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ARTICLE

An Invitation to Dialogue ‘The World Café’ In Social Work Research

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ABSTRACT

In the context of discussions about the potential of collaborative research, a practice-based project was implemented in Auckland, New Zealand during 2006 and 2007, aimed to help develop a culture of enquiry among practitioners in social service. One design variable in this project was the World Café, a conversational process that helps groups to engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning. In relation to other collaborative approaches, the World Café is powerful in terms of the use of cross-pollination of ideas through evolving rounds of information exchange and the use of a café-style social context that allows the sharing of information in an equitable and non-threatening manner. This article reports on the design and implementation of a World Café approach, located in the philosophy of appreciative inquiry, through ‘Café Hear and Now’. The authors reflect on the perceived value of this initiative and invite dialogue on the implementation of the World Café in social work research.

KEY WORDS:

Action Research
 (AR)

Appreciative
 Inquiry (AI)

practitioner
 research

qualitative

methodology

World Café

INTRODUCTION

The past several decades have seen a number of challenges to traditional research approaches in which knowledge is formulated by external 'experts' and both knowledge and policy disseminated downwards through a hierarchy (Dirkx, 2006; Lee and Garvin, 2003). The emerging approaches challenge traditional concepts of what constitutes expertise, research processes, and ownership and encourage questions about the role of power, and the contestable nature of knowledge itself. This has been reflected in discussions about the potential of collaborative research approaches, including action research and participatory action research in social work settings (Bond and Hart, 1995; Healy, 2001) as well as the promotion of practitioner research and reflexive practitioner-based enquiry (Lowe and Hulatt, 2005). Increasingly we see suggestions for researchers and practitioners to move beyond traditional practices of information transfer toward a more appropriate notion of information exchange (Lee and Garvin, 2003) and for practitioners to move beyond being recipients of knowledge-transfer to having an active role in knowledge creation (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). Of course, these shifts are in many ways part of a broader pattern of global developments and global forces (Lunt, 2003). This includes a policy emphasis on 'what works', the revolution in technology and information retrieval, and challenges to experts and their knowledge systems.

Consulting several sources that offered imaginative ways of developing collaborative research (Cooperrider et al., 2003; Reed, 2007; Senge, 1992), the World Café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) provided a basis for developing a social work research approach that encompasses social work values, knowledge generation and information exchange through 'conversations that matter'. As a simple but powerful process, the World Café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) focuses on intimate exchange, disciplined inquiry, cross-pollination of ideas and possibility thinking. It is a conversational process that helps groups to engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning. The World Café is based on the assumptions that (a) The knowledge and wisdom we need are already present and accessible and (b) Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in creative ways. In relation to other collaborative and iterative learning approaches, the World Café is particularly powerful in terms of the use of cross-pollination of ideas through evolving rounds of information exchange and the use of a café-style social context. These are values that underpin social work practice: client-centered practice requires practitioners to be creative in promoting a hospitable place where information can be shared, collaborative learning occur and mutual respect be promoted. As Gilgun and Abrams (2002) succinctly state 'qualitative social work research connects with social work values' (2002: 46). Therefore, implicit to social work research is the connection with the ethos of professional

social work practice such as inclusiveness of stakeholders, promotion of human relatedness and mutual generation of understanding and knowledge. Furthermore, Shaw and Gould (2001) issue a challenge in that 'social work research too often lacks methodological imagination' (2001: 5).

Cooperrider et al. (2003) states that the most powerful vehicle for changing the social order is through the act of dialogue; with generative dialogue enabling co-ordination and potential growth. Furthermore, generative dialogue is very context-sensitive and reliant on language that is grounded in affirmation and appreciation. Consequently, positive strategies grounded in the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry provided a basis for designing and implementing the World Café approach. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an established technique for organizational development, analysis and transformation (Egan and Lancaster, 2005; Fitzgerald, Murrell and Miller, 2003; Whitney, 2004). Where AI differs most from other organizational development models, is in its focus on strength-based approaches to change. This obviously resonates strongly with social work practitioners committed to strength-based practice and attachment theory (see Gilgun, 2005; Neilson, 2005), but is also gaining ground as a research tool, resonating with a range of research approaches. As Reed (2007: 42) so eloquently states, AI '... focuses on supporting people getting together to tell stories of positive development in their work that they can build on.' According to Reed (2007), AI is developed to be inclusive and collaborative, to take place in real time and to focus on building the positive; this is where AI connects with research. These themes also provide the connection to the implementation of the World Café. The intention of this article is two fold: to report on the design, implementation and perceived value of a World Café approach through 'Café Hear and Now'; and to initiate dialogue for the implementation of the World Café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) in social work research.

BACKGROUND TO THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WORLD CAFÉ

McCormack et al. (2002) attempted to provide meaning to 'context' particularly in a health setting and acknowledged that although context refers to the setting in which practice takes place, the term does little to reflect the complexity of the concept. Furthermore, Shaw and Gould (2001) argue that qualitative social work research should be strongly grounded in an understanding of, and puzzling about issues of context. As it is not possible in this article to explore all the constituents of the World Café context, it is important to describe how the World Café approach fitted into a larger practice-based knowledge generation project.

