learning as a way of being a social worker

In chapter 4, the social workers I talked to described themselves as being faced with a range of constraints in their working context—which involved the issue of uncertainty embedded in practice. As examined in the previous chapter, such constraints aiming for certainty can be seen in the language of accountability, in a way to take control of risk and error in ever-changing working environments. While practitioners are faced with an inherent uncertainty at different levels, their professional communities—which include workplaces, professional associations, and the state—tend to expect less uncertainty in practice in the light of accountability for decision made by them. Moves towards certainty also have considerable implication for professional development in a range of fields, as discussed in the section of literature review. In search of certainty in practice, professional development is increasingly taken as a means of regulating the way of practice; some research have suggested that issues of power and trust underlie increased regulation of professional development (Coffield, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). As such, in the quest for certainty, the dominant discourse tends to focus on the standardisation of practice and learning in order to ensure accountability as professionals—which can lead to the fact that the learning experiences valued by the social workers in the study are not necessarily congruent with the rhetoric about professional development employed by professional communities as revealed in the findings. The majority of the social workers noted that the professional development programme that they attended or needed to attend was dominated by the way in which instructors give didactic instruction on update knowledge, information and skills. Some of them described themselves as feeling uncomfortable with the underlying assumption of learning providers that regardless of their practice experiences they would be deficient as professionals. That assumption seems to cause them to discount such formal learning opportunities to different degrees, while putting

more value on informal learning opportunities such as a learning group organised by practitioners themselves. Other social workers described themselves as having experienced a considerable change in understanding about their way of practice and of being a professional through formal learning opportunities, as described in the examples of Hisa and Jun in Chapter 5. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 5, we need to remind ourselves of the fact that professional learning involves cumulative process over time. Even though in a formal learning opportunity the social workers did not find themselves learning something important associated with their practice at that point in time, the meaning of learning experience might change in hindsight in that they can realise what it makes sense to them, as described in the examples of Mari and Harumi in Chapter 5.

8.1.1 Need of a broader understanding of professional learning

Thus, the learning experiences provided by the social workers are not simple and straightforward but complex and diverse as repeatedly discussed in the study. This leads us to the need of viewing professional learning in a holistic way. Some authors have argued for the need of a broader understanding of professional learning (Dall'Alba, 2004; 2005; 2009; Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007; Sandberg and Dall'Alba, 2009; Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009; Webster-Wright, 2009). Dall'Alba (2009) has noted that the rhetoric about professional learning is primarily focused on an “epistemological” dimension which represents knowledge and skills, arguing that we need to move to a broader “ontological” dimension which implies “professional ways of being”—which tends to be overlooked in the discourse of professional learning. As Dall'Alba (2009) points out:

While knowledge and skills are necessary, they are insufficient for skilful practice and for transformation of the self that is integral to achieving such practice. When we concentrate our attention on epistemology (...) we fail to facilitate and support such transformation. A focus on epistemology occurs at the expense of ontological considerations (...)
(p.34-5)

Some authors have attempted to put different weight on the distinction between “doing” that entails knowledge and skills, and broader “ways of being”. Ewing and Smith (2001) go as far as to suggest:

As practitioners or people who are exploring practice, it is impossible for us to separate out who we are from what we do: we bring our beliefs and our already acquired knowing and understanding to our practice. Being is

embedded in our practice of doing and, through the doing, as practitioners we continue to become who we are (p.16).

Though those two dimensions of professional learning—doing and being—are expressed in different ways, both dimensions are inextricably interrelated in an actual working context. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, learning experiences described by the participants were closely interconnected with their ways of being a social worker. Their learning experiences are more of something that gains knowledge and skills. It can be argued that their ways of being a social worker is blended into with the background of each learning experience in that their professional ways of being shaped their learning, and vice versa. Here I would like to lay special emphasis on the need to take each dimension of professional learning as not competing but complementary. What and how practitioners learn can vary with who they are and what they value as professionals. As such, without setting each person's learning experiences in the context of their ways of being a social worker, we cannot understand their varied and complex learning. Through the interviews, each of the social workers drew different pictures of themselves as professionals. Here I illustrate how the social workers expressed their understanding of who they are as professionals and how their professional ways of being was interconnected with their learning, through using the example of Satoko and Yukio—both of whom had worked for the same sheltered workshop for those with learning disabilities. I draw on evidence from the interviews and observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Vignette 1: Satoko

In their organization, Satoko and Yukio, as social workers, got into small-scale manufacturing jobs with the service users—which included checking products to be delivered to business connections. Those jobs accounted for a large part of their job in their day-to-day practice. Satoko described herself as feeling it fairly challenging to engage in the part of manufacturing jobs:

Frankly speaking, I don't like involving in such a manufacturing job, so I find it difficult to maintain my motivation for that part of the job. (...) In the manufacturing job, we've got enormous workload putting a huge burden on us. I was tired of such a work setting in the earlier time of my practice experience (1-to-1).

Satoko remarked of her role in the organization as: “*I was wondering whether we were not social workers but just sort of manufacturing workers*” (1-to-1), which led her to reduce her motivation for the job itself as a social worker, and even to think of “*quitting my job many times, like almost every year*” (1-to-1). In such a working context, Satoko strove to maintain her motivation for her job in her own way:

Epecially when I am considering how to provide support for the service users, I find myself strengthening my motivation for my job. When I undertake the tasks related to the manufacturing jobs, I try to think of how service users can develop a part of their faculty, not the manufacturing jobs in themselves (1-to-1).

Her way of dealing with the challenging aspects of her role as a social worker that she was expected to deliver in the organization was to pay more attention to what approach would be useful to develop each service user's faculties in working on the manufacturing jobs. This awareness of her role prompted her to decide to attend a graduate school to learn about learning disabilities in more depth. Satoko placed a high value on improving knowledge of developmental psychology that she learnt in the graduate school in order to inform practice. Satoko described how her educational background in which she had majored in education for children with learning disabilities in her undergraduate career, had an impact on her understanding of way of practice as a social worker. Therefore, she *"had been thinking of the need to learn about learning disabilities and yet developmental psychology in more depth"* (1-to-1). Satoko described how her learning experiences in the graduate school had an influence on herself:

My fellow students were in a wide range of fields, including medicine, psychology, and education. I found myself learning a lot from the interaction with them. I probably think that experience in the graduate school helped me to widen my point view (1-to-1).

Satoko also described herself as experiencing a considerable change in her general point of view about life through subsequent learning experiences:

Through having worked as a social worker so far, I find it rewarding to gain various chances to grow as a person, in ways it makes me think about the fact that we live in a society. I mean, through the interaction with service users and carers, I've got chances to learn about how they live their lives, deal with problems they are faced with. What's more, that's led me to rethink about how I should live my own life. We could learn life itself through our job. I would probably say, that is what social work should be (1-to-1).

