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Doing
RESEARCH in
SOCIAL WORK
and SOCIAL CARE

THE JOURNEY FROM STUDENT
TO PRACTITIONER RESEARCHER

1

Research in the Professional Practice Context

In this chapter you will learn about

- Defining research
- Evidence based practice
- Your role as a researcher – perhaps student or practitioner – and the impact of the research context on your role and activities
- Insider and outsider research
- The importance of self-reflection and self-awareness, as well as some tools to assist you to develop these skills.

Introduction

This chapter begins by introducing you to the idea of research, particularly within a climate of evidence based practice (EBP). What follows is a definition of research, specifically related to research in the social work and social care fields. Given that researchers in these fields are often concerned that their research will 'make a difference' and generate useable knowledge in practice, we have included (in Chapter 2) a description of pragmatism as offering a valuable philosophical basis for such research. But, to begin, this chapter 'sets the scene' by outlining the types of research in which we as professionals are engaged. We focus on practitioner

researchers and the importance of evidence informed practice, to student research on placement or as graduate and postgraduate researchers. Given that a commitment to reflective practice and ongoing self-awareness is a key expectation of professional practice, in this chapter (and indeed throughout the book) we pay particular attention to this idea and explain how it also 'fits' with research. We provide guidelines on *how* to be self-reflective and what this might mean in different contexts and with different epistemological orientations (and we will definitely define all words like this!). We focus on the different expectations and constraints when research takes place in varied contexts such as organisations and agencies, as well as in clinical and community settings. We discuss, for example, researchers as 'insiders' and 'outsiders', time pressures, as well as issues of ethics, power and researcher roles.

Real-world examples will be given, outlining the researcher's location and position alongside the role of reflection. Links will be made here to Chapter 2 with regard to the frameworks that underpin our research practice, as well as how self-awareness assists with conducting the research, and at what points.

Research

It's very hard not to do research! In fact, every time we go shopping or go to work or just engage in the usual activities of everyday life, we do research. We can't avoid making observations, remembering previous experiences when we did something similar, making comparisons such as which shampoo to buy; in fact without using our 'research faculties' we would rarely be able to participate in, let alone enjoy, life. Perhaps what differentiates this 'everyday research' from research as a formal activity, is the fact that the latter requires a systematic approach to the identification, collection and analysis of data, and the sharing of the outcomes or results of that process with the wider community (see also Charles, 1997).

Evidence based practice

In contemporary times in many countries, service managers and increasingly service users expect that professional practice is built upon an evidence base, with social workers engaged in what is usually referred to as evidence based practice (EBP). The need for EBP is recognised as central to the development of social work's professional credibility amongst other professions (Berger, 2010; Edmond et al., 2006: 377). EBP is credited with a potentially powerful and vital role of translating research findings into practice interventions and initiatives, thereby giving it a key role as a focus for reflective practice, so prized by social work practitioners (Adams et al., 2009: 168). Indeed the potential that EBP activities hold for integrating theory and practice requires greater recognition (Edmond et al., 2006: 380) and, when combined with practice wisdom, will enhance practitioner skill and expertise. As Rubin and

Parrish (2007: 409) comment, 'instead of ignoring clinical expertise and client values and expectations, the EBP process requires practitioners to extend themselves beyond the realm of practice wisdom and combine these elements with the best evidence'.

There has been criticism of EBP (perhaps rather unfairly) as providing students and practitioners with a cookbook approach to interventions and decision-making, thereby decreasing the need and subsequently the capacity for critical thinking (Adams et al., 2009). Despite this, practitioners in social work and social care are nevertheless expected to have the skills and knowledge to be able to analyse the evidence presented in the research of others to inform and better serve their clients, as well as carry out research into their own practice.

Rubin and Parrish (2007: 407) offer a definition of EBP useful to social workers and social care workers:

> a process in which practitioners attempt to maximise the likelihood that their clients will receive the most effective interventions possible by engaging in the following four steps:
>
> 1. Formulating an answerable question regarding practice needs
>
> 2. Tracking down the best evidence available to answer that question
>
> 3. Critically appraising the scientific validity and usefulness of the evidence
>
> 4. Integrating the appraisal with one's clinical expertise and client values and circumstances and then applying it to practice decisions.

(For variations on this definition, see also Adams et al., 2009; Berger, 2010; Edmond et al., 2006.)

It has been noted that both qualified and practising social workers, as well as social work students, demonstrate reluctance with regard to doing research (Unrau and Grinnell, 2005), perhaps indicative of their lack of confidence in their abilities to read and understand research or to develop strategies to incorporate it into their practice. This book may help to address this problem.

