Introduction

Social work practice research has established as a genre of social work research over the last three decades (Thyer, 1989; Scott, 1990; Shaw, 2007), with the Salisbury Statement published in 2011 as one of the milestones. The statement marks a departure from the well accepted notions of 'scientific practitioner' and evidence-based practice which primarily promote research-led practice. Instead, the statement stipulates it is a two-way road to bring research and practice closer to each other – making practice more research-informed and research practice-near. Indicating social work practitioner-academic collaboration is the preferred model of knowledge production, the statement invites further attention to the collaborative nature of social work practice research and the different modes of knowledge production, including 'practice research' and 'practitioner research' (Uggerhøj, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2008).

The successive Helsinki Statement (2014) for social work practice research turned the focus to developing practice-near research by involving service users, social workers and academics in the process of negotiating realities and producing useful knowledge. There is repeated emphasis on research methodology being participatory and dialogical for validating different forms of expertise. The idea of inclusivity and diversity, partly as a commitment to social justice but also a way to provide a critical scholarship for social work practice research, was later extended to foregrounding varied and varying political, cultural and social contexts where social work practice and research are undertaken especially outside western democracies (see Hong Kong Statement in Sim, 2019).

The synergy between social work practice research, given its quintessentially collaborative nature, and participatory action research (PAR) has been explored by many researchers. Participatory action research (PAR), sometimes called participatory research (PR), is a research approach that emphasises working 'with' instead of 'on' people. According to the UK Participatory Research Network (UKPRN), the aim of PAR/PR 'is to maximize the participation of those whose life or work is the subject of the research' (visited on 10 November 2022). Those traditionally seen as the receivers and users of knowledge are involved in the design, implementation and dissemination of research, making decisions on the knowledge production process to ensure usefulness, relevance and workability of the produced knowledge (Kong, 2016). The proliferation of this area of literature can be evidenced by a simple keyword search for 'social work' AND 'participatory action research' on the Web of Science (20 July 2022), resulting in 6,015 publications since 2011, with most of them published in the USA (1936), England (1066), Canada (786), Australia (562) and Spain (354).

Informed by this body of research, we developed a novel approach to social work participatory practice research - 'Collaborative Practice Research for Social Work' (CPRSW) - at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. In August 2020, mirroring the rapid shift to remote and later hybrid practice in social work during the Covid-19 crisis (Pink et al., 2021), the British Association of Social Workers (BASW)

and Durham University acted swiftly to set up an online Social Work Practitioner Research Network for piloting CPRSW. The pilot of this new methodology was carried out under the project, *Empowering Social Workers in Challenging Times: Learning from Best Practice during COVID-19,* which is funded by ESRC IAA and granted ethical approval by Durham University. The Network initially consisted of eight social workers from England and Wales and six Durham University researchers (Table 1.). Keeping with a move from linear knowledge transfer to developing cooperative knowledge production (Gray and Schubert, 2013), the network co-analysed 2222 qualitative responses from UK social workers collected by the BASW's *Ongoing Survey on Social Work during COVID-19* (the BASW survey) during the first COVID-19 national lockdown. The analysis captured UK social workers' worries, challenges and good practice during the first COVID-19 national lockdown (March- August 2020) (Kong et al., 2021a) and informed the production of the reflective activist toolkit (Kong et al., 2021b), an article in a professional magazine (Noone et al., 2021) and a research paper (Kong et al., 2021c).

This paper begins with an overview of how PAR has been applied in social work research to illustrate the novelty of CPRSW – an online networked approach to participatory practice research for collaborative learning. We then articulate the design and implementation of CPRSW, including how it was piloted and evaluated in the UK context. Based on the data collected in questionnaires and interviews with co-researchers in the pilot, we present analysis of the processes and outcomes of CPRSW to illustrate how it challenges existing epistemological hierarchy and promotes egalitarian knowledge production. In the discussion, we will consider the distinctiveness of our methodology in relation to similar approaches of participatory practice research and the values for wider application.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) in/for social work

This literature review on PAR in/for social work is based on the search results obtained by a Boolean search for journal articles published in English since 2011, the publication year of Salisbury Statement. The initial search was performed on the Web of Science on 20 July 2022, having identified 6015 publications that contains both 'Participatory Action Research' AND 'Social Work' in their titles/abstracts. After excluding non-journal and non-English papers, we further narrowed down the publications to the social work field, resulting in 491 publications (see appendix 1). It is worth noting that this is not a systematic review of PAR in social work, but a literature review that helps situate CPRSW in the wider scheme of participatory social work practice research.