Satoko's comment seems to highlight that her sense of being is not only within the sphere of work but also of life. This should be placed alongside the example of Mari described in chapter 5, which shows that change in learning experiences can involve practitioners' lives outside their professional work; this makes it difficult to draw a boundary between "professional" and "personal" learning. As such, it can be argued that ways of being are not limited to professional identity as social workers, but entail a general sense of being.

Vignette 2: Yukio

On the other hand, Yukio—who was in charge of part of manufacturing jobs—described his role in the organization as: *"I found that we can't handle our job without understanding a sort of logic of a business"*, in that *"business firms never take our convenience into consideration, or I would say that is just their business"* (1-to-1). Their work was subcontracted by various

business firms which include a housing manufacturer and a traditional Japanese sweets company. Therefore, the organization needed to respond to the demands from those business firms. In such a working context, Yukio often needed to work overtime in order to deal with loads of work that included paperwork. Yukio found this kind of work challenging just like Satoko did, especially when he was inexperienced as a social worker. He illustrated how he dealt with such a challenging aspect of his job:

I find that service users with learning disabilities can make a contribution to our society through getting involved in a work, so we need to make goods which meet the certain standards set by business firms, so that those goods can be accepted and used in a business world. When I come to think of that fact, I find my work to have meaning to some extent, even though there are tons of paperwork related to quality control of products (1-to-1).

Thus, Yukio tried to accept a challenging part of his job through appreciating the value of something that manufacturing job can have. Yukio also noted what could enhance his motivation for engaging in manufacturing jobs:

I always try to think if I were a service user in the organization. What I mean by this is, I don't want to work for that low wages, so I want to work on raising service users' wages as much as possible (1-to-1).

His understanding of the importance of the manufacturing job caused him to reflect on his way of being a social worker. Yukio encapsulated the relationship between social workers and service users as: “*I often feel like we may be just co-workers for a service user, I mean, our existence can vary according to each service user*” (FG). As described in the example of Yukio in the section of findings, he found himself learning a lot through interacting with others in informal learning opportunities—who included not only helping professions, but also friends other than helping professions. Yukio described that such learning opportunities led to his assumptions about what he did and who he was as a social worker in his working context being challenged and questioned to considerable degrees. For Yukio, it can be argued that learning involves questioning his underlying assumptions about his way of practice as a professional. Such learning experiences led him to become aware of the aspect of “invisibility”, as discussed in Chapter 4, that tended to be embedded in social work practice. Yukio put a value on the need to “*properly appreciate one who does something that can be difficult to notice in everyday activities*” (1-to-1).

We can see the interesting differences between the examples of Satoko and Yukio in the light of how their ways of being a social worker are interrelated with their learning. Their learning experiences seem to show part of their assumptions about who they are and what they value not only as a professional but also as a person. Thus, the varying ways of being that was expressed in the interviews add rich colour to each of their learning experiences. It can be argued that each learning experience has a distinctive quality as an expression of who they

are as a social worker and further as a person in the interplay with their actual working context.

8.2 Supporting professional learning as a way of being a social worker

In the previous section, we have discussed that in order to address the dissonance between the rhetoric about professional development employed by professional communities and what social work practitioners value in learning, there is a need to extend our attention to broader ways of being as well as doing that entails knowledge and skills in related to different dimensions of professional learning. It can be argued that recognition of ways of being a social worker allows us to understand their varied and complex learning in a holistic way as practitioners learn in their day-to-day practice. In this section, through integrating the findings with arguments made in the previous sections, we examine the way forward for social workers to continue to learn as professionals in a working context.

8.2.1 Challenging assumptions underlying a way of practice

As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6 in the finding section, three components identified—*Experience, Opportunity, and Reflection*—are essential for professional learning to happen with each component inextricably interwoven. The social workers in the study described themselves as learning through their engagement in everyday activities with others in various ways. The findings show that for changes in understanding to occur in learning, assumptions underlying their way of practice and even of being a social worker need to be questioned and challenged to different extents. Sandberg (2001) has pointed out that in order to shift to a different professional understanding, professionals need to be involved in critical inquiry into previous understanding. In related to changes in learning, Day (1993) has noted that reflection is a “necessary but not sufficient condition”, arguing that “confrontation either by self or others must occur” (p.88). Here confrontation may be referred to as question or challenge. As discussed in Chapter 6, some of the social workers noted that though they found it comfortable to communicate with their colleagues within their work settings, they often felt dissatisfied when they discussed a case in a meeting since they did not get different perspectives on their way of practice. They described that what they learnt through such a discussion was something that they can expect in a routinised way. It can be argued that they tend to find themselves learning nothing significant as professionals in a learning opportunity unless their taken-for-granted assumptions are foregrounded and challenged to different degrees. On the other hand, the findings demonstrate that what counted as learning experiences where they considered their assumptions were questioned and challenged varied differently; what counts as learning experiences is something that is an individual

construct and interpreted differently in their own working context. This seems to drive us to the question in what ways their assumptions about their ways of practice can be questioned and challenged.

Noticing

In considering the question, the notion of “noticing” (Mason, 2002; Witkin, 2000) seems to be useful though relatively few attempts have so far been made at it. Noticing can be a taken-for-granted activity in our daily lives. We notice something that is going on around us by using all five senses, and then respond to what we have noticed. However, it is almost impossible to notice all aspects of things in a given situation. It can be said that what is noticed would be part of things around us—there can be other aspects of things that we might have failed to notice. In that way, noticing is something about an open-ended activity. In the light of professional practice, Mason (2002) distinguishes between three levels of noticing: *ordinal noticing, marking, and recording*. Ordinal noticing refers to something that one can remember when prompted by someone’s remark on it or something related to it. Marking as “a heightened form of noticing” entails “a high level of energy, of commitment, because it requires more than casual attention” (p.33); it involves remarking upon what one has noticed to someone else. Recording involves making a note of something that one has noticed. Noticing involves complex multidimensional activities, in that what we notice, make sense of what we have noticed, and how we respond to that interpretation are interrelated with each other. Mason highlights that “it is almost too obvious to say that what you do not notice, you cannot act upon; you cannot choose to act if you do not notice an opportunity” (p.7). Furthermore, referring to the notion of noticing explored by Mason, Loughran (2006) points out the close relationship between noticing and reflection:

A most important issue that he [Mason] raises relates to the point that if something is not noticed, then it is unlikely that a response will be forthcoming. Therefore, that which is noticed, how and why, carries influence not only on the nature of reflection but also on the action(s) as a result of reflection (p.46).

Loughran also argues that the purpose of reflection could have an influence on that which is noticed. Thus, what professionals notice can have considerable implications for practice at various levels. The question now seems to arise about what can be noticed in a practice situation. It may be argued that what can be noticed can reflect what professionals bring to a situation. As discussed so far, practitioners bring their broader ways of being—which is shaped through a diverse range of experiences—to their day-to-day practice. Their ways of being can significantly influence what is noticed and frame a resultant response in an actual

working context. Witkin (2000) has highlighted that “noticing involves extracting something from context (although the extracting process too is contextual)” (p.102); he goes on to say that noticing entails:

An intertwined, interdependent relationship between what is noticed and various contexts. Intelligibility depends on the contexts assumed, their compatibility with culturally recognized explanations, and understandings of what is possible within those contexts (p.103).