Defining research

There are many definitions of research. Alston and Bowles (2012: 9) describe *social research* as 'the systematic observation and/or collection of information to find or impose a pattern, to make a decision or to take some action', and that, further, social work research 'implies action, pursues social justice and collects systematic information in order to make a difference in people's lives' (see also Dominelli and Holloway, 2008; Shaw, 2008). In addition, McDermott (1996) emphasises the importance of having a theoretical understanding of a problem in its broader social context. She also notes (p. 6) that social work research should '[enable] the participation of the researched, the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed and those who interact with them'. From this perspective, social work research might be considered to be characterised by a focus on:

- Conceptualising problems in their social context
- Seeking a multi-dimensional understanding of problems
- Seeking change and an action-orientation to so doing
- Meeting the broad aims of social work: human rights, social justice, respect, integrity, empowerment and participation.

How these ideals translate into the practice of research across the broad area of social care might include:

- An interest in practical knowledge, or the application of knowledge and understanding to practical problems
- A social justice orientation, motivated by the potential that their research might lead to changes or improvements to or demonstrate the benefits of remaining with the status quo
- An interest in human rights, such as enabling groups like sex workers or Indigenous peoples whose experiences are rarely in the public domain to be heard
- Work as part of a team of other professionals, which could include community workers, policy-makers, service users and consumers of services
- Work across sectors: health, mental health, alcohol/drug and child and family services.

The researcher

Our aim with this book is to provide a map and signposts for doing research from the start of your journey as a student in social work/care to becoming a practitioner. As we will discuss, while the particular tasks and activities that researchers perform may be generic, the role of the researcher will be different depending on where one is along this pathway.

Role difference has implications for how generic tasks may be carried out, for example, with regard to the degree of autonomy that the researcher has.

What questions about social work practice do you have? Are there concerns or injustices you'd like to see addressed? Have you observed gaps in services that you think need to be resolved?

Case study

The research environment

Research environments: Geoffrey, a researcher who is employed by an organisation to do research, may have minimal choice about the questions he will research but perhaps some autonomy with regard to the methods used; Annie, a self-funded PhD student, may appear to have complete autonomy in relation to the research area chosen, but may encounter constraints which limit autonomy in the form of ethical factors, or feasibility issues, or access to research participants because of student status.

All researchers like Geoffrey and Annie share contexts that are complicated and complex. It should also be clear to you that these concerns are shaped by a broad pragmatic philosophy, notably with regard to a commitment to social justice, and a focus on creating knowledge for practical application.

Complexity does not only refer to the web of systems and players involved in delivering services, but can also include the diverse and sometimes conflicting ways in which issues and problems are defined, recognised and understood.

Take, for example, the very different ways in which 'risk' and 'vulnerability' are understood by doctors, social workers, physiotherapists, patients and families (McDermott, 2014) in the following example.

Case study

Understanding risk

Discharge of an older patient is being considered; the physiotherapist may be concerned about the risk that the patient may fall should she go home; the social worker may place greater emphasis on risk to the patient's right to autonomy and independence; the carer may be concerned at the pressure on him to monitor the patient's health while being anxious about risks to his own emotional wellbeing; the patient herself may be currently assessed as having moderate rather than severe dementia and hence believe that others making decisions for her risks her ability to express her freedom to choose where she wishes to live; the neuropsychologist may believe that the patient's dementia is at risk of worsening and hence admission to a facility rather than a return home is warranted sooner rather than later.

This example highlights the variety of ways in which the concept of risk might be understood, indicating that a researcher researching such a concept will need to be clear how he himself is going to define the term. It also draws attention to the context, for example, is a 'health risk' different from a 'child protection risk'? And from what position or location is the researcher defining 'risk', for example, as a health practitioner or a policy-maker? Thus, the researcher will need to identify from which vantage point, or within which context, he is viewing the issue or problem. This positioning will be significant with respect to the way in which the research question is formulated, the literature reviewed, and the research design and methods chosen.

Although we go on to discuss these issues in greater detail in Chapter 2, it is important here to acknowledge that all of us have views that shape how we see the world and how we think we can see the world; this is known as our *epistemological* position.

When we translate our interest into a research question, the question we arrive at will reflect that position, but more of that in the next chapter.

The context

This takes us to a key principle in doing social research: that of understanding the importance of context. Social workers bring to their research a perspective which emphasises the context-bound nature of human action. Importance is placed on understanding the person within their environment. Environment is conceptualised very broadly as including many 'levels' of action: intrapsychic, interpersonal, organisational, environmental and structural. Particular interest in the experiences of vulnerable people, structural barriers to service access, impact of stigma or prejudice might characterise research questions in the social work and social care fields.