The identified set of literature has clearly demonstrated a wide range of application of PAR in understanding and advancing social work education and practice. PAR has been carried out in many fields of practice, such as community development, migration support, medical social work, trauma-informed practice, health-social care integration and health disparities, mental health, learning disabilities, youth work,

domestic violence support, technology-assisted social work, ecosocial work and decolonial/indigenous social work (see appendix 1). McBeath et al. (2021) considered Practice Research (PR) as a social work specific PAR approach, whereas Uggerhøj et al. (2018) argues that Practice Research might not be necessarily collaborative nor participatory although it might often involve social workers in one way or the other.

In spite of great interest in using PAR to bring social work research and practice closer to each other, very few social work PAR studies explicitly link to the discussion of practice research, practitioner research or participatory practice research. Among the 491 papers on social work participatory research, only three papers explicitly mentioned 'practice research' and one mentioned 'practitioner research' in their titles/abstracts. In the following, we will present how PAR has been applied in social work research in terms of their approaches to collaboration and types of knowledge produced.

PAR in/for social work and approaches to collaboration

Most of the identified papers did not specify their PAR approach but they treat it as a generic approach for involving social workers and/or service users from a single site or multiple sites of practice, as steering committee members or co-researchers to shape and develop social work learning and intervention. There were also studies that do not embrace a full-on PAR, but explore the utility of participatory methods, such as mapping, photovoice and participatory diagramming, for capturing marginalised voices. Among papers where specific approaches of PAR are mentioned, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is the most cited one (119 papers). These studies involved service users, community practitioners and other community stakeholders in advocating for cultural, attitudinal, institutional and policy change, often associating themselves with the critical and radical social work practice to justify their methodological choice. Often, these studies' major goal was to enhance the communities' capacity and social capital, for learning, knowledge production and problem-solving, reflecting the community work tradition of social work practice that might have been reduced significantly because of neo-liberalisation of social work profession (Bortoletto, 2017; Westoby, 2019). Meanwhile, some other social work CBPR studies (15 papers) focus on decolonising social work and centring indigenous knowledge and their life-worlds. For example, Godden (2021) explored with indigenous communities in Peru the idea of 'buen vivir' which is a value-based love-driven framework for 'living well' with both people and the nature. Feminist PAR (2 papers) and Appreciative Inquiry (2 papers) were also explicitly employed to, respectively, work with people who have experienced gender-based violence (Johnson and Flynn, 2021) and sexual health disparities (Loutfy et al., 2016) and people with disabilities (Roy, McVillly and Crisp, 2021).

The approach to collaboration in these studies is primarily community/group based, carried out in a single site or multiple sites. Some collaboration required the

formation of their own advisory group, co-inquiry group and action group, whereas some were carried out with established community organisations or peer-led networks, for example, a Facebook group for young people to discuss mental health problems (Gillard et al., 2014) and community-based organisations dealing with loss and death (Kleijberg et al., 2020). Only two studies formed their own networks for promoting practice-based research - the Practice-Based Research Network in Los Angeles (Kelly et al., 2015) and Professional Collaboration Network (Sage et al., 2021). We will return to issues these papers raise in the discussion to explore the potential of a networked approach to social work participatory practice research.

What types of knowledge are produced by PAR in/for social work?

Through collaboration, co-researchers in social work PAR produced both theoretical and practical-ethical knowledge, aiming to improve intervention and service process and outcomes, empower marginalised communities, centre indigenous voices and knowledge, offer critical views on structural oppression, provide alternative conceptualisation of key social work ideas and develop new education and practice models/frameworks. McBeath et al. (2021) contend that PAR in/for social work can produce professionally focused and organisationally situated knowledge through social work researchers-practitioner-manager-user collaboration. Banks et al. (2021) also pointed out how PAR could build awareness of situated ethics in social work practice.