What is noticed can be influenced to a considerable degree by cultural values. Therefore, it can change in a context within which professionals notice. What professionals need is to acknowledge the importance of context in noticing and to be aware of what they bring to a practice situation in relation to their ways of being.

Here we may recall the example of Toshie described in chapter 4, who had worked for a community support centre for the disabled. Toshie described herself as becoming aware of the fact that her judgement was considerably influenced by her underlying assumptions; that awareness led to her way of practice being challenged and questioned. Her awareness of the fact that what she can notice might be a small part of something about a case she engaged in made her uneasy with herself as a social worker. That is because what she has not noticed can have a negative influence on her resultant practice. Practitioners rely on their underlying assumptions—which can be shaped within their working context—as a basis for making judgments in day-to-day practice. Practitioners’ assumptions underlying their way of practice can have a considerable implication for what they notice and how they make sense of what they have noticed in a practice situation. Here the notion of “marking” identified by Mason (2002) seems to offer the key to a further understanding of noticing. Mason highlights the importance of remarking upon what one notices to someone in order to be aware of what it is that which he or she has noticed. As demonstrated in the section of findings, engaging with others in a broad range of opportunities can help them to enhance their noticing in that they recognise what they have noticed and have not noticed, or what others may notice. As Witkin (2000) points out:

(...) What we notice may not be clear until after we speak about it. We need others to help us make sense out of what we thought we saw. Thus, rather than being an individual activity, noticing is relational (p.103).

The findings demonstrate that through interacting with others—for instance, by talking, watching and working with them, the social workers got a chance to look at their practice from different perspectives. Through those opportunities, their taken-for-granted

assumptions about themselves—their feeling, thoughts, and values—were questioned and challenged in various ways, which led them to “frame and reframe” (Schön, 1983) that which they thought they noticed in a given situation. In those learning experiences, the importance of engaging with others cannot be overemphasised. Witkin (2000) notes that “we need not only to create space for other voices and perspectives but that we need to find ways to shift our own standpoint so that we may notice differently” (p.104). Through actively engaging with others in a diverse range of opportunities, practitioners could see different possibilities of something in a practice situation, in that they become aware of the limits of their own noticing and expand what they can notice—which can lead to informed practice judgements in their own working context.

There is one more thing to note in terms of noticing. The time when noticing happens varies differently for each practitioner. As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, professional learning entails continuous process without any starting and ending point. Through their career as professionals, the social workers in the study related one experience to another among a diverse range of cumulative experiences. It is not only within the action present that noticing can happen. The findings reveal that retrospective noticing can have an influence on what the social workers thought they had noticed in a given situation, in that they saw the same situation in a different way to the one in which they had done. It can be argued that this is in parallel with the distinction between near-simultaneous reflection in practice and post hoc reflection on practice made by Schön (1983) and others (Loughran, 1996). Retrospective noticing can involve an interaction between a past and present self, which is ongoing over their career as social workers. Thus, noticing can be something “intrapersonal” as well as “interpersonal”.

Vignette 3: Satoko

Here let us return to the example of Satoko. As described in the previous section, while finding knowledge and skills that she gained in the graduate school to be useful to support service users with learning disabilities, Satoko described herself as feeling challenged when applying those to service users and carers in her day-to-day practice, as expressed in the following words:

One lives his or her life at his or her own pace, so there would be no meaning if I made a suggestion which seems to me helpful for service users and carers, unless I appreciate that fact. From my point of view as a professional, I just tend to feel like helping service users to develop their abilities, but it can be the case that they find my idea just self-satisfied depending on a situation (1-to-1).

Through engaging with service users and carers in her working context, Satoko was challenged her assumption about her way of practice and yet professional way of being.

Furthermore, those learning experiences brought about an extensive change to her understanding of way of being a social worker:

Social workers can play multiple roles in a range of settings. That can be a strong point we should develop more (...) Thanks to that kind of shift in my thinking about the role of social workers, I've got to enjoy my work and become aware of the fact that we carry out a greater job than we expect. I would say that I got to appreciate fully our daily routine. I strongly felt that my attitude toward my work has greatly changed (1-to-1).

Thus, taking a different look at her role as a social worker led her to stay motivated for the part of her job involving the manufacturing that she had underestimated. Through subsequent learning experiences in various opportunities, her professional way of being was being shaped. In this way, as retrospective noticing happens, practitioners can engage in an ongoing dialogue between a past and present self through interaction with others in a diverse range of opportunities.

8.2.2 Dialogue in a supportive relationship

Having discussed the importance of noticing in professional learning, the following section addresses the ways in which we can encourage social work practitioners to experience a change in understanding about their way of practice and even professional way of being. As noted in the previous section, active engagement with others can act as an impetus for social workers to notice something in a practice situation from different perspectives, though noticing does not necessarily depend on engagement with others; noticing can be triggered by other things such as reading a book. There has been a large body of literature confirming the social nature of learning, as examined in Chapter 2. In relation to professional learning, many researchers in various fields have pointed out how working with others not only at work but also beyond work—which is across fields and disciplinary—can have a significant influence on learning (Devos, 2004; McCormack et al., 2006; Reeves et al., 2002). However, interacting with others in a range of opportunities does not necessarily lead to practitioners' ways of practice being questioned and challenged and further cause them to experience a change in understanding as they value in learning as professionals. As shown in Chapter 6, some of the social workers I spoke to described themselves as facing difficulty to different degrees in sharing their experiences openly in their own work settings. They tended to feel afraid to share their concerns with their colleagues and/or supervisors, as the following excerpt of Akira demonstrates:

Though I grumbled at some of my colleagues about my work, I didn't tell about something about my feelings like the dilemma I was faced with, especially in a case meeting at my workplace. (...) In such a case meeting, I tried not to express my feelings (1-to-1).

This was echoed by other social workers differently in that they felt uncomfortable interacting with others in an unsupportive environment, as starkly highlighted in the following example of Tomoko:

In the case discussion, I sometimes shed tears because of being criticised for my way of practice by the colleagues. So, I find myself hesitating to discuss the case I work on. (...) I really want my workplace to change so that we feel easier to discuss with each other (FG).

Those experiences in which she was harshly criticised by her colleagues made her hesitate to express herself openly in her workplace. Many of the social workers seemed to find talking about the case that goes wrong to be likely that they are regarded as being “incompetent” as professionals by their colleagues and/or supervisors. With regard to a supervisory relationship in workplaces, Hughes (2002) highlights the “burden of trust” as asymmetrical, in that “staff must prove their trustworthiness” to supervisors by showing themselves to be competent (p.64). The need to prove own trustworthiness as professionals may make it difficult for practitioners to express themselves in an open way.