The World Café was implemented as part of a practice innovation ('Growing Research in Practice' – hereafter referred to as GRIP). This project

was developed, based on feedback from academics, practitioners and senior managers on the low levels of social work research activity, particularly after practitioners had graduated from academic institutions and commenced practice. Therefore, the GRIP program, whose aim was ‘to assist the development of a culture of practitioner enquiry in social service agencies,’ (Lunt, Fouché and Yates, 2008) provided a context to support practitioner capacity and capability in practice-based research projects in Auckland, New Zealand. To achieve this aim, the collaborative program involved bringing together 43 practitioners from eight diverse social service agencies, and six individuals that together formed the ‘GRIP team’. The GRIP team included a practitioner advisor (also referred to as ‘critical friend’) and four academics from two universities, all logistically managed by a program manager. The initiative was supported by three funding bodies. In this 15 month, time-limited program, teams of practitioners were supported to conceptualize, design, implement and disseminate their own practice research projects located within their own agencies. Figure 1 illustrates the structure and dynamic of the GRIP program. The studies originated with a wide range of agencies and the practitioners were predominantly social and

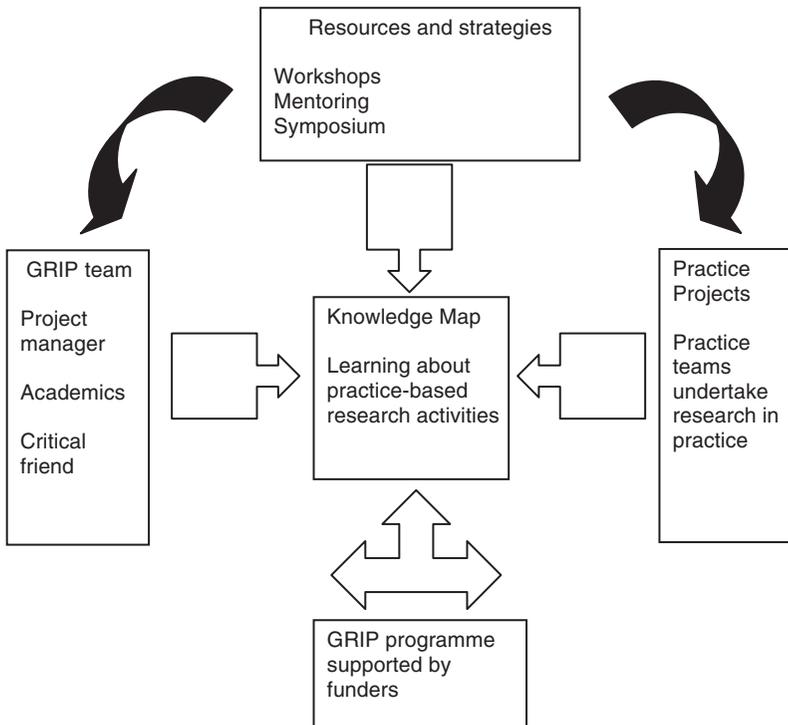


Figure 1 STRUCTURE AND DYNAMIC OF THE GRIP PROGRAM (LUNT, FOUCHÉ AND YATES, 2008).

community workers, but there were also therapists, counselors and psychologists. A prerequisite for participation was that each project should ultimately be about improving services to clients. A range of research approaches, methodologies and methods were employed.

The execution of the practice-based projects required a case-by-case consideration of the agency, and its context, mission and client base. Ethical considerations and approval were the responsibility of the individual teams. They all gave considerable attention to ethical issues pertaining to their projects, and obtained peer review and approval from appropriate bodies. There was also recognition that practice groups would be able to avail themselves of sources of support from within their own organizations, such as protocol advisers and knowledgeable colleagues, as well as service users and consumers. The importance of appropriate consideration of ethical issues – particularly where data collected for service provision purposes is being considered for use in research – was highlighted in workshops and in mentoring – two strategies utilized as part of the GRIP program (outlined below).

With regards to the overall GRIP program and the enhancement of learning about practice-based research activities by the GRIP team (the development of the 'knowledge map – refer to figure 1), data was collected in two phases, the first from feedback sheets, mentoring records, and minutes recorded by the GRIP team, and the second from group and individual interviews. We have considered the ethical issues regarding the collection of this data, including conflict of interest, respect for the rights of participants, and potential of harm to parties involved. We have managed them effectively in the team and in our relationship with the practice teams, by means of measures outlined in the ethics applications. Ethics approval was obtained from the respective University's ethics committees – in phase one for the collection of data at workshops, mentoring sessions and meetings, and in phase two for participant interviews to supplement our understanding of participants' experiences. The supportive strategies included mentoring, workshops and a symposium. Mentors were assigned to the teams and met with the teams regularly in the workplace and communicated frequently with them by email to communicate ideas, drafts and dilemmas. The mentoring aimed to be supportive and empowering, rather than supervisory, and responsive to the queries or concerns raised by the individual teams themselves. The practitioners were encouraged and assisted to present their research projects at the GRIP symposium, with varying emphases on their GRIP experience and the outcomes of their research. It was in one of the workshop sessions however, where the World Café was implemented and will be discussed in more detail for the purpose of context.