Fox et al. (2021) argued that PAR can foster egalitarian knowledge exchange between academic researchers and practitioners, making a case for the important roles that 'pracademic'/practitioner-researchers play in transdisciplinary learning and producing both theoretical and practical knowledge. It might be harder to think about how academics involved in social work PAR could transgress the disciplinary boundaries to become 'academic-practitioners', especially in countries and services where social work practice is narrowly defined as statutory work for adult and children safeguarding such as the UK. While the possibility for academics to participate in action/practice might be more restricted in clinical or service-dependent practices, it is much more plausible at the community level of interventions. For example, in many CBPR studies included in this literature review, academics themselves have been involved in community organising (facilitating bonding, bridging and knowledge exchange) and mobilising social movements against racism, sexism and homophobia.

Literature on PAR in/for social work has pointed to the need for a more inclusive theorisation of participatory practice research, which features a spectrum of transdisciplinary learning and role taking. The current theorisation of participatory practice research suggests the division of labour between academic researchers and practitioner researchers, with the former leading research and the latter leading learning in their own practice (Uggerhøj et al., 2018). However, this theorisation might be too restrictive for making sense of cross-site and cross-country learning, or participatory practice research carried out in non-clinical settings, such as in the

place-based communities or communities organised around social and policy issues. The CPRSW in discussion is one of the few networked approaches for producing knowledge beyond one single site, with the aim to continuously redraw the established academic-practitioner/research-practice boundaries for producing relevant and useful knowledge.

Collaborative Practice Research for Social Work (CPRSW): Rationale, Design and Processes

CPRSW, by design, is a network-based participatory approach to social work practice research. The networked approach was a response to some well identified organisational barriers that hinder social workers' participation in research, for example, the lack of research support, heavy workloads and lack of funding (Harvey et al., 2013). By pooling together research and practice expertise in a Network, social workers can find research support from their practitioner and academic peers who are not from their direct practice, and learn from the diverse skillsets owned by the Network members to develop knowledge and research skills relevant to addressing their intellectual and practical concerns. With all the meetings and trainings being accredited as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) by BASW, it also helps offset some of the extra workload that their participation in research might bring. External funding and resources coming from both impact-focused funding and BASW further created learning opportunities that single service agency might not be able to offer with their often very strained resources.

This methodology thereby sees practice wisdom and research evidence as equally valid forms of knowing, and consistently seeks ways to integrate, link and utilise the two forms of knowing in practically and ethically meaningful ways for informing social work practice (Kong, 2016; Kong et al., 2021b).

Diagram 1. The cycle for connecting experiences, evidence and exploration in CPRSW

Social workers' experiences are both evidence and instrument for analysis: they are the former when the experiences are systematically collected for informing the understanding of social work practice/theories/research; while they are the latter when social workers are involved in the interpretive process of data drawing also on their practical insights and professional positional knowledge (as a frontline social worker, manager, practice educator or strategic planner for the local authorities). This approach stipulates the roles of social workers' experiences in producing theories for practice and theories from practice, and further suggests the possibility of linking these two types of research together through the cyclical process delineated in diagram 1.

For ensuring egalitarian and democratic collaboration between social workers and academics in CPRSW, academic-practitioner collaboration started at the proposal development stage. Sui-Ting Kong from Durham University and Jane Shears from

BASW co-developed and implemented a three-phase process when piloting CPRSW:

Phase 1. Practitioners learning and setting research agenda:

This took place when social workers' face-to-face visits were halted, and massive disruptions were caused in social care by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the constantly changing policies (Kong et al., 2021a). There was a huge demand for useful knowledge to guide practice in chaotic situations, and this project therefore set up the UK Social Work Practitioner Research Network for collaborative data analysis on the BASW survey. Eight social work practitioners from children and adult services in both England and Wales participated in setting the agenda for the research project and agreed on the training needed before academics joined the team at a later stage.

Phase 2. Practitioners getting training on research skills and prepared for handling data:

In this phase, a CPD course was co-developed with the Network members, aiming to enhance practitioner researchers' capacity to utilise secondary data to inform their practice during COVID-19. The CPD course consisted of training workshops on social work practitioner research, qualitative data analysis (coding, conceptualisation and collaborative analysis), NVivo demonstration and writing, co-delivered by Sui-Ting Kong, Jane Shears and Catrin Noone (who is the researcher of the *Empowering Social Workers in Challenging Times* project. She was responsible for coordinating the network meetings, supporting collaborative learning and carrying out preliminary data analysis. She also contributed to both the final report and academic outputs of the project). The course also helped identify and develop a community of social workers interested in carrying out research in/for their practice by providing opportunities for them to network and share knowledge with other practitioner researchers. At the end of phase 2, social work practitioner researchers held a general meeting to discuss their collaboration with university academic researchers and how best to conduct a co-analysis of the BASW survey.