In the case example below you will see how Fiona and colleagues in a health setting studied the ways in which their social workers understood the concept of 'complexity' as it referred to their clients in sub-acute settings (McAlinden et al., 2013). They positioned their research in the context of a hospital, identifying the various 'levels' at which the research question was relevant. The methods chosen reflect the 'level' at which data were sought and the rationale for this.

Case study

Understanding complexity in a hospital environment

Fiona McA, Fiona McD and Jo (the study team) wanted to understand the factors influencing the service social workers were delivering to patients. Their intention was to use the findings to support and improve the capacity of social workers to work with patients identified as complex. They approached the study questions from a social work perspective, influenced by the conceptual framework of person-in-environment. They wanted to capture understanding of complexity that resonated at micro, meso and macro levels.

At the micro level, structured interviews were used to identify the perspectives of social work practitioners across all sites of the hospital regarding the nature of 'complex cases'. The research team's interpretation of these data included analysis of both workforce and organisational issues relevant, at the meso level, to perceptions of complexity and social workers' responses to complex casework practice. In drawing out the implications of these findings, the analysis included consideration of macro level factors relating to training and workforce policies including recognition of the complicated social, economic and legal context in which their work and their organisation is embedded.

Earlier, we introduced the idea of epistemology (and more of that later!). Suffice to say here, epistemology relates closely to our consideration of context because the way we understand context will be influenced by our epistemological orientation. For example, how does our understanding of the context in which we are researching influence how the phenomena we wish to understand are defined and expressed within that context? Do we look at context as in some way responsible for the way phenomena become known, and then responded to?

Where researchers do research in direct (clinical) practice settings such as hospitals, community mental health services, correctional/probation services or family support agencies, the contextual issues that require recognition are often also ethical issues. For example, if you have questions relating to the needs or experiences of your own patients/clients, or the agency's service users, you will be alert to the possible power differentials in your relationships with them, and the importance of ensuring that they are free to participate, or not, without pressure in any research you propose. If your interest lies in researching the policies and programmes of your own organisation, there may be issues to manage regarding your own position within the organisation and how comfortable your peers or superiors will be with participating in research, given that some issues may be sensitive. While the topic of ethics in research will be discussed fully in Chapter 3, it is important to note here that the extent to which confidentiality and anonymity can be preserved in 'in-house' research will also require consideration.

These examples of the ways in which attention to context will shape research highlight some of the issues that context-focused research generates. In later chapters in this book we will explore them in greater detail. What they do raise, however, is the question of who the researcher is and where the researcher situates or locates themselves.

The researcher in context: insiders and outsiders

Another key principle in getting started with your research, is to think about 'who the researcher is'; that means, do they enter the research context as an *insider* or an *outsider*, as a student, as a practitioner, as a member of a cross- or inter-disciplinary team?

Insider (sometimes referred to as 'emic') research generally refers to research that is carried out by a researcher who is located 'inside' the organisation which is the site and focus of the research. It can also refer to a researcher who belongs to a group that is itself experiencing a problem or concern which the researcher decides to study; for example, they may themselves be a carer for a person with a disability and decide to research how others in the same situation experience this. An *outsider* (sometimes referred to as 'etic') researcher generally does not belong to the organisation or community which is being researched, nor do they personally experience the problem or issue being studied.

The advantages of being an 'outsider researcher' are considered to be the researcher's objectivity and neutrality, whilst an 'insider researcher' brings personal knowledge and understanding of the research question or issue, and with this may come increased trust from research participants. But 'insiders' may be criticised for lacking the necessary objectivity in data interpretation, while 'outsiders' may be criticised for not gaining sufficient 'entry' into the world of participants and hence having limitations on their access to data and information. For a critique and analysis of some of these issues, see Shaw and Faulkner (2006), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), and Humphrey (2013).

Importantly, however, as Kerstetter (2012) points out, it is more often the case that insider/outsider positioning occurs on a continuum, with researchers rarely being either/or. Indeed, some community based research, especially that which is participatory and action-oriented, may proceed from the basis that researchers, when they are 'outsiders', may move, over time, to becoming 'almost insiders'. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) reflect on their movement along the insider/outsider continuum, with one researcher being drawn more closely 'inside' the research, whilst the other became more clearly positioned as an outsider by the research participants.