The workshops were introduced to increase general research knowledge and inform the practice-based research projects, but had multiple objectives. These workshops also provided an important opportunity for the participants

to meet and share experiences with other practitioners and to discuss issues that arose during the research process. It also became a way that projects could set themselves goals and benchmark their own progress. Six workshops, spread between February 2006 and February 2007, allowed broad cover of the phases of the research process and some of the more significant steps that all research projects must traverse, as well as the cultural and organizational challenges of social service research. A range of speakers contributed sessions at these workshops. Each workshop had a particular focus, and styles of presentation and facilitation varied. In the first workshops, participants were assisted to explore the potential focus and scope of their enquiry, and consider where and how they could obtain data. Subsequent workshops addressed the other stages of the research process, including refining the research question, using the literature, core ethical concerns, cultural and organizational challenges of social service research, and thinking about methodology.

Suggestions for improvements to workshops were collected from both participants and the GRIP team members after each workshop. Reflections on this data led the GRIP team to realize that the workshops did not take place in a collaborative way as was hoped, but started to develop as an opportunity where knowledge was 'transferred' by the so-called research experts. After the third workshop and a number of mentoring sessions, it also became clear that almost all participants were finding it difficult to manage to find time for research-related activities. Allocating time away from the day-to-day pressures of case-work or acute environments proved critical to doing the research, but actually taking time away from the coalface or reducing caseloads to allow it to be done, had not happened. The time allocated to attend to research projects was often influenced by immediate practice concerns rather than wider issues of knowledge generation. This did not come as a surprise, as the reality of workload and time constraint was considered at the outset of the project and we encouraged the place of practitioner research alongside individual motivation, team attributes, organizational culture and context. The demands placed on practitioner time and 'permanently expanding caseloads' (Fuller and Petch, 1995) are major barriers globally to social workers undertaking research (Fook, 2003; Fuller and Petch, 1995).

One positive discovery, however, was the inherent tenacity and resilience of the practitioners to maintain hope that they would be able to manage their time differently and that they would be able to continue with their respective projects. As part of daily practice, it is not uncommon for practitioners to liaise with each other as to how best resource themselves and their clients. Accessing resources and harnessing their own resourcefulness is the basis of practice wisdom. The social work practitioners involved in the research projects, once they have collectively identified 'time' as being a resource, were able to use this transferable skill as tacit knowledge inherent to social work practice. As will be

explored later in this article, this further substantiates the appropriateness of the World Café in research, in that it replicates the essence of social work interactions.

As highlighted earlier, the World Café is a conversational process that helps groups to engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning and is based on the assumption that knowledge and wisdom needed are already present. Figure 2 illustrates the interconnectedness of these elements in the World Café. This then seemed an appropriate vehicle to use to address both the issue of collaborative learning and information exchange and the critical issue of managing time for research in practice. At the same time, it became a powerful method of data collection.

DESIGNING THE WORLD CAFÉ

The permeating aroma of coffee, soothing music and café-styled table settings are not ordinarily associated with research or, for that matter, with social work practice. A café-style setting is however reasonably familiar to most researchers,

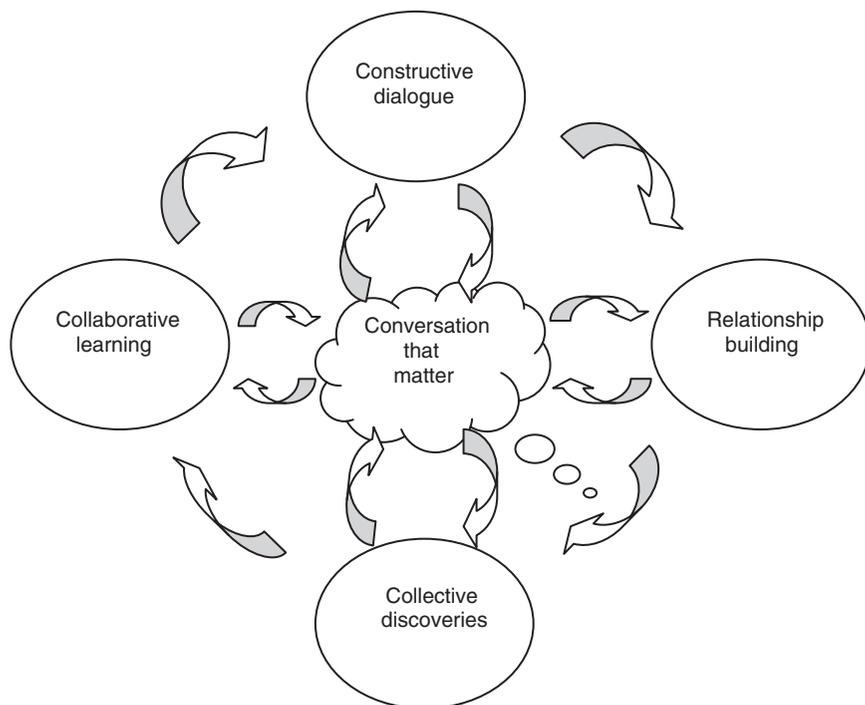


Figure 2 THE INTERCONNECTED ELEMENTS OF THE WORLD CAFÉ (BROWN AND ISAACS, 2005).