Phase 3. Forming a team of practitioners and academics for co-analysis and co-writing:

Academic researchers and practitioner researchers collaboratively analysed the data collected in the BASW survey. This process was facilitated by six joint meetings and six separate small working group meetings. The former involved discussing the codes, concepts and themes emerging from the data analysis, while the latter was for individuals/groups to work on a set of data/concepts/themes. The data analysis was organised using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis package, NVivo 2020, and the NVivo file was made available for all co-researchers involved in this project to scrutinise/work on collaboratively.

This reversed sequence of involvement (practitioner researchers first and academic researchers second), embedded in the design, aimed to empower social workers to

feel comfortable to share their experiences, worries and challenges in undertaking research, and allowed sufficient time for practitioner researchers to get familiar with the data before the co-analysis began. Therefore, only in the third phase of the project, Durham University researchers joined with the practitioner researchers to collaboratively analyse the data and produce materials useful for professional practice. The collaborative process led to outputs that targeted different audiences including frontline social workers, social work managers and academics.

Evaluating CPRSW

During the third phase of the project, Evgenia Stepanova joined the project as independent evaluator aiming to assess the effectiveness of training and the quality of collaborative learning. Two practitioner researchers and two academic researchers, including all the authors of this paper, formed an evaluation team to discuss, deepen and advance the initial analysis put forward by Evgenia Stepanova. Data used for evaluating CPRSW include

1. Five recordings of the CPD sessions in phase 2;
2. Two rounds of online survey administered at the fourth and fifth month of the project (phase 3). Eight responses were collected from the first sweep of the survey and three responses were collected in the second sweep of the total of 14 active co-researchers;

Table 1 Demographics of interview participants

3. Eight qualitative interviews (also referred to as conversations) carried out with four practitioner researchers and four academic researchers to explore the experiences, views and their motivations for joining the project, as well as perceived outcomes on their personal and professional development.

Thematic analysis was performed with the aid of NVivo 12. Emerging themes were presented back to the wider Network, in five of the regular meetings, to get feedback and ensure their relevance and closeness to practitioner researchers' experiences. The evaluation of CPRSW forms the part of the analysis elucidated in this paper.

Collaborative environment: respectfulness, honesty and practitioner-led learning

The CPRSW approach created a collaborative environment which allowed participants to engage with one another with honesty and mutual respect. This environment was sustained by agreeing on and enforcing ground rules for respectful exchanges. This was particularly important when dealing with disagreements in interpreting research findings and inferring the causes for some observations. An example is when the Network was discussing why mental health services suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, adult social workers and children social workers put forward drastically different explanations – the former attributed the lack of resources in adult services to an overemphasis on child protection whereas the latter felt it was just a matter of increased demands and maintained that children

should take priority. Ground rules helped contain the tension and allowed the facilitator to explore different plausible explanations with the group that were less antagonising.

The collaborative environment also depends on building relationships that are 'founded on a shared purpose: [professional] development' (Wallerstein and Martinez, 1994:313). Many practitioner researchers spoke of the common experience of not having a strong research culture at their workplace and their eagerness to expand and exercise their research skills in and on social work practice as their major motivation to participate in the Network. Several practitioner researchers reported that they perceived the project meeting as '*something to look forward to*' and often viewed the meetings as rewarding. The network approach, for being online and cross-services by design, clearly provided the opportunity for social workers from different service units and different parts of the country to collaborate on a social work research project. The professionally diverse but like-minded group became a safe space for practitioner researchers to share their professional observations, thoughts and feelings which can sometimes be misinterpreted as criticism in one's workplace. Honest exchange is crucial for contextualising findings about social workers' experiences during COVID-19. Some potentially sensitive topics discussed in the Network included the inadequacy of support from senior management, influence of politics on COVID-19 measures and the lack of protection for the most vulnerable, austerity and neo-liberalisation of adult and children services.