Furthermore, we must draw attention to the wider context of dissonance in an ever-changing professional world discussed in the previous chapter; the dissonance involves the way to view and address the issues of uncertainty embedded in day-to-day practice. In terms of the contemporary context for university teachers, Davies (2003) noted that a climate of increasing surveillance aimed at controlling uncertainty and risk can lead them to question their work and even value as professionals. As discussed in Chapter 4, many of the participants described themselves as feeling discouraged when what they value as professionals in their work and learning seemed to be discounted by not only their organizations but also professional associations and universities. In such a tension that social work practitioners face in their day-to-day practice, it can be difficult for them to share their various experiences with others in an open way—which may be likely to lead to a resulting negative impact on their learning in a way that they lose the opportunities to notice something associated with their practice in different ways. As shown in the example of Harumi in Chapter 6, she described herself as getting to notice her feeling of fear about her challenging case that she had not become aware of in her work setting, through interacting with the researcher as an outsider in a supportive relationship. As discussed in the previous section, seeing their practice from different perspectives may require practitioners’ taken-for-granted assumption about themselves— their feeling, thoughts, and values as professionals—to be challenged and questioned to varying degrees. However, the findings demonstrate that the participants found it difficult to express themselves openly with others in an unsupportive climate. In order for practitioners not to feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences with others, there is a need for a culture of support and trust in their wider working context, rather than control and trustworthiness. In discussing professional learning

for teachers, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) highlight the importance of trust as “the bedrock of professional collegiality” in sharing their concerns (p.31). A supportive relationship built on trust may encourage practitioners to engage with others actively and express themselves openly. As such, it can be argued that practitioners need to be both supported and challenged so that they can be open to different possibilities of their practice.

Critical dialogue

The question then arises as to in what ways “supportive challenge”, as it were, can be possible in an actual working context. Some researchers have emphasised the importance of the combination of challenge and support in learning in different ways by using the notion of “critical friendship”; involving action learning (McGill and Beaty, 2001), learning through reflection on critical incidents (Tripp, 1993), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Titchen (2000; 2001) also suggests the conceptual framework of “critical companionship”, involving the combination of “high challenge” and “high support” for facilitating learning from experiences at work (Titchen, 2000: 123). It may be argued that in a trusting relationship practitioners can engage in “critical dialogue” (p.123)—which can prompt them to reflect on their assumptions at different levels without feeling afraid to be judged as professionals. Here “dialogue” seems to offer the key to an understanding of the ways in which to have underlying assumptions challenged can be compatible with being supportive in learning relationships. In highlighting the importance of dialogue, Witkin (2007) points out the difference between criticism and critique: “Whereas criticism suggests finding fault or judging harshly, critique implies analysis and evaluation” (p.14). Witkin refers to dialogue as “the means we use to generate the conceptual shift that characterize transformation” (p.13). Dialogue can involve practitioners exposing their underlying assumptions—which may help them to increase the awareness of their own noticing. As demonstrated in the above example of Akira and Tomoko, their experiences where they were criticised in their work settings prevented them from engaging in dialogue, in that they were discouraged from expressing themselves in an open way. In order to make dialogue constructive, there seems to be a need to provide not “criticism” but “critique” in learning relationships. Witkin (2007) suggests the practice of “problematization” as a way of developing critique:

To problematize is not to take for granted what is taken for granted, but to treat such beliefs and assumptions as ways of understanding that have gained a status that renders them relatively impervious or invisible to critique (p.14).

Here we notice that critical dialogue involves reflecting on a wider issue that can have implications for day-to-day practice. Critical dialogue can serve to promote change rather

than maintaining the status quo. As discussed in Chapter 6, the social workers in the study put emphasis on getting different ways of understanding that can lead to different possibilities of their practice at different levels. To increase awareness of multiple ways of seeing something in practice can allow practitioners to broaden their scope for possibilities available in an actual working context. As such, it can be argued that through engaging in critical dialogue, practitioners can seek to enhance a range of possibilities that could lead to changing their day-to-day practice in different ways.

A diverse web of learning relationships

We have discussed that in order to experience a change in understanding as social work practitioners, there is a need to have their underlying assumptions about practice challenged and questioned through critical dialogue in supportive learning relationships. The question that we need to consider in this final section is in what ways practitioners engage in critical dialogue in their working context. As discussed in Chapter 5, learning relationships with others through which the social workers experienced varying changes in understanding were significantly different to each of them according to their learning needs. Titchen (2000) notes that learning through “critical companionship” can be facilitated through not only more experienced practitioners but also peers. This point is supported in my study and that of others (Fuller and Unwin, 2004b). As described in Chapter 5, the participants found themselves learning as professionals through actively engaging with not only more experienced practitioners but also their peers across professional boundaries. Boud et al. (2001) refer to learning relationships with peers as a “network”—which can be flexible, rather than fixed in a working context. In this study, according to each of the social workers, learning relationships with others took various forms in a diverse range of opportunities. Many of the participants got involved in learning groups organised by fellow practitioners beyond their own work settings. Some of them described that their way of practice and even their professional way of being were challenged and questioned by interacting with a group of friends who are not professionals. Moreover, other social workers used social media such as “Twitter” and “Facebook” to share their experiences with others. Thus, it can be argued that supportive challenge can be possible across not only boundaries of “novice” and “expert” but also boundaries of “professionals” and “non-professionals”, and even of “real” and “virtual”. It should also be noted that learning relationships are not limited to people, but can even include inanimate objects. As described in Chapter 6, some of the social workers engaged in an inner dialogue through reading books in different genres. In the example of Harumi as discussed, a “code of ethics” can allow for prompting her to reflect on her practice. In this study, relationships that prompted their learning entail a rich and complex mix of interactions in various learning opportunities. It may be argued that learning relationships can entail interacting with not only others but also inanimate objects.

How should we interpret these diverse learning relationships? Can we use the word, for example, communities or networks to represent the learning relationships? There are different words used to refer to learning relationships in professional learning: learning networks (Koper et al., 2005); learning communities (Ferguson et al., 2009; Wood, 2007); knowledge communities (Hakkarainen et al., 2004); communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) among others. Learning relationships could be something that are built as an intricate web. Practitioners cultivate such a web of learning relationships over their career in their working context, which can vary according to their needs as professionals. This seems to reflect what Wilson et al. (2008) describe “a tangled web of knowledge” (p.99) that practitioners utilise in making judgments in day-to-day practice, as discussed in the previous chapter. When we see the knowledge base of practitioners as a holistic entity with different nature of knowledge interrelated, it makes good sense that a web of learning relationships developed can be something complex and diverse, rather than simple and straightforward. In this study, some of the participants used a word in Japanese that is close to or a direct translation of the idea of a “network”—which Kadushin (2012) defines as “a set of relationships” (p.14). Mari described her informal professional network that she had built in her working context according to her needs:

Through various opportunities, I have built up sort of a professional network. (...) I try to ask for help to someone in that network. For example, when I've got something unfamiliar in practice, I ask someone who is familiar with it for help. Alternatively, I try to get any feedback to a case from a person who I find has different perspectives from what I can notice. That is how I have addressed issues in practice (FG).