social workers and to a large section of the population in general. Such a social setting was therefore purposefully created to enhance the capacity to ‘dialogue’ in a relaxed and familiar environment. Our preference for the café context was that it provided space for people to move around, bump into each other and possibly make impromptu contacts. Further to the physical and social space, we assumed our ‘café’ space would allow the sharing of information in an equitable and non-threatening manner and, due to the public nature of these environments, café etiquette would encourage behaviors consistent with social norms in open places.

Unlike other small group discussions such as nominal groups, delphi groups and brainstorming groups as discussed by Fontana and Frey (2000), or the more popular focus groups where a moderator uses the group process with a small number of participants to stimulate discussion (Linhorst, 2002), the World Café enables groups of all sizes to participate in evolving rounds of dialogue with a few others, while remaining part of a single, larger connected conversation. This allows for small, intimate conversations to link with and build on others as the World Café is facilitated to allow people to move between groups and discover new insights into issues. According to Brown and Isaacs, ‘... people often move rapidly from ordinary conversations... toward *conversations that matter*, ...’ (Brown and Isaacs, 2005: 4), fostering dialogue in which the goal is not only thinking together, but also creating actionable knowledge. Pamphilon, Chevalier and Chevalier (2006) emphasize the World Café as beneficial in engaging people in meaningful conversation and larger groups in authentic discussion.

As a means of cultivating and harnessing the power of ‘conversations that matter,’ the World Café is designed on the following seven integrated principles (adapted from Brown and Isaacs, 2005; Tan and Brown, 2005; World Café Design Principles, 2008):

1. **Set the context.** The café hosts intentionally create the purpose and parameters in which collaborative learning will unfold. They help to shape the content and the process – both in preparation and during the World Café session.
2. **Create hospitable space.** It is important for the hosts to create a social space that is welcoming, provides personal comfort and psychological safety. In some instances, hospitable space begins with a creative invitation to attend a café.
3. **Explore questions that matter.** All participants should focus their collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement. Depending on the timeframe and objectives, a café may explore a single question or use a line of inquiry through several conversational rounds.
4. **Encourage everyone’s contributions.** The hosts and all participants to the World Café should invite full participation and honor each person’s unique contribution. People engage deeply when they feel they are contributing their thinking to questions that are important to them.

5. **Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives.** In encouraging a rich web of interactions, optimum learning and development occurs. Facilitating conversational rounds and asking people to change tables between rounds allows for a dense web of connections. In some instances, it may be helpful to have one person remain at a table to act as the table host to both summarize the conversation of the previous round for the newcomers and invite them to share the essence from the previous round. Where possible, the tables can be 'waited' on by the café hosts.
6. **Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions.** As the diverse perspectives are successfully connected, focused shared attention should be encouraged to nurture coherence of thought while affirming individual contributions.
7. **Harvest and share collective discoveries.** The hosts should ensure that collective knowledge is visibly displayed and actioned. By distilling the insights, patterns, themes and deeper questions down to their essence and providing a way to get them out to the whole group, collective knowledge is developed. To capture this visually on flip charts or post-it notes or even the paper table cloths, the information can be taped to a wall, discussed and actioned.

Although little evidence of the implementation and outcome of the World Café can be found in scientific literature, it is alleged on the dedicated World Café website (World Café History, 2008) that the World Café has been used by hundreds of groups, including large multinational corporations, small non-profits, government offices, community-based organizations and educational institutions. It is also declared that the core design principles of the World Café have been applied in many different ways where groups have a need to engage in constructive dialogue around critical questions and that the process resonates with traditional practices of dialogue and deliberation in many different cultures. The outcomes of these efforts proclaim to include innovative approaches to health care, education, socially responsible business, environmental protection, social welfare, conflict resolution and sustainable development. No direct application of the World Café in the field of qualitative research has been discovered and to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time the World Café is reported as a research approach.

LOCATING THE WORLD CAFÉ IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND ACTION RESEARCH

Prior to positioning the World Café as a qualitative research approach, we shall provide a brief reflection as to how we situate the world café approach alongside action research (AR) and appreciative inquiry (AI) frameworks. First and foremost we were guided by the hypothesis that for social workers to embrace research as part of their practice, the methodology of choice needed to emulate

the essence of social work such as inclusiveness, hope-promoting language and the generation of client-centered resourcefulness. We strove to align an approach that incorporated attitudes and behaviors that paralleled practice.