Having social work practitioners to join the project and co-develop the research and learning agenda before joining up with the wider group of academics, the project tailored learning opportunities to suit individual practitioners' preferences and needs. Mapping out the research process alongside practitioner researchers' interests and skills led to training sessions on participatory research, thematic analysis and use of NVivo. Academic researchers joining later in the project were briefed about the research agenda and training which took place in the project group, creating a reversed sequence of involvement compared to conventional research led by academic researchers.

Flexibility and Diversity

Flexibility in terms of what, how and when to contribute was built into the collaborative learning process in CPRSW. Each session was designed to enable individuals to participate at their own pace by balancing the use of their existing experience and acquisition of new skills in researching on social workers' experience during COVID-19. Reflective questions were used to enable co-researchers to explore their pre-existing knowledge and experiences to make sense of data presented to them, so as to identify key issues facing the profession during COVID-19. Data were organised by themes on NVivo based also on the emerging analysis by co-researchers in research meetings. In each co-analysis session, co-

researchers were encouraged to read as much data as they could in their own circumstance and provide their interpretations of data in small groups.

> *"It's just a way that you can come to it when you're ready. And I think that's to me is how participation should work. It shouldn't be a linear process with people all participating in the same way for the same amount of time. We have to create environments that support people to participate on their own terms. And I think that worked pretty well for us [and] for academics. Because otherwise, I think a lot of people would have been caught off balance" (Emily, academic researcher)*

While some co-researchers had less time to engage in data analysis, there were also those who wanted to gain experience of analysing data with NVivo. Depending on the project phase, participants met as often as once a week to once a month. All sessions were designed as group work with smaller breakout group and joint discussions. These opportunities to collaborate allowed participants to establish good relationships with other co-researchers and take on shared responsibility for a research task.

> *"Having insight from across disciplines is brilliant. Everyone has something to offer and it's great to build the network and see what we all can contribute." (Anonymous response to questionnaire)*

The variety of project activities, such as co-producing policy brief, practice guidance and report as well as launching webinar, further created space for participants' voices to be heard. They allowed various ways to contribute to the research outputs and express one's opinions. Practitioner researchers, such as Anne, said they felt CPRSW had been *'a genuine attempt at collaboration rather than a tokenistic attempt' and contested their preconceived idea that research was about academics leading and practitioners would be 'allowed to do tiny bits of it'*. The varied outputs also diversify learning opportunities to suit the skills and learning needs of individuals. Instead of prioritising academic outputs which are often written in jarring language and might not serve the purpose for aiding practice in critical times, diversified outputs enabled co-researchers with diverse interests to invest themselves in the process, motivated them to participate in the knowledge production and dissemination processes that speak to their professional learning goals.

Empowerment and Ownership

Co-researchers expressed positive experiences of their engagement in the project and discussed how personalised support helped their learning. "*Fast insightful and personal responses*" and being encouraged to think outside the box are said to link to boosted professional confidence, improved professional knowledge and enhanced participatory skills.

> *'I was supported and assisted to be able to offer…you can tell I wasn't confident about those areas of the journey…I think that [I] shy away from that. I was able to kind of say, look, this is what I'm saying. And I was helped to work through it because I had some negative thought.' (Kate, practitioner researcher)*

The flexibility and diversity in learning, previously discussed, have led to other positive outcomes for participating individuals – feeling empowered and belonging. Democratic decision-making mechanisms, the practitioner led and practice-oriented learning processes and research activities for integrating experience and evidence afforded a sense of control and ownership among practitioner researchers. These empowering practices are embedded in the project design but need to be backed up by ensuring co-researchers' equal access to resources and fair recognition of each other's contribution in both the processes and the outputs.

By analysing the 'empowering moments' expressed by co-researchers, it has become clear to us that those opportunities to speak for themselves and to be heard are crucial to dismantling epistemic hierarchy.

> *'I felt very valued in contributions that I can make. And that's felt quite genuine and quite authentic. I mean, you are key figures in this project in the first place.' (Anne, practitioner researcher)*

Instead of leading the research activities academics facilitated and enabled practitioners to make best use of their practical experience, professional insights and analytical skills to interpret data. Thus, practitioners saw their voices mattered, 'views are valued' and they could "influence the course of events. Better integration of practice experience and frontline observations in social work practice research is of paramount importance for producing relevant, useful and up-to-date knowledge. Especially amidst public health crisis of a pandemic when systematic data collection is challenging and the situations are complex and rapidly developing.

