# Distinctions in Practitioner Research between Professional Practice and Research Practice

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**Citation Link**

**Abstract**

Practitioners undertaking research into their professional practice and those involved in evaluating it often struggle to identify distinctions between the professional practice under investigation and the research practice used to study it. This paper identifies ten areas of distinction between professional practice and research practice. It provides some example questions under each of the ten categories. These questions can be adapted for practitioner researchers as both a preparation exercise and to develop documentation to submit with research proposals or research ethics applications. The paper starts with a definition of practitioner research and then gives a brief history of practitioner research followed by reflections on the relationship between academic and professional knowledge and decolonising practitioner research.

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## Introduction

Practitioner researchers undertaking research into their professional practice need to clarify to themselves and others what professional practice is and what research practice is. The two may be intertwined but there are many important differences across all areas of these practices. Not offering clear distinctions creates confusion for others especially where academics or managers are unfamiliar with practitioner research.

This paper identifies ten areas of distinction between professional practice and research practice. It provides some example questions under each of the ten categories. These questions can be adapted for practitioner researchers as both a preparation exercise and to develop documentation to submit with research proposals or research ethics applications. The paper starts with a definition of practitioner research and then gives a brief history of practitioner research followed by reflections on the relationship between academic and professional knowledge.

## Practitioner research

Practitioner research is an umbrella term which covers a number of methodological approaches to first person professional research. These could be created from scratch to suit the context, adapted from an existing methodology or used as developed by someone else. The choice of methodology needs to address relational process and content. It could be a single or combination of approaches to researching one's practice. The rationale for the choice of methodology will be suited to the sensitivities and nuances in the context under investigation.

Practitioner research is first-person research conducted from within the doing of professional practice. It is distinct from practice research which could be conducted by an outside observer who is not involved in the professional practice. The aim of practitioner research is to generate new learning for the researcher, their professional field and the community it serves. The learning may focus on both subject (an area of practice or experience) and/or methodology (a way of studying something).

The practitioner researcher studies their practice with or without the people involved in the practice-in-view. Clients or colleagues who engage in the professional practice are invited to become research participants (sometimes called co-researchers). Practitioner research pays attention to a wide range of influencing contexts such as people, permissions, policies, cultures, environments, materials, theories and monitoring. A practitioner researcher recognises how they act as a multi-layered cultural filter for identifying what they notice, how they respond and what else is happening. Centring first-person knowing involves surfacing one's inner dialogue and its cacophonic, professionally directive, culturally normative chorus.

Reflexive and decolonial approaches reveal and challenge taken-for-granted, colonial, ideological influences, difficult-to-spot power relations, and processes of decision making which act on or exclude some voices or ideas over others. At times, this requires the practitioner researcher to get into a kind of meditative state to create the optimum conditions to access the exchanges in one's internal dialogue. Practitioner research is a heightened form or multi-layered form of reflexivity (Burnham, 1993; Burnham and Neden, 2007; Hedges, 2010; Simon, 2012).

The commitment of decolonising practice and research takes reflexivity beyond the everyday cultural normativities of the practitioner researcher. Practitioner research is an immersive commitment to lenticular ways of being in relation to people, places, time, materialities, knowledge and ways of being and knowing which are always present across time and place, seen or unseen, remembered or acknowledged. (Pillow, 2019).

## A recent history of professional knowledge

The history of knowledge, knowing and know-how is an important subject to consider in practitioner research. Since the 1990s, the helping professions have been pressured to justify their practice by producing a positivist evidence base to show what works for whom. The professions of psychotherapy, counselling and social work were in a rush to create the evidence base they didn't have in order to justify their existence. Psychotherapy and counselling research responded by generating positivist outcome-based research, for example, CORE (Evans et al., 2002) or SCORE (Stratton et al., 2013). The self of the researcher did