In another example of Harumi, she organised an informal learning meeting among fellow social workers in order to “*discuss an uncomfortable feeling in practice and also build an informal network*” (1-to-1). She also described herself as using Facebook actively to share something about her practice with a range of people beyond her work setting, as described in Chapter 6. Though I have not made network theory a central theme of my thesis, there is an extensive literature on network theory: social network theory (Freeman, 1978; 2004); actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005). Actor-network theory (ANT) associated with Latour, provides a broad understanding of learning. Fenwick (2009) presents its key idea as follows:

ANT takes knowledge generation to be a joint exercise of relational strategies within networks that are spread across space and time and performed through inanimate—e.g. books, mobile phones, measuring instruments, projection screens, boxes, locks—as well as animate beings in precarious arrangements. Learning and knowing are performed in the process of assembling and maintaining these networks, as well as in the negotiations that occur at various nodes comprising a network (p.8).

In ANT, networks are considered to link people with inanimate objects “equally”, which draw criticism that social nature of people’s knowledge—in a way that knowledge is constructed through interaction between individuals and social/organizational construction—is overlooked (Bloor, 1999; Collins, 1998). As Collins (2010) puts it: “knowledge-constructing networks were to be seen as metaphysically symmetrical, humans no longer having the central role” (p.166). In the above examples of Mari and Harumi, they seem to make a claim—at least by implication—that their professional network is something that an individual practitioner can purposefully “build” in a working context. In the professional network, they seem to place themselves in some sort of central position in such a professional network. In the study of social network theory, the concept of “centrality” has been important in an attempt of measuring a network though there are different ways of measurement (Freeman, 1978; Freeman et al., 1979). Kadushin (2012) characterises centrality as: “some nodes have more connections than others and those connections serve as links to other nodes” (p.27). As it seems that to inquire further into the issue of social network analysis would involve us in other factors than learning relationships and would take us beyond the scope of this study, I do not want to go into the details for the moment.

Within an intricate web of learning relationships, the social workers share their diverse experiences with each other—which can allow them to link their own experiences with others’, or to link one experience with another one among their various cumulative experiences. Such interactions can be a trigger to their underlying assumptions about practice being challenged and questioned—which can lead them to see their way of practice and further professional ways of being from different perspectives. It can be argued that changes in understanding through learning are relational, in that one change can bring about another one in a web of learning relationships—which can be fluid according to their changing needs. In that way, support for learning should necessarily be flexible and diverse, rather than fixed and simple. Their diverse ways in which the social workers continue to learn seem not to be able to be standardised or controlled. There is a need for practitioners to have more professional autonomy so that they can develop a web of learning relationships in their own way, rather than imposing on them. As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, while many of the social workers expressed their discomfort with the dissonance between learning expectations from their workplaces and professional associations, and what they value as professionals, they dealt with it in their own ways in their working context. Coffield (2007) has argued that more attention needs to be drawn to professional self-regulation rather than increased standardisation for organizational change in the discourse of professional learning. Recognising the wider implications that learning can have for practitioner themselves, it is important to put more value on diversity and complexity in learning rather than bringing

learning under control in today's changing working environments, where as discussed repeatedly they need to demonstrate professional accountability for evidence and outcomes.

In the final chapter, Conclusion, we consider the ways to bridge the gap between actual learning experiences valued by the social workers and learning expectations from professional communities in the context of Japanese social work. Also, I will examine the limits of the study and further research to be carried out in order to further our understanding of professional learning as a way of being social workers.

Chapter 9

Conclusion: Open window into professional learning

In this final chapter, I start by reviewing the main arguments of the study. Then, I discuss the ways to make a difference to professional learning in the context of Japanese social work, finally examining the limits of the study and further research to be done.

9.1 Review of the study

This study has examined how the social workers in a range of social work agencies and settings, who had around ten years of practice after they had qualified, continue to learn as professionals in the context of Japanese social work. This study sought to develop an understanding of complex and diverse learning as experienced by the participants over their career as social workers, through employing the qualitative research strategy which involved qualitative interviews—focus groups and one-to-one interviews—to explore the perceptions and views of them about professional learning, and also observation work to examine what actually happens in different learning opportunities in which they were involved. I also conducted the research with the intention of participatory inquiry in ways that organised the research team—which consisted of experienced social workers. The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of professional learning from the perspectives of social work practitioners in a holistic way, while many studies on professional learning have often focused on specific factors or categories that can affect learning in a range of fields as discussed in Chapter 2.

The findings from this empirical study have shown that talking about actual learning experiences—that the participants considered had significantly affected them—prompted to reflect on their way of being a social worker, or to recall their past reflection on it; that the challenges and struggles they confronted were closely related to their professional ways of being. We cannot understand their learning unless we set each person's learning experiences in the context of their way of being a social worker. The participants saw their learning as something about changes in their understanding in varying ways. Though those perspective changes in learning varied widely depending on their learning situation, three components of professional learning have been identified that can lead to such changes in their understanding: *Experience*; *Opportunity*; and *Reflection*. *Experience* describes how professional learning involves the interconnection of cumulative background experiences that they had—which can include both within their professional work and outside. What counts as a learning *Opportunity* can vary considerably according to them. It makes good

sense to treat such various opportunities not as distinct ones but as a unified entity. *Reflection* involves them in seeing practice from different perspectives in a range of opportunities, in a way that their taken-for-granted assumption is challenged—which may lead to new possibilities that can make their practice different in their working context. These three components are not entirely distinct from each other, but inextricably interwoven.

Through this study, discussions have been made on what is valued by social work practitioners and professional communities—that include organizations, professional associations, and universities—and also what matters in practice and learning in an actual working context. The findings reveal that there is the significant gap between what the social workers value in learning and what is expected from professional communities. Within various constraints of their working context, the social workers tried to seek a balance between them in their own way, which shaped their diverse and complex learning experiences. As discussed in the literature review, many discussions about professional development (PD) in a range of fields of practice have tended to take diverse aspects of professional learning as something that is separated, although some attempts have been made to treat them as something that is linked. The dominant discourse in PD tends to focus on ensuring professional accountability for their performance with measurable standards in today's ever changing working environments. Maintaining these standards involves professionals attending PD programmes whether obligatory or not. In the name of efficiency, the diverse and complex experience of learning as professionals has not been thoroughly examined. In this context, reference has been made to the tensions between certainty and uncertainty, formal and informal knowledge, or performativity and value in a life-world of social work practitioners. The implications of these tensions embedded in everyday practice need to be given careful attention in the discourse of professional learning. This study empirically shows that continuing to learn is interrelated with a day-to-day experience of being a social worker. Much of the rhetoric about PD is not consistent with the actual learning experiences described by the social workers—which cannot be controlled and standardised. It can be argued that taken-for-granted assumptions about professional learning have not been openly challenged and questioned among social workers and professional communities in the context of Japanese social work. In the next section, I devote a little more space to considering the ways to bridge the gap between actual learning experiences valued by the social workers and the rhetoric about PD.