Leigh's (2014) research provides an interesting ethnographic case study of a researcher alternating between a carefully chosen insider and outsider positioning. In her study of child protection, she adopted the dual role of 'insider' observing the work of her own social work team, and 'outsider' observing another team in another child protection setting, intending that taking these dual roles would enhance her reflexivity. In her paper she identifies the personal and professional dilemmas that complicated her 'intimate insider' role, in particular issues of boundaries in relationships with colleagues in her own organisation. While it was emotionally demanding and at times unsettling, Leigh was able to use her capacities to reflect, enhanced by her 'outsider' role in the second agency, assisting her to process and work with the challenges of studying the impact of personal relationships that she was a part of, and their influence on the social work role.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an important form of research, especially in community settings, which often leads to (and may even instigate) the differences between insiders and outsiders overlapping. There are two main strands in participatory research: one is rooted in action research and a second more critical, and openly emancipatory strand, originates in concerns with issues of oppression, marginalisation and resource inequities (Pyett, 2002; Wallerstein and Duran, 2003; Khanlou and Peter, 2005). Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire and others in Latin America, PAR has transformed thinking about research relationships: instead of communities being objects of research, community members become partners in inquiry (Wallerstein and Duran, 2003). Such participatory approaches have strongly influenced approaches to health research (Wallerstein and Duran, 2003; Baum et al., 2006). Feminist perspectives have also enriched participatory approaches through questioning how difference, power issues and representation of others are accounted for in the research process and in the knowledge produced (de Koning and Martin, 1996).

If you are engaged in a study currently, or are considering doing so, here are some issues to reflect on:

Are you an insider or an outsider ... or perhaps a bit of both?

What are the advantages and disadvantages to your position?

Does your research question reflect your insider/outsider status?

What does it feel like to be in your position (as insider or outsider)? Do you think you have a different view of the research issue than if you were in the 'opposing' position? How is your view different?

How can you make best use of your status in answering your research question?

If you are starting out or already beginning your research, or refer back to the issue you noted earlier, there are some important questions to ponder in the box above.

Student researchers

Student researchers, whether undertaking graduate or postgraduate study, by virtue of their status *as* students, are faced with a number of issues for consideration. They are more likely to be 'outsiders', not only because they are generally not employed by the organisations they are researching, but also with regard to their position in structures of power and influence. Thus, much of what was earlier noted about 'outsider researchers' is relevant here, for example, the benefits of neutrality and objectivity, and the challenge of working towards achieving the acceptance and trust of research participants. In addition, however, we are used to thinking of researchers as being in more powerful positions than research participants and hence the necessity of designing research to minimise any harm to those who may be vulnerable. But student researchers are often in less powerful positions, particularly if they are researching organisations, policies or programmes provided by professionals. From the student point of view, we may say that in these circumstances, they are researching 'up' and they themselves may experience feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. Ways of addressing this power imbalance might take the form of working to a reference group or steering committee which can guide and mentor them. The availability of good, supportive and easily accessed supervision is a key factor in minimising anxiety and building confidence. Harvey (2011) provides some practical guidelines to interviewing 'elites', those in senior managerial positions in organisations or highly skilled professionals. Such issues as being aware of the need to gain the interviewee's trust, coming to the interview well-prepared, being flexible with availability to fit with the interviewee's commitments and the advisability of asking open-ended questions are useful to consider.

Being a student however, also confers a particular kind of identity that may be derived from social class, educational attainment and economic status. These factors might set a student apart from some of the groups that they are researching, particularly if participants come from more marginalised backgrounds. To such groups, student researchers may be perceived as outsiders and again they may face the challenge of building trust and acceptance with those whom they are researching.

Practitioner researchers

As discussed in the introduction, social work and social care practitioners are, by definition, those whose primary role is to provide a service of some kind to those who are service users of their organisation or agency: to work with those experiencing difficulties in their day-to-day lives. Practitioner research is therefore a particular form or kind of research. Within social work it exemplifies the very kind of research that we might consider to be synonymous with social work itself – research which occurs within, is mediated by and is reflective of its social context. Mitchell et al. (2010: 13), in reviewing practitioner research studies, noted that

'most studies reflected the service delivery context in which practitioners operated …'. This is what we might expect, for, above all, social work practice is *contextualised* practice, summed up in social work's recognition of the defining significance for the profession of person-in-environment. In this sense then, practitioner research derives its legitimacy and imperative *because* it informs the context where social workers are practising.

There are a number of definitions of practitioner research in the literature (Epstein and Blumenfield, 2001; Wade and Neuman, 2007; Lunt et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2010; Bawden and McDermott, 2012; Harvey et al., 2013; Marshall, 2014). The Salisbury Statement on Practice Research (International Practice Research Conference, 2008: 2–3) defines it as:

> [involving] curiosity about practice. It is about identifying good and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience … It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower, and to realise social justice through practice.