The reversed sequence of involvement in the CPRSW process also unsettled the assumptions that academics always know better and more about how research should be done. Since practitioner researchers had time to prepare themselves in advance of the co-analysis with academics, they felt less intimidated when engaging in research dialogues at a later stage whereas academics were put in a situation where they needed to acquire skills for collaborative learning that could make them feel left behind.

> *'I think that social workers always feel intimidated by academics, and in order to avoid that, the social workers had more sort of power and flexibility from the start, but it led to academics being left behind.' (Tara, academic researcher)*

The majority of practitioner researchers expressed positive experiences in CPRSW which included boosted confidence and "*constructive*" dialogues and feedback with like-minded people.

> *'it's really good to speak to people who are looking at issues, deeply reviewing, surveying the literature that's around. And there is a huge amount all over the world and certainly in England and in Britain as well. So it's really good to actually not only be able to read things that people have written like yourselves from, but actually to be able to converse with people and have dialogue with people and looking up to date ideas.' (Amit, practitioner researcher)*

However, the larger joint meetings *'with the very experienced academics'* are still *'slightly more intimidating*' than small group discussions.

Practitioner researchers reported that enthusiasm, individual attention to each researcher and strong commitment of the project leader served as a powerful force for learning and collaboration. This might indicate the need for the initiating researcher of CPRSW to personalise support and encourage expression of opinions in the due process, demonstrating the criticality of an ethics of care to participatory research (Gilligan, 1993; Banks, 2013). Acknowledging and responding to individual researchers' differences in terms of their level of practice and research skills, experiences, level of confidence, views and perspectives and life circumstances, it was found by many co-researchers that they felt they had "*equal opportunity to develop either knowledge or skills or any other valuable aspects*" in the CPRSW pilot.

Pedagogy of discomfort in collaboration

The reversed sequence of involvement and a focus on empowering practitioner researchers in CPRSW are strategies to swap the ownership and leadership in the process/structure for knowledge production, but they also engendered uncomfortable emotions among academics. Feelings of unease, confusion, a sense of misplacement were expressed by academics when they first joined the project.

> *'I suppose I felt when I went, you know, when asked to go to the online meeting. I felt rather unprepared. Do you know the expression? Yes, and I am happy to wing it but I am not sure. […] It just is simply it's just an unusual experience.' (Alena, academic researcher)*

Some practitioner researchers were aware of the unease and sense of discomfort felt by academic researchers. They described academics' experience in CPRSW as 'sweating' at first but maintained that there was a 'balance' in participation in general and 'the journey was in the right direction'.

While practitioner researchers expressed a sense of confidence in phase 3, some academic researchers felt exposed to vulnerability of entering an unfamiliar environment and an 'established team'. Use of unconventional methods can sometimes cause more anxiety on the part of academics than practitioner researchers because they are trained to have a defined understanding of well-

established methods/methodology, and deviation from those might create discomfort and confusion.

> ***Interviewer:*** *If it wasn't titled collaborative focus groups, what would you call it?*
>
> ***Alena (academic):*** *Well, I just I didn't recognise any of the qualities of focus group... I mean, it may be that I've got a very old-fashioned view of focus groups, but I suppose I'm very tied to Morgan's work on focus groups. That for me focus group is a way [that] You are trying to generate ideas of thinking and experiences, ideas, thinking from different people in a group about a particular area. Yeah, I've never been. If it was called collaborative data analysis, I would have understood it.*

The experience and feelings of Alena indicated the need to better prepare academics in participating on collaborative research with practitioners, especially when practitioners also take on the role as researchers whereas not all academics maintain their participation in practice. In response to that, Tara, an academic researcher, suggested,

> *'But I think for the academics to be introduced to the Practitioner Research Group on day one of the CPD and plus some of the academics who were going to be involved later could perhaps have done one or two short training sessions.'*

Introducing academics to the team at the beginning and negotiating the openness of the CPD training for academic researchers might be helpful for preparing academics for collaborative learning in CPRSW. Creating separate space for academics to identify and articulate the discomfort and enable reflection on the structure and root causes of these feelings will be needed in future implementation of CPRSW, drawing on the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999; Nadan and Stark, 2017).