9.2 Sharing and voicing diverse learning experiences

Over the past decades, a number of studies have been undertaken to highlight that professional learning entails informal and incidental aspects. As discussed in Chapter 2, much research has shown that professionals learn a lot through their day-to-day practice at work.

In spite of these numerous attempts made by scholars in a range of fields, traditional professional development activities—that centre on delivery of information updates—remain in the middle of professional learning in the context of Japanese social work. This seems to be mirrored in the following example of Ko:

In terms of the word of 'learning', there seemed to me to be a difference between what we have in our mind and what you have in your mind. I would say that when we think of learning, we tend to link it directly to attending professional development programmes. (...) I found myself getting aware of that I had taken learning in a narrow way. (...) I am wondering if something that brought about changes in me in day-to-day practice can be referred to as 'learning' (1-to-1).

This was expressed as he reflected on his experience in the focus group—it shows that his experience in the focus group led him to notice not only his but also other participants' taken-for-grounded assumptions about learning. Summed up well by Ko, for many of the social workers the word "learning" tended to represent formal learning such as PD programmes—in which what and how is learnt are often predetermined, rather than various informal learning opportunities—where they described themselves as experiencing changes in their understanding at varying levels. This seems to suggest that the gap between lived experiences of learning and the rhetoric about professional development tends to be hidden, or is shared only among trusted fellow practitioners—which led to their rich learning experiences being underestimated not only by professional communities, but also by social workers themselves. Many of the social workers described themselves as expressing their concerns about day-to-day practice only between trusted colleagues—for example, during a coffee break or after work—or between trusted fellow practitioners beyond their own organizations in informal opportunities such as a learning group. It may be argued that such situations have prevented the gap between lived experiences of learning and the rhetoric about PD from being highlighted in professional communities. The diverse and complex learning as experienced by social workers has remained underrepresented in the discourse of professional learning. Therefore, there is a need to share and voice their lived experiences of learning among social workers, organizations, professional associations—which can allow transfer of the disparity in professional learning from "private" to "public". Brookfield (1995) criticised the culture of silence, individualism and secrecy which can be barriers in critical reflection in the teaching profession (p.247-251). In this study, many of the social workers noted that participation in the interviews themselves became a learning experience in a way that gave them an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences and notice their taken-for-grounded assumptions about learning through interaction with others, as shown in the above example of Ko. Other social workers also spoke about their experience of the interviews as follows:

Through sharing each participant's learning experiences, I find myself thinking more about learning (Takashi/FG);

Although I thought myself as having worked so far while reflecting on my experiences in my own way, talking my learning experiences in the interviews allowed me to notice things in different ways. So I find this a good opportunity to reflect on my career (Mayumi/I-to-1);

Through sharing with other participants who work in different organizations and fields, I find myself noticing that what I thought I was aware of is just the way of looking we are used to in my organization (Toshie/FG).

These comments seem to be good examples that reflexive work was undertaken through the interviews. As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of reflexivity involves a critique of reflection, aiming to expand its scope by taking into account contextual factors that have an implication for subjective understanding and action in practice. The above examples including the one of Ko show that becoming aware of the varying ways in which learning is experienced can allow social work practitioners to see their experiences from different perspectives. Furthermore, reflexivity can lead them to initiate changes which would be achievable in their own working context, as Hager and Halliday (2006) see reflexivity as a possible “antidote to paralysis” (p.232). Some of the participants noted that sharing concerns about learning expectations from professional communities with their fellow practitioners prompted them to organise a learning group beyond their own work settings, in order to meet their learning needs that were not satisfied in their own work settings. To share awareness of diverse and complex learning experiences can be a first step in making a difference to professional learning in the context of Japanese social work. For changes to be triggered, social work practitioners need to be encouraged to share and voice their everyday realities openly in professional communities—which may involve them talking about concerns and anxieties as frontline practitioners in diverse ways. This may require learning providers—such as managers in organizations and professional associations—to understand how such a learning takes place, and also to put in place arrangements that do not obstruct such initiatives by practitioners—which can lead to organizational and professional culture being transformed where the diverse ways in which social work practitioners continue to learn are valued.

Also, alternating voices about practice and learning should be shared and valued not only in organizations and professional associations, but also in universities. As discussed in Chapter 4, many of the participants highlighted the gap between what they learnt in universities and what they experienced in their everyday practice as social workers. Though pre-qualifying education has not been a theme of this study, in order to bridge the gap there is a need to share everyday realities openly that social workers face in a working context between students, social workers and educators. That can lead each of them to see practice and learning from different perspectives. Such a learning culture—where assumptions about practice and learning are exposed—could encourage professional growth over a career as a

social worker. I have used the word “open window” in the subtitle of this chapter, in the sense that there cannot be a one size fits all way of professional learning, but rather there ought to be various possibilities that are opened up as social workers explore their professional way of being over their career. In order to make professional learning different and diverse as the social workers value, it is important to allow a window as a way of learning to be open in that practitioners can pursue their own learning path within their working context.

9.3 Discussion on methodology

I conclude this final section with an evaluation of the limits of the study, following by suggesting further research to be undertaken in order to contribute to a better understanding of professional learning for social workers.

9.3.1 Limits of the study

Before turning to the task, it will be useful to make a distinction between “limits” and “limitations” of a study—which are often used interchangeably. While the former refers to proper boundaries to the extent of what we do and say about a study, the latter are more like faults. Here I use the word limits in the sense that how confident we are that a research can answer questions. Though any study can have both limits and limitations, in what follows I discuss several limits that the findings in this study are subject to.

First, the participants of the study, as discussed, were a total of 26 experienced social workers who had around ten years of practice after they had qualified. While this is a small-scale study, a range of kinds of social workers was recruited for the interviews in terms of age, practice experience, service specialism, agencies and settings. As the participants were all volunteers, it may be noted that the study was directed primarily towards those who were interested in learning as professionals. All the participants seemed to be enthusiastic in learning; therefore, there was no participant who openly expressed disinterest in learning. They were fairly motivated to talk about their learning experiences in the interviews. They also may have decided to attend the interviews since they had felt some concerns over professional development activities that they undertook in their own work settings.