Given this definition, we see that the kinds of research questions which *practitioner researchers* (those practitioners who undertake research in or on their own practice), address focus on the issues, problems and situations that they encounter in their day-to-day practice which challenge, surprise or perplex them. For example, McAlinden et al.'s study (2013) began with wondering about social workers' practices with complex patients and resulted in a study to examine the meaning of complexity. Practitioner researchers also undertake evaluations of the impact of their practice or the programmes they develop (see, for example, Green et al., 2015). Importantly, they may focus on identifying the evidence that supports or challenges their practice, perhaps prompting change in that practice. These activities are often in response to the increasing emphasis being placed on practitioners working from an evidence based or evidence informed position. With this comes an expectation that practitioners be familiar with the evidence supporting their practice or be active in contributing to this evidence by researching their own practice (Caldwell et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Mullen et al., 2008; Rubin and Parrish, 2007; Arnd-Caddigan, 2010; Berger, 2010; Rubin and Bellamy, 2012; Bellamy et al., 2013).

Practitioner researchers are primarily 'insider' researchers, working from the basis of their 'practical' or 'tacit' knowledge, that rich store of understanding that they (perhaps almost intuitively) bring to bear on the situations and problems of everyday practice. Tacit knowledge might be thought of as providing their 'theory in use' (Argyris and Schon, 1974); that is, their knowledge about how to 'go on' in order to achieve the outcomes they want in particular situations. Doing research can provide an opportunity to bring such tacit or practical knowledge to light, and in this way advance the practitioner's understanding and critique of what they do and why. Importantly, doing practice research provides a ready-made opportunity to critically reflect on their actions and their impact on service delivery.

Studies undertaken by practitioner researchers are typically small in scale and in timeframe. Usually practitioners design and develop their own studies, often adopting a variety of methods (Lunt et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2010), such as data mining (Epstein and Blumenfield, 2001),

surveys, interviews and focus groups. Very importantly, research conducted by practitioners on their own practice can become a vital way of translating research findings into practice interventions and initiatives, a translation that is often very difficult to achieve from other approaches (see Gray et al., 2015). It is thus a key pathway towards ensuring practitioners work from an evidence or knowledge informed base.

Doing research as a practitioner brings with it many challenges. From the outset, their role as a practitioner signals their 'insider' status, which, as we've noted earlier, requires close attention to identifying, recognising and working with the potential biases that may influence the design process and analysis of data collected. As we have also noted, ethical issues around access to research participants, anonymity and confidentiality need to be attended to.

Collaborative research

Social workers and other social care practitioners as well as students often join with colleagues from a range of disciplines and locations, as well as with service users and consumers in order to do research. This then becomes a collaborative and/or cross-disciplinary approach.

Case study

Benefits of collaborative research

Laura, who was a student writing her social work Honours thesis, worked with a group of allied health practitioners who wanted to explore both the characteristics of patients admitted to hospital as 'social admissions', and the role social workers played in the multidisciplinary team making discharge plans for such patients. The student was supervised and guided by the multidisciplinary team, and data gathering involved interviews with various allied health workers. This was a situation of mutual reward! The student had access to patient records and data as well as very good supervision from the team; the team had the disciplined contribution of an Honours student with a thesis to write within a tight timeframe. Everyone blossomed! The thesis was completed on time; the team proceeded to build on the research with a further research question; the findings were presented at several conferences, and an article has been written by the team.

Researching with others has advantages and disadvantages. As seen with Laura's example above, such projects can bring together researchers from a variety of locations, perspectives, skills and interests, with differential access to resources, data and information. Importantly, different stakeholders will by definition have different stakes and interests in how the question will be framed, the methods to be used, and how the findings or results can be analysed and interpreted. Our earlier example of how risk is defined differently amongst health service providers highlights this point. Given the range of potential definitions and understandings which

a multidisciplinary team represents, the first step is likely to be that of achieving common ground amongst the team of researchers. And this may require a shift in thinking, concepts and methods, where different discipline-specific knowledge is shared and discussed in order for the team to arrive at a collective understanding of the phenomena being studied (see Lawrence and Despres, 2004: 401).

All teamwork, and this is what cross-disciplinary research is, poses the challenge of learning to communicate and understand across disciplinary and consumer/provider divides. As Newhouse and Spring (2010: 315) note, one challenge may be that the team members 'need to learn to communicate, understand each other's language, ideally develop a shared language, and learn to coordinate their actions as a team'.

A collaborative cross-disciplinary approach to research is one important way of integrating discipline-specific and practice knowledge. Hadorn et al. (2010: 13–16) highlight the value of such integration. They identify five core areas for a cross-disciplinary team to attend to in order to facilitate team integration. These are: shared systems based thinking, attention to problem framing and to shared values, an acceptance of uncertainty and understanding that collaboration rests on the team's capacity to harness difference.