A brief review of the literature pertaining to AI and AR (Egan and Lancaster, 2005; Fitzgerald, Murrell and Miller, 2003; Whitney, 2004), identified both as incorporating a framework for eliciting information. The philosophy of AR embraces a problem-solving perspective to change management utilizing a framework for 'data gathering, diagnosing, implementing and evaluating a change process' (Egan and Lancaster, 2005: 35). It involves a focus on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance in understanding and addressing the problem identified. Furthermore, as Somekh (2006: 31) writes: 'because action research is a methodology that closely involves participants in a social situation it is necessarily strongly influenced by their values and culture'.

AI focuses on a strength-based approach to change: discover, dream, design and destiny. The philosophy that underpins both frameworks not only determines the choice of language used but also attunes and orientates the organizational context to the potential and sustainability of change. The use of language has the ability to reinforce existing beliefs of deficit thinking or, has the potential of unleashing possibilities for the creation of new (and presumably better) beliefs. Similarly in practice, for a practitioner, every inquiry is positioned as an intervention as the images embedded within the question have the potential to unlock possible, actionable answers.

As an organizational development tool, AI is grounded in a philosophical orientation of promoting what works best in an organization and builds on success, achievement and positive attributes. This obviously resonates strongly with social work practitioners committed to strength-based practice and attachment theory (see Gilgun, 2005; Neilson, 2005), but is also gaining ground as a research tool, resonating with a range of research approaches. Rather than seeking a problem to be solved, organizations are a mystery to be embraced. A number of principles are regarded as core to AI, born out of several theories related to positive image and positive thinking. An AI emphasis is firmly on appreciating 'what gives life to human systems when they are at their best' (Cooperrider et al., 2003) and as a relational construct, AI is grounded in affirmation, appreciation and dialogue.

Reed (2007) and Cooperrider et al. (2003) suggest that the embracing-solution process has four phases. The collaborative, participative and system-wide approach to organizational development is operationalized by the 4-D cycle:

- **Discovering** 'what gives life to people, their work and their organization'. This is synonymous with a strengths-based perspective, sourcing client's experience of

how they have managed change previously and building on their resourcefulness. It also harnesses possibility thinking and is the essence of the ‘miracle question’ associated with solution-focused practice.

- **Dreaming** of what might be provides a visionary exploration of ‘provocative propositions’ (Reed, 2007); constructed by clients and stakeholders this promotes strategic intent and is both aspirational and transformative.
- **Designing** the ideal is based on evidence-based examples that have emerged from the successes and achievements of the past. Building on existing resourcefulness promotes realistic, achievable and imaginable goals where the focus is on choice and co-construction.
- **Destiny** is focused on sustaining the envisioned future; this requires creating the networks and structures that facilitate connections and the potential to co-create new ways of working, moving from ‘new knowledge to new knowing’ (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000). Reed (2007) refers to this phase as ‘delivery’ and describes it as the phase where possibilities are explored through the lens of past successes.

Although we believe the AI approach resonates strongly with the beliefs and values associated with social work practice and therefore the parallel appropriateness of this research approach, we are not wearing rose-colored glasses. Sourcing only good things or ‘the best’ in an organization does not negate the prevalence of problems. Problem-orientated approaches invariably utilize more energy than strengths-based practice; uncovering positives and tapping into tacit knowledge raises individual and group awareness of possibilities and as such, elevates collective consciousness of a more enabling nature.

The World Café aligns with the change process of ‘data gathering, diagnosing, implementing and evaluating’ (Egan and Lancaster, 2005: 35) in AR, but is also clearly situated within the philosophy of AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) as it is premised on generative dialogue which in itself has enormous potential for transformation. The World Café however, additionally provides a challenge to rethink our ideas on transformational potential through the process of knowledge-exchange. It provides an enabling framework: purposeful orientation of the environment to café-style and associated dialogue, that helps groups to engage in constructive evolving rounds of dialogue. This, while remaining part of a single, larger connected conversation and with the AI orientation, allows the dialogue to remain focused on what is already working well.

Therefore, taking into account the aforementioned discussion, the world café approach and the implementation of ‘Café Hear and Now’ embodied the essence of social work practice and as a form of research methodology, resonated with practice. Parallels to practice required the establishment of a hospitable, relaxed context and attention to language that orientated participants to images that promoted vision and purposeful action.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WORLD CAFÉ: 'CAFÉ HEAR AND NOW' IN AUCKLAND

In planning the fourth in the series of six workshops, the café hosts (GRIP team) utilized the seven integrated principles of the World Café as outlined above. They started by '*setting the context*' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) and creating the purpose and parameters of this workshop. 'Café Hear and Now' was shaped to enhance the sharing of knowledge and generate collaborative learning as a means of enhancing participant's research-mindedness. This was particularly aimed at achieving multi-directional knowledge exchange (rather than linear knowledge transfer) as proposed by Lee and Garvin (2003). In setting the context, we aimed to move away from an individualistic ethic, to not privilege expert knowledge and to avoid a one-way flow of information (Lee and Garvin, 2003: 451). We decided on the metaphorical naming of the World Café as 'Café Hear and Now', to reflect the essence of the café purpose, namely to focus on the critical issues in the participants' shared experience by contributing, connecting and listening to each other.