Discussion

Research and practice integration has long been a priority in social and health care. Within social work, there have been various approaches developed over the years to achieve this goal, namely practice near research (Cooper, 2009; Winter et al., 2015), evidence-based/informed practice (Epstein, 2011; Thyer and Meyers, 2011), social work implementation science (Cabassa, 2016), practice research (Julkunen and Uggerhøj, 2016), practitioner research (Shaw, 2005; Shaw and Lunt, 2012) and service user-led research (Beresford, 2013; Boxall and Beresford, 2013). While some of these approaches emphasise what types of knowledge should count, some others focus on who should be doing research/producing knowledge. What is common to these diverse responses is the involvement of different stakeholders: social work practitioners, service users and carers. At the minimum they are

involved in dissemination and utilisation of the research evidence and at most coproducing and practice.

A networked approach to social work participatory research is a rather unusual one. Existing literature on similar approaches show that they are either service specific (Kelly et al., 2015) or with a focus on knowledge dissemination and utilisation rather than knowledge production (Sage et al., 2021). Kelly et al. (2015) set up the Recovery-Oriented Care Collaborative, as one of the other 152 established Practice-Based Research Networks (PBRNs) in the US, for fostering collaboration between academic researchers, clinicians and mental health practitioners in learning and research. Sage et al. (2021) set up the Professional Collaborative Networks (PCNs) to enhance social capital, relational capital and digital literacy of social work students hence the social work workforce for utilising research knowledge. Unlike CPRSW, these approaches aim to make practice more evidence-based/informed but do not address alienating academic practices that are not sensitive to the needs of practice or see practice as afterthought. Neither do they challenge the research-to-practice direction of knowledge transfer, leaving practice knowledge still at the bottom of knowledge hierarchy.

CPRSW addresses both epistemological and social hierarchies in social work knowledge production which are characterised by practice wisdom, tacit knowledge and practical experience being seen as less valid than research evidence and theories. CPRSW advocates for the validation of experience and evidence as equally relevant to social work professional knowledge development: First by seeing experience as both data and instrument for interpreting and contextualising research data, and second by acknowledging practitioners' roles in setting the research agenda, data analysis, writing up and disseminating research when given the right environment and support. This can be seen as a type of participatory practice research which, however, does not conform to the traditional division of labour between practitioner researchers and academic researchers, with the former responsible for professional learning and the latter research and theoretical development (Uggerhøj et al., 2018).

Evaluation of the pilot of CPRSW shows that the reversed sequence of involvement in a collaborative research process can increase confidence, research capacity and motivation of practitioner researchers in conducting research. Flexibility in participation and diversity in research activities allowed personalised professional learning and no-blame environment for collaboration. Academics and social workers can take part on their own terms, work together in self-selecting groups where they may express and defend their views and participate in a variety of challenging analytical and writing tasks. To practitioner researchers, CPRSW provided an egalitarian learning environment where there existed a safe space and social connectedness. However, academics expressed unsettling emotions in such an unfamiliar research environment, highlighting the need for a better understanding of these emotions, their causes and ways to critically reflect on them for making research practice-near. Further research is necessary to explore how to convert this

discomfort into a pedagogic resource for challenging stereotypes of the 'others' in social work learning and research.

Regarding the challenges of a networked approach to participatory practice research, key issues are representation of the workforce and the ambiguous roles of academic researchers. While the network is self-selecting participants might not be representative of the social work workforce and the professional learning needs of those who do not/cannot participate. Membership of the network is fluid and can shrink or expand unexpectedly which can affect the network's scheduled work programme, leaving a question of who get to take up the work left to be done. Building sufficient resources and human power to a CPRSW project is therefore essential for its success. Rethinking the roles of academics in this approach will be needed if we want to prepare academics better to enter this process and to enable them to see how their research skills and knowledge in theory could help give voice to tacit knowledge and practice wisdom which are often unarticulated and unheard in social work literature (Kong et al., 2021c). The learnings from piloting the CPRSW also point to the importance of building infrastructure, interactive space and skills for transdisciplinary learning underpinned by equal participation of multiple stakeholders, as part of the agenda for democratising social work practice research.

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Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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