Problem-solving in a multidisciplinary collaborative research team depends on the extent to which those involved contribute their knowledge and information to the discussion. The more unshared knowledge (that is, disciplinary knowledge) which is not known to all, is included in the debate, the more comprehensive will be the solution to the problem (Godemann, 2008: 631). The team's collaborative work encourages a focus on the process of working together. This might require self-examination through cycles of self-reflection. It might throw up hunches or hypotheses for consideration. For example, the kinds of questions researchers might ask themselves and one another could be: What is it that we are observing? How are we observing? What do we know? And what do we know because of our observations? In this way, the team encourages the ongoing and continuing critical analysis of members (Wolf-Branigin, 2013: 7). Importantly, however, issues of power and influence within the team are also an important focus of analysis. In these ways, what emerges from the interaction of the team itself can become a source of insight for reflection-on-practice and reflection-in-practice (Wolf-Branigin, 2009: 122).

Having sketched the centrality of context and the importance of researcher positioning and identity in social work and social care research, we can bring these two 'principles' together through addressing another important principle, that of the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness to the research project.

Self-reflection and self-awareness

Self-reflection and self-awareness are closely related concepts, with the former (self-reflection) usually being the pathway to the latter (self-awareness). Knowing who the researcher is means knowing from what position in the social world they are approaching their research; for

example, as an insider or an outsider, as a service provider or as a student. More importantly, it means knowing how this social location influences what can be seen and known, and how social structures of age, gender, ethnicity and power influence the way we all look at the world. What is difficult is realising that the influence of such aspects, which may be outside our awareness, works to filter and bias what we see and understand.

These characteristics of a researcher – both structural and individual – provide researchers with what we might think of as 'windows' through which to view the social world, making some aspects visible and others opaque.

The challenge is to tease out and recognise their influence rather than to dispense with it; for, in an important sense, our 'biases' can become very valuable sources of knowledge and understanding, in much the same way that a psychoanalyst uses transference and counter-transference to assist their therapeutic interventions. Here is an example of a social work practitioner who wanted to evaluate her practice by seeking input from patients in the palliative care ward where she worked about how they understood her role.

Case study

Reflecting on our own practice – reflecting on ourselves

Miriam is a palliative care social worker. Her patients, completing a self-administered survey placed in a box anonymously on the ward, almost unanimously praised her for her care and support. While Miriam was initially very pleased, if not flattered, by the response, she began to reflect and ask: Why are these comments so positive? Who is making them? What are patients wanting to convey by providing such positive comments? In this self-reflective approach, the social worker learned something about the patients' anxiety for care and support, for not being rejected despite their neediness in the face of life-threatening illness.

As a researcher, she began to consider that their strong tendency to provide 'positive' comments might have concealed other underlying feelings, which were difficult to acknowledge.

Qualitative researchers who gather data using structured and unstructured interviews are, in an important sense, the 'data gathering instrument', their personal characteristics having the chance to influence what data are gathered.

Two student researchers early in their research journey make just this point, highlighting their developing understanding of themselves as researchers and of the role of self-reflection and self-awareness in conducting research.

Student researchers

From the time I began to consider this research, it was clear that I needed to think about it (not being neutral) and manage my own subjectivities and personal biases. (Marc)

Another measure I took to manage subjectivities was my effort to 'get the full story'. I attempted to achieve this by including consumer, carer and worker perspectives, programme and policy evaluations and a cost perspective in my research. (Amy)

How can we develop self-awareness?

One way of developing self-awareness, which several novice practitioner researchers in a large health network adopted, was through forming a small research group. This group met monthly as the practitioners developed, refined and carried out their projects.

Participating in the group provided a key resource, which not only spurred the social workers on towards completing their projects, but also was seen as supportive and helpful.

Using peers, who could be other practitioners, or class mates, or fellow postgraduate students, can be an excellent way of ensuring researchers adopt a reflective and reflexive mindset. In much research, qualitative in particular, the researcher's challenge is to capture her own perspective so that it can be 'bracketed out' and used to assist with making interpretations rather than clouding the process. Of course this is a bit like one hand clapping: is it truly possible to understand and interpret one's own perspective at the same time as understanding the perspectives of others?

Peer researchers are the most helpful allies in this challenge: they can take on the task of asking critical questions about the existence and nature of our assumptions (see Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio, 2009).

Practitioner researchers at a health service

Group meetings are important, supportive and interesting: different perspectives to bring and different questions to ask ... good to bounce off each other.

... the group model has been really supportive – been good to talk things out, get other opinions: helps you reflect.

Good to come from different areas of work – helps with objectivity.

... leave here feeling so motivated.