Creating the ambience for the café and ensuring a '*hospitable space*' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005), required the transformation of a lecture room. This was achieved with soothing background music, comfortable chairs and tables arranged in café style, colorful paper table coverings to encourage doodling and small posies of fragrant flowers on each table. Each table was also provided with small colorful notepads and colored pens to gather ideas and themes. Research participants were orientated to the World Café initiative via a 'power-point' presentation with additional posters covering the World Café principles, assumptions and etiquette displayed around the room. As research-participants had habitually sat with their own team members at all of the previous workshops, this remained the case for the first round of focused enquiry. However, as the 'evolving rounds of dialogue' of the World Café was introduced, groups were soon disrupted as they joined new discussion groups at the various tables.

In '*exploring questions that matter*' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) it was really important to the GRIP team to ensure that questions were asked in the right way. Based on appreciative inquiry philosophy that 'people grow in the direction of the questions they ask' (Cooperrider et al., 2003; Reed, 2007), the questions that arose for the café hosts were: 'How could we create the ideal; how could we engage individuals in 'meaningful conversation' and the larger group in 'authentic discussion' as highlighted by Pamphilon, Chevalier and Chevalier (2006)? The following focused questions accessed the participants' resourcefulness:

1. What in your workplace has enabled your research?
2. What would be the ideal situation especially around having enough time?

3. What needs to happen to achieve the ideal?
4. What's the ideal? What can we do to promote it?

The café questions were purposefully orientated towards appreciative inquiry principles and formulated as 'provocative propositions' (Reed, 2007: 10). As visionary and aspirational 'dreams' we were seeking to align the inter-relatedness of the cognitive processes with radical statements of intention and action. How would these statements of intention contribute to the development of a culture of practitioner enquiry in social service agencies? What would research-practitioners be doing differently in their workplaces? What resources would need to be in place?

Each focused-question rotation lasted 20–25 minutes. A self-selected host remained at each table between rounds to 'encourage everyone's contribution' and to provide continuity of ideas while other participants were free to move to other tables to engage in developing and 'connecting ideas' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) and wider networking. Question responses were gathered and arranged thematically on a large wall by the café hosts and all participants were encouraged to view the collective discoveries. The dialogue commenced rather tentatively. This may have been due to the unorthodox approach to generating ideas and as Carter (2006) points out, practitioners are not in the general habit of uncovering best practice; not because it does not exist, but because practitioners 'are so unused to talking about it' (Carter, 2006: 52). By the fourth rotation, however, the dialogue had reached such a level of intensity and commitment that it required several attempts to draw the conversations to a close – the energy and enthusiasm was palpable! Where at first, the participants 'brainstormed' ideas in reaction to a question, the subsequent rounds incorporated their own answers with what was said at another table, and the ideas became connected. So, for example, in response to the question: 'What has enabled the research?' participants collaboratively collated responses and identified collective patterns e.g. 'participant networks, management, research team, GRIP, leadership, passion'. In the evolving rounds, responses 'connected' ideas, such as 'we did not have a supporting manager – that would have made a difference'; or 'our passion for finding answers to the problem also enabled our research'. Furthermore, participants were more explicit in validating their collective strengths and unleashing their potentials; 'research has a place and a value in agency policy, valuing research, self-determining team members motivating others'.

It was energizing to see participants 'identify patterns and develop insights from the conversations' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). Capturing these visually on post-it notes and the paper table cloths, the information was taped to a wall. Although the nature of this data and the content of the conversations and discoveries are not the focus of this article, the following insights from the groups serve as examples in the 'sharing of collective discoveries' (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). From the 'connected ideas' the emerging conversations led to discoveries that 'research

in the workplace was enabled by' and, 'the ideal can be achieved by': group commitment; resource availability from the agency; supportive leadership from workplace management; and practitioners' passion.

As a means of responding to participants' needs and in developing the knowledge map (refer to figure 1), the GRIP team sought explicit feedback at the completion of each workshop and after completion of all the sessions. The feedback allowed space for participants to express their opinions in a narrative, qualitative manner. Consequently, workshop four, incorporating 'Café Hear and Now', allowed participants to document their preferences from a perspective of raised consciousness. They were comparing the traditional knowledge transfer approach and the more generative approach of knowledge exchange.

Comments varied between '*it's lovely to have these days as we can concentrate on the tasks. World Café was great, moving me out of my comfy zone – the workshop was useful and timely, excellent to connect more with other groups*' to participants validating their personal experience by providing one-liners that captured the learning from the café process: '*sharpened my skills, knowledge, passion, curiosity; seeing ourselves as researchers...believing that social workers are researchers, connecting with my research whanau*' (an indigenous Maori concept for extended family and significant others). Many of the comments also focused on the wider environment and the extrapolation of '*research as core business, research is integral to the organization's work*' and '*research as a workplace investment*'. Although the participants may have been slow to 'uncover' and articulate best practice, the substantive feedback indicates that the café-style process of knowledge-generation was a preferable medium for promoting insight and enhancing practitioner's self-worth as a researcher. In response to the question at completion of all the workshops: 'which sessions were useful to you or your research?' 76% of participants acknowledged that 'Café Hear and Now' was the session largely and totally useful (to their research).

THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF THE WORLD CAFÉ APPROACH THROUGH 'CAFÉ HEAR AND NOW'

It is difficult to isolate the successes of 'Café Hear and Now' from the successes achieved by the GRIP program as a whole. It would appear that individuals and teams took significant learning from GRIP, including learning about research and the value of practice-based research. Benefits also derived from the findings of the research projects and outcomes for social service agencies, such as the commitment to ongoing practice research and a growing focus on research in discipline-specific forums. In addition, a number of potential future initiatives were developed which will provide another layer of benefits beyond immediate practice outcomes, satisfaction and learning. These include ongoing dissemination of the results of the projects in journals, at conferences and through

feedback to management, clients and professional networks. It is worth noting the following observations from the café exercise that can be extrapolated to a wider discussion on the value of the World Café to social work research, as summarized in Table 1.

Cognitive Reframing and Individual Sense-making of ‘Questions that Matter’

‘Café Hear and Now’ nurtured participants’ ability to identify with ‘conversations that matter’ – in this instance, from the initial ‘isolated’ responses about enabling factors in research, through the ‘connected ideas’ in the evolving rounds to individual sense-making of practitioners as researchers and with research as a workplace investment. This certainly supported the aims of the GRIP program and, in our opinion, this one workshop made a significant contribution in this regard. As an interpretive activity, the café experience allowed the participants to make sense of how they perceived themselves as researchers, in relation to colleagues, and what resources and systems needed to be in place to promote research in the workplace. ‘Café Hear and Now’ provided a new experience in research-related activity and therefore mediated a different perception of knowledge generation.

Table 1 THE VALUE OF THE WORLD CAFÉ TO SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Interconnected elements of the World Café	Value of ‘Café Hear and Now’ in research
Constructive dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cognitive reframing ● Individual sense-making of ‘questions that matter’
Relationship building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Webs of relationships or connections ● Promotion of professional networks
Collective discoveries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Harnessing and promoting the innate resourcefulness and dialogical discourse central to social work practice ● Hope promotion and a collective ‘can do’ orientation
Collaborative learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equitable contribution and participation ● Collective knowledge sharing

Webs of Relationships or Connections and Promotion of Professional Networks

The interactive nature of the café enabled practitioners from a variety of settings to make connections and to promote networks. Networks are often regarded as a means of overcoming resource constraints (Benson-Rea and Wilson, 2003). Chetty and Wilson (2003) differentiate between vertical and horizontal networks where strategic networking is involved. Horizontal networks, according to these authors are the relationships that firms form with competitors, while vertical networks are those formed with customers, suppliers and distributors. In the context of the social services, these research-minded networks are influential in the propagation of research-based practice and extend the current professional culture of critical reflection and practice competence to a more enabling context of practice-based research and active involvement in evidence-informed activities. As relationships grow, networks are combined and connected to others through direct and indirect linkages (Benson-Rea and Wilson, 2003). The World Café approach is uniquely geared to promote such horizontal networks.

Harnessing and Promoting the Innate Resourcefulness and Dialogical Discourse Central to Social Work Practice

We have been able to draw parallels from the co-operative construction of meaning in the café process to the dialogical interaction between practitioner and client. Three different practice-based interventions informed this discovery:

- Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) places an emphasis on ‘solution talk’ (Walsh, 2006: 211) that encourages clients to focus on solutions to problems. ‘Solution talk’ has been central to the focus of and language used in the framing of questions for the café.
- A strengths-oriented practice (Walsh, 2006) implies that practitioners elicit from clients their capacities, talents, hopes, visions and talents. This perspective emphasizes human resilience in spite of the adversities and struggles of life’s challenges. ‘Café Hear and Now’ aimed to draw out practitioners’ enabling capabilities in spite of practice difficulties.
- In narrative theory, where each person’s notion of ‘self’ is inherently fluid, change is premised on the perspective that all people are capable of developing new, empowering stories that include new senses of the self (Walsh, 2006). The café hosts supported an approach to the café dialogue that assisted the participants to use an appreciative stance in seeking to engage in social enquiry.

Hope Promotion and a Collective ‘Can Do’ Orientation

As workshop participants articulated their hopes and possibilities for a (research-oriented) future there was evidence of positive expectations that research as an investment would contribute to providing a more hopeful perspective of social

work as a profession in the future. The purposeful use of the ‘provocative proposition’ orientation, that is, an explicit alternative to ‘the way things are done around here’ idea promoted a context where research-participants were able to express their tacit knowledge in a socially-orchestrated environment. The opportunity that the World Café provided, allowed participants to remain part of the larger connected conversation over and above the evolving dialogues. We were able to observe and hear as workshop participants collectively discovered solutions that would enable research to occur in the workplace, such as ‘*we should put a similar proposal to our management team for resources*’ or ‘*we should inform our supervisor that we are the only team that do not have access to . . .*’; or even ‘*we will have our supervisor contact yours to discuss strategy*’.