Secondly, as discussed, I used to work for KISWEC which was the main research setting in this study. Therefore, through my working experiences in KISWEC, some of the participants were known well to the researcher. This researcher’s background might have positive and negative implications for the interviews. My familiarity with their organizations, professional development programmes and learning groups that they attended enabled the researcher to have a close dialogue with the participants and further to be aware of issues of relevance for them. On the other hand, such a familiarity might have hindered the researcher from proving

carefully into their learning experiences in the interviews—which might have led to their underlying assumptions about learning being not closely questioned. While I was transcribing the recordings of the interviews, I often found myself noticing my assumptions about something related to what the participants talked in that there might have been other ways of questioning the language used by the participants. To take a simple example, one participant whom I had known well distinguished different kinds of role that she served in her work setting by using the word of “direct care” and “interviewing or counselling”. When I was interviewing her, I assumed that I knew what those simple and familiar words meant and so did not probe into them. The meaning of the words might have been understood not in the same way between the participant and the researcher. With regard to the role of researchers in relation to research participants, White (2001) argued how through her research process her role transformed from insider to outsider. As discussed in Chapter 4, I got involved in the study as an “outsider in collaboration with insider(s)” on the continuum of positionality suggested by Herr and Anderson (2005). Through the process of research, I found myself getting to see things with fresh eyes as an outsider.

Thirdly, concerning the research methods employed, this study is based on the three qualitative methods: focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and observations. As discussed in Chapter 3, the method of observation was used to examine the occurrence of learning as it happens. The observation provided rich data in a way that allowed for complementing the interview data and examining what actually encouraged and discouraged professional learning within a working context. On the other hand, it may be argued that the data presented in the study relies largely on the interview data. Interviews are heavily dependent on what the participants say that they do—interviews involve their capacity to understand, construct and explain their learning experiences. Also, as Rubin and Rubin (2011) note, the meaning of an experience is constructed or reconstructed through the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Though the interviews have an authentic meaning, the meaning entails the time and place that the interviews were conducted to a considerable degree. Therefore, it needs to be noted that the findings of the study have limited applicability in a wider context. However, as many scholars argue, the aim of qualitative research is “not to generalize about the *distribution* of experiences but to generalize about the *nature* and interpretive processes involved in the experiences” (Rice and Ezzy, 1999: 42) [original italics]. As Geertz (1973) speaks much of this, “The essential task of theory building ... is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick descriptions possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them” (p. 26). He suggests that this is exactly like the process of clinical inference; he highlights that: “The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured, facts” (p. 28). I believe that the findings have a good grasp of

the holistic nature of learning experiences of the social workers in the context of Japanese social work.

Lastly, as discussed in Chapter 3, the data was analysed employing thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to interrogate the stories of the participants' learning experiences as social workers without breaking their stories into small chunks. While I tried to use longer quotes in order to preserve the sense of their narratives, because of the restriction on space there has been much data left unreported. In analysing their narratives, I paid careful attention to what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) call "indigenous coding"—that is, categories of meaning that the participants gave to their learning experiences in the interviews. However, it should be acknowledged that my assumptions about professional learning can have an implication for the way I interpreted the data. Schutz (1970) made a distinction between "first-order constructs" which refers to participants' statements in research, and "second-order constructs" which is something about interpretation that a researcher offers; he noted that first-order constructs should be transformed into second-order constructs:

Each term in ... a scientific model of human action must be constructed in such a way that a human act performed within the real world by an individual actor as indicated by a typical construct, would be understandable to the actor himself, as well as to his fellow-men in terms of commonsense interpretation of everyday life (p.62).

As such, the relationship between the two can be difficult. It cannot be denied that there are other possible ways of interpreting the learning experiences described by the participants. I hope that the lived learning experiences presented here will allow the readers to explore "a horizon of possible meanings" of them (Kvale, 1996)—which can lead to further our understanding of professional learning as a ways of being social workers.

9.3.2 Further research

Following this study, in order to develop a way forward there may be a need to conduct a further research in the following ways. For one thing, the participants in this study were experienced social workers who had around ten years of practice after they had qualified. That was because I assumed that they had more extensive learning experiences rather than novice social workers who were in their first few years of practice. It would be interesting to compare learning experiences of novice social workers and experienced social workers. Though there were several participants who were in the position of supervisors, it would also be interesting to examine learning experiences of those who are supervisors and/or

managers in social work related organizations—which may highlight different perspectives on professional learning.

What is more, a greater focus on a learning group could produce interesting findings that account more for the way to enhance professional learning for social workers. Although it is of the essence, as discussed, to put more value on professional autonomy in developing learning relationships with others without imposing on practitioners, there may be a need to develop structured support in organising a learning group. Though I have not discussed in great detail how some of the social workers in the study organised the learning groups, they sought to enhance their learning in their own way. On the other hand, many of them faced difficulty in organising learning groups in different ways. For example, some of them spoke of how a heavy responsibility for a learning group was undertaken by certain members; such differences in the extent to which each member takes responsibility for a group can have a negative impact on running it, as shown in the example of one participant: *“I am wondering why the learning group was finally stopped. That is probably because there was nobody who tried to take the lead in organising the group”*. I suggest that a possible approach of exploring the way to make a learning group an open forum for social workers to continue to learn as professionals would be action research. As described, I conducted this study with the intention of participatory inquiry in a way that organised the research team—that consisted of experienced social workers. Whereas the research team members helped me, as discussed in Chapter 3, to recruit the participants and get access to the learning groups, and also provided useful advice about the interviews through the meetings held during the fieldwork, it can be argued that their involvement was limited in that they did not engage in a whole process of the study. Action research as a participatory form of research (e.g. Reason and Bradbury, 2006)—with a learning group involved in cycles of “look, think, act” (Stringer, 1996)—would contribute to the generation of understanding and action for changes in an actual working context.

Lastly, another possible approach would be to investigate organizational culture through conducting a case study in a social work related organization. This study offers some insight into something that seems to have anything to do with Japanese culture in the light of professional learning, though not being discussed in detail. For example, as described in Chapter 6, some of the participants tried to be reflective in day-to-day practice by checking directly as a reference “code of ethics”, “Seven principles of the social work relationships” defined by Biestek (1957), and “the Analects of Confucius”—which might be unusual in the UK and other cultural settings. A longitudinal study involving ethnographic immersion in a practice community would be valuable (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2008; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2006) in a way that allows for exploring how organizational culture can have an implication for professional learning in the context of Japanese social work. Such a study may

offer some insight into the way to seek a balance between professional agency, and professional accountability and responsibility in supporting learning for social workers within realities of the current working context.

Through this study, I found myself getting to notice my assumptions about professional learning as a researcher. Through interacting actively with the participants, the member of the research team and my supervisors, my underlying assumptions were challenged and questioned in different ways—which led myself to experience changes in understanding about my ways of being a researcher. My journey as a researcher has just begun, so my understanding will be challenged and questioned through engaging in a further research. I really hope that this study has given voice to the actual learning experiences that the social workers value as professionals, but has not been shared in their organizations, professional associations and universities although being shared only among trusted fellow practitioners.