How to 'do' self-reflection

The task confronting the reflective researcher is that of ensuring that his or her research results or findings are the 'best possible' interpretations of the data; that is, that the findings can be relied upon to be trustworthy and authentic accounts of what has come to be known through the research process. As we will discuss in Chapter 2, researchers come to do research holding different world views, or understandings of the nature of social reality. We refer to these as holding different epistemological positions. These will influence how research findings are arrived at and interpreted. Different ways of knowing require different research methodologies and methods, and with these come different standards for determining the accuracy or 'truthfulness' of the findings. So, when reflecting on research processes and findings, the researcher's epistemological position may direct him or her to asking and answering different questions.

On the next page are the kinds of questions that reflective researchers might ask as they set out on their research journey.

See the comment from Amy, a student researcher, which highlights the positive impact of attention to self-awareness on the research process.

Keep a journal or research diary

This can become a repository for those thoughts, feelings and decisions that can easily be forgotten. Diaries and journals comprise the written reflections of the researcher who charts their research journey and in so doing reflects, critiques and, importantly, records the process. Because reflection emerges out of the process of writing, it can provide opportunities for clarifying one's view of the world by noting answers to questions such as: What do I know? Why do I know this? How do I know this?

Engin (2011) writes about her use of a diary as she undertook her PhD. She highlights its role in assisting her personal development and learning about how to be a researcher as well as its role in demonstrating how she was going about the process of constructing her (ethnographic) research. Indeed, she notes that her diary became an important emotional support as she encountered the challenges, set-backs and dynamics of her research. Engin (2011: 301–3) organised her diary under these headings: *questions to self*, for example, how she planned to manage potentially different scenarios arising as she collected data; *justifications for decisions made*, for example, why she chose to interview a participant in a particular time or place; *noticing*, here she recorded comments on things that seemed to surprise or perplex her in the data collection; *dialogue with expert other*, the 'expert other' being other writers and researchers whose work she was reading and analysing in relation to her own emergent findings.

Many researchers, perhaps particularly qualitative ones, find that it can be a good idea to use a journal or diary frequently, structuring the diary by posing specific questions, such as those to the right.

While few researchers use their journal entries as a data gathering method (though they may be used for this), those who do make use of journals

Why am I researching this question? Whose question is it? What difference does it make who has formulated or raised this question?

Who am I as a researcher; for example, am I a student, a practitioner, an insider, an outsider?

What are my personal attributes and characteristics? What do I bring to the research and how might this influence what I see and what I do?

What is my world view?

How might my world view influence my research?

Amy, student researcher

By remaining mindful of my world view I was able to appreciate both the strengths and weaknesses of previous attempts at reform in relation to my topic.

Where policy and programmes were inconsistent with my perspective, I was more able to acknowledge their goals and success by 'suspending initial judgements'.

What have I learned today?

What has surprised me today?

What are three questions I now have?

consider that they are an intrinsic part of the research process, often filling an important role as part of enhancing the rigour of data analysis. This is particularly so in research relying on qualitative thematic analysis where (as we will see in Chapter 9) it is essential to stand back and review and interrogate the themes arrived at to ensure their trustworthiness and authenticity. The diary may be most effectively used to record this process, the insights gathered along the way, the support found for those asserted and the play made with engaging rival explanations to challenge them with.

Supervision

As a research student or a social work and social care practitioner, ensuring you have access to a research supervisor can be important. The role of the research supervisor is to provide you with the guidance, support and useful criticism to enable you to progress on your journey. Doing research whether as a student or practitioner is a big undertaking! As we see throughout this book, there are complicated decisions to be made, issues to be considered, skills to learned (often including how to use supervision); and research supervision provides a place for working with these issues throughout the journey.

Choosing a supervisor is rarely done lightly. Most researchers seek to work with a more experienced researcher with whom they are personally compatible, share a research interest and who is reasonably accessible. If you are a student, your supervisor is likely to be an academic within your school, department or faculty. Supervision is generally a core activity of academic staff, forming an important part of their role.

For social work and social care practitioners, you may need to search out a research supervisor. Some large agencies or organisations may have staff who are suitably qualified to provide research supervision. If this is not the case, many practitioners make links with a university or academic department where staff are available to supervise. It might also be worth considering whether enrolment in a postgraduate course will include access to research supervision. Such a decision can not only provide rewards in the form of further qualifications, but can also offer the structure and support to do research. And some employers offer incentives such as study leave for staff enrolled in higher degree studies.

It's a good idea when you first meet with your supervisor to map out how you propose to work together, for example, how often you will meet, whether the supervisor wants to read your work in advance of meeting, whether, if articles are written from your study, they expect to be acknowledged or included as a co-author. Supervisors generally provide suggestions and feedback on your work-in-progress. They may assist you in analysing your data, ensuring added rigour in data interpretation. Above all, they have 'been there before' and know from personal experience those moments of frustration, confusion and exhilaration that the journey brings.