As a means of attempting to understand what we observed with the collective discoveries, it is important to briefly outline the difference between explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is acquired through learning where the interactive process comes from a visual and/or verbal source. Listening to and taking notes from people who have explicit knowledge of specific subjects. ‘Tacit knowledge however, does not arise from the transfer of one mind to another but arises from the active engagement of the body with subsidiary awareness’ (Sorri, 1994: 19). As an ‘art form’, tacit knowledge is ‘indwelling’ (Polanyi, 1966) in social work praxis, especially as practitioners actively engage with people: empathic listening, ‘making sense’ of another’s narrative and learning through reflective practice. Although unable to explain the specific nuances of praxis acquisition, tacit knowledge is evidenced by demonstrating a given skill or knowledge and by showing rather than telling. Attempting to understand the individual discovery of ‘self as a researcher’ and collective acknowledgement of ‘research as a workplace investment’ (as reported, comments provided by participants to the World Café experience) we draw on the work of Polanyi (1966) who builds on Gestalt psychology – ‘when we recognize a whole, we see its parts differently from the way we see them in isolation’ (Polanyi, 1966: 3). The merging of the participants into a collaborative, developmental process (as per the dialogical nature of ‘Café Hear and Now’) caused a transformation in the appearance of both the individual and the collective. As an integrative act, participants collectively ‘showed’ their abilities to engage in knowledge-generation resulting in ‘aha’ moments. They completed each others’ sentences as they discovered that they agreed; they used examples from different people in the room to illustrate a point; they collected notes from a previous round of discussions with only a few people, to feed into the larger connected conversation. At that point in time, the participants demonstrated an ‘indwelling’ phenomena: collective empathetic participation giving rise to a coherent identity (in this instance of research-mindedness) that would not have been possible within an AR change process of ‘data gathering, diagnosing, implementing and evaluating’ (Egan and Lancaster, 2005: 35)

or only generative dialogue within the philosophy of AI (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) only.

Equitable Contribution, Participation and Collective Knowledge Sharing

During the evolving rounds of dialogue, conversations were linked to each other and allowed for participation that enabled ‘aha!’ experiences. Participants discovered how others were managing and what the possibilities are. All participants spoke favorably of the support in promoting positive (research) development and although the content of these discoveries is not the focus of this article, the following findings are shared in highlighting the product of the collective knowledge sharing. Participants identified the ideal research environment as:

- involving other disciplines in their work;
- acknowledging research as ‘real work’;
- a focus on the benefit to clients and a unique contribution to social work knowledge;
- seeing themselves as researchers and believing that social workers are researchers;
- a space where research is valued as a workplace investment.

‘Café Hear and Now’ provided an experience in sharing collective discoveries, but also enabled the GRIP team to use the contributions for their own learning. The information on the post-it notes and the key words captured on the paper table cloths, became ‘data’ and as such, the café, a method of data collection as well.

LET THE CONVERSATIONS CONTINUE

‘Café Hear and Now’ as a practice application of the World Café in Auckland, New Zealand has responded to the challenge of promoting an example of social work research using an imaginative methodological process. The future-focused, enabling process of knowledge-generation encouraged by ‘conversations that matter’ shows strength as a research tool on different levels. The World Café is powerful in terms of the use of cross-pollination of ideas through evolving rounds of information exchange and the use of a café-style social context allows the sharing of information in an equitable and non-threatening manner.

In the field of social work research, a consistent thread has been the need for new expertise that challenges traditional hierarchical relationships between the researcher and the researched, and that gives both social workers and clients opportunities to solve problems (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). This has been reflected in discussions about action research and participatory action research in social work settings. As a collaborative approach, the World Café moves participants beyond being recipients of knowledge created elsewhere and

transferred for 'use', to being engaged in processes of knowledge creation (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005).

In conclusion, as a process that helps groups engage in constructive dialogue, the World Café contributes to cognitive reframing and individual sense-making, allowing a different perception of knowledge generation and moves participants beyond information transfer toward information exchange (Lee and Garvin, 2003). As a process aimed at relationship building, it allows for the development of webs of connections and the promotion of networks. The impetus on collective discoveries enables the harnessing of resourcefulness and a sense of hope, while the drive towards collaborative learning allows for equitable and collective participation. For supporters of the view that the practice wisdom of health and social care practitioners and the lived experience of service users can be just as valid a way of knowing the world as formal research (Glasby and Beresford, 2006), the World Café offers promising options of collective discoveries and collaborative learning. It will also resonate well as a powerful method of data collection with qualitative researchers promoting the focus group context as an advantage (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006).

Even though we believe 'Café Hear and Now' premised on the World Café approach (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) was significant in terms of the program participants identifying as researchers and acknowledging research as a workplace investment, we would like to explore further the possibilities of creative social work research practice from this learning. We would like to engage in dialogue on the implementation of the World Café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) as an approach and a model to expand the practical outcomes for social work research and the wider field of qualitative research.

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