Appendices

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Appendix 1



Research Information Sheet

(*This form was translated into Japanese.)

Researcher

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Research title

Professional learning as a way of being a social worker: Post-qualifying learning among Japanese social workers

What is the purpose of this research?

This study is being undertaken to fulfil the requirement for the PhD degree in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York in UK. The purpose of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of the role of professional learning for social workers in their working context in Japan, in order to provide them with the support to continue learning throughout their careers as frontline practitioners, and further enhance their professional practice. The researcher wishes to explore how experienced social workers perceive professional learning after they have qualified through an analysis of their views and experiences gained during the focus groups and individual interviews.

What will happen to participants during the interview?

In each focus group, around seven people will be involved. The focus groups will be of 90-120 minutes' duration which includes a short break. When conducting the focus groups, the researcher will use a topic guide to organise the discussion. During the interview, voice recorders will be used in order to collect accurate information and concentrate on communicate with the participants. Also, the researcher will take notes. If you want the

researcher to turn the voice recorders off, the researcher will stop recording immediately. Before starting interview, I will explain you about this.

The individual interviews will be conducted with the participants of the focus groups who express their willingness to cooperate. The targets for the individual interviews will be around twenty experienced social workers. If too many of them express a willingness to participate in not only the focus groups but also the individual interviews, I will select the participants of the individual interviews among them in order to make sure of the sufficient diversity of the data in terms of agencies and settings. On the contrary, if too few possible participants give any favourable responses, I will select a few participants from each of the focus groups and recruit them to take part in the individual interviews before and/ or after the focus groups will be carried out. Through the individual interviews, the researcher expects to explore and clarify the topics in more detail, which might not be addressed fully in the focus groups. The individual interviews will be of 60-90 minutes' duration. The individual interviews will be audio-recorded on voice recorders and the researcher will take notes as well. You may request that the recording be paused at any time. Also, an interview guide will be used as a guide.

Potential benefits and risks

- Benefits

The results of this study will help draw more attention to the importance of professional learning for social workers in their working context in Japan.

- Risks

It is possible that some participants of the focus groups might inappropriately share information gained, whether intentionally or not, with their manager(s) or supervisor(s) who are assumed to be in a position to have an impact on their career progression. Therefore, if the possible participants of the focus groups work for the same agency or organization, the researcher will allocate them into different focus groups in order to minimise the risk. Also, the researcher will ask that all participants do not discuss what is discussed in the focus groups with anyone else.

What will happen to the information you give?

All information taken from you will be kept strictly confidential and the researcher will be only able to have access to the data per se. No material which could personally identify you and your organization will be used in any reports on the study. The researcher will utilise the data for the final thesis, and/or conference papers and journal articles. A summary version of the thesis will be available to read by the participants in a hard copy and/or PDF file in Japanese.

Ethical Review

This research project has been approved by the Department of Social Policy and Social Work Interim Ethics committee in the University of York. Further details, if needed, can be obtained from the supervisors.

Voluntary nature of the study

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. If the participants wish, they are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason.

Thank you for reading this research information sheet. Please feel free to contact the researcher or supervisors if you have any questions about this study.

Appendix 2



Informed Consent Form

(*This was translated into Japanese.)

I _____ hereby consent to participate as requested in the interview for the research project on workplace learning in social work organizations in Japan.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form for future reference.
4. I understand that:
 - Participation is entirely my choice, so I am free to decline to answer any questions and withdraw at any time without explanation.
 - The interview will be audio-recorded on voice recorders in order to accurately capture what is said, however, I may request that the recording be paused at any time.
 - I understand that I will keep what is discussed in the focus groups confidential.
 - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.
 - I understand that participation in the focus group and/ or individual interview will not impact on my employment.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

I certify that I have explained the study to the participant and consider that he/ she understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name: Takahiro Asano

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix 3-a

Topic guides for the focus groups

1. Beginning of interview

- Interviewer's introduction
- Explanation about the study with the research information sheet
- Obtaining written informed consent from each participant

2. Main interview

The following three questions are asked:

- a) In what sorts of situation have you felt the need to learn as a social worker?
- b) In those situations, how do you consider you have addressed the need to learn?
- c) Could you explain in detail about your one specific instance where you felt learned something which has significantly affected you as a social worker?
 - How do you consider you learned through the experience?
 - What do you consider you learned from the experience?

Note: These questions are relatively comprehensive, not schedules as such.

3. End of interview

The participants are given a final opportunity to voice their opinions on professional learning.

Appendix 3-b

Interview guides for the individual interviews

1. Beginning of interview

- Explanation about the purposes and procedures of the individual interviews

2. Main interview

a) How would you describe your experiences as a participant in the focus group?

b) Could you explain in more detail about your learning experience(s) which you have provided in the focus group?

c) Could you explain about your another specific instances where you felt learned something which has significantly affected you as a social worker?

- How do you consider you learned through the experience?

- What do you consider you learned from the experience?

Note: These questions are relatively comprehensive, not schedules as such.

3. End of interview

The participant is given a final opportunity to voice his/her opinions on professional learning.

Appendix 4

Organizational structure and types of programme offered in KISWEC

KISWEC (Kyoto International Social Welfare Exchange Centre) has four sections as follows:

1. Education and training section

Providing the professional education and training program with social workers.

- Certified social workers course – providing the students who hope to become certified social worker with the required curriculum.
- Continuing education course for social worker- providing the professional education and training programmes with helping professions, mainly social workers. This course includes “Foundation class”, “Theory class”, “Method class”, “Family therapy class” and “Supervision class”, etc.
- Planning and managing the workshop commissioned for social workers and their supervisors in public social welfare office of Kyoto City.

2. Overseas exchange section

- Managing the visiting study programme to foreign countries, mainly Switzerland. In this program, two trainees are sent to Switzerland for three months every year. They are helping professions including social workers who work for social work organizations in Kyoto-City, which are membership of the programme. Also, KISWEC accepts a trainee from overseas including Switzerland.
- Offering scholarship for a staff member who has worked in certain periods and hopes to get a PhD degree in social work field in overseas universities.

3. Research section

- Conducting research into social work related issues
- Offering a wide range of information regarding social work in Japan and other countries through publishing two annual journals: “International Social Welfare Information” and “Developmental and Educational Consultation Research”.

4. Counseling and educational consultation section

- “Nozomi Counseling Room”: providing specialized counseling services with individual and family
- “Nozomi Consultation Room for Parents and Child”: providing preschool children with learning disabilities with play therapy, and also their parents with consultation at the individual or small group level.

KISWEC also provides the following facilities for the disabled.

- Five sheltered workshops for those with learning disabilities
- One sheltered workshop for those with physical disabilities
- One group home for those with learning disabilities
- One community support centre for the disabled: Coordinating community services for the disabled in a particular area

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