Feedback from research participants

A great source of feedback and prompts to reflection and self-awareness can come from those who participate in your research. As we noted earlier, the question of whether a

student researcher is perceived as 'more powerful' than they actually believe themselves to be, is one better answered in discussion with participants. Of course, the extent to which participants are contributors to the reflective research process depends on the kind of research they are doing. Cossar and Neil (2015), in their research on post-adoption support, provide an excellent example of service user involvement in research. They include reflections from birth parent consultants, particularly about how research is and should be conducted, noting time, respect, care and trust as vital. Similarly, PAR is characterised by the formation of partnerships with the researched and clearly their contributions are intrinsic to all aspects of it. By way of contrast, clinical research, such as a randomised controlled trial, makes every effort to exclude participant influence on the research in order to avoid any potential source of bias.

One important strategy used by participatory action researchers is to establish a project steering group of key community members or stakeholders, which can be a space for shared listening, learning and decision-making (Wadsworth and Epstein, 1998; Viswanathan et al., 2004). Yoland Wadsworth (1991) has argued for what she termed the 'critical reference group' to be central. Critical reference groups are made up of people who may be users of services or members of self-help groups, or others whose interests are critical to the research in question; they are sources of 'literally critical things to say about' the question (Wadsworth, 2001: 56). In participatory projects, these group members bring critical perspectives on the issues and may also undertake a range of researcher roles. For instance, Warr and Pyett (1999) described working with a critical reference group of women with experience of the sex industry in planning, recruiting and interviewing female sex workers, and in interpreting the findings to understand the complexity of meanings attached to sex work and intimate relations for these women.

Whilst other research approaches are less driven by the interests of stakeholders, many qualitative interpretive research designs provide opportunities for participants to comment on research findings by, for example, reviewing transcripts of interviews or meeting in a focus group to review the findings. For example, a researcher was studying the parenting experience of people who had been adopted. After extensive interviews with a number of participants, she analysed these data into broad themes. She then invited participants to comment on her interpretations as part of the process of arriving at the 'best possible' interpretations of the data.

Benefits of self-awareness and self-reflection

These are many. But perhaps of great significance is that self-reflection enables us to develop awareness of the nature and influence of our own intellectual and personal qualities and how these can contribute to improving lives and opportunities. Self-reflection also helps us to see something of our own limitations, the barriers and impediments that disadvantage us in our relationships with others and hence in our understanding of others. It is sometimes thought

that doing research is 'easier' in the social work and social care fields than in direct practice because researchers are shielded from dealing with the difficult realities of other people's everyday lives. Nothing could be less true: the reflective, reflexive and self-aware researcher is more accurately understood as a front-line worker whose job it is to listen, think, grapple with, understand and motivate change through the power and practice of research.

Chapter summary

We have begun this book by concentrating on the context in which you will conduct research, examining the factors that will impact on your observation of and connection to the problem and your autonomy. We outlined strategies for ensuring self-awareness throughout the research process. In the next chapter we address the frameworks underpinning research in social work and social care, including epistemology and participant driven research, which we have introduced in this chapter.

Key take-home messages

How we approach the doing of research will be shaped by our position as insiders/outsiders, our role (student, practitioner, etc.), the context in which we are conducting our study and the interaction amongst these factors. Self-reflection and self-awareness are vital to understanding this interplay and ensuring methodical and transparent research.

Doing research in the social work and social care fields may, as the examples in this chapter identify, be best understood as a strategy for solving problems in a pragmatic way. The knowledge generated by research can provide the means to do so.

Additional resources

Hallowell, N., Lawton, J. and Gregory, S. (2005) *Reflections on Research: the Realities of Doing Research in the Social Sciences*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education. This book is a great read as an orientation to doing social science research. It contains the stories of 20 researchers who have all contributed stories about the pleasures and pains of doing research. There are lots of vignettes and tips about carrying out research as well as more serious accounts of dilemmas and challenges along the research path.

Twitter has a collection of hashtags for researchers, which can provide a good way to connect and share the research journey. See, for example, Piirus Voice Chat, which hosts guest bloggers and researchers' comments on a wide range of research issues in diverse fields, including the social sciences – www.piirus.com.

A good companion as you learn about and develop your research understanding and skills might be The Social Research Update: http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk. It is published quarterly by the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK, and provides helpful explanations and information on many research topics and issues.

A useful discussion of how to work reflectively as a researcher can be found at the Participation Research Cluster, Institute of Development Studies, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation: www.participatorymethods.org/method/reflective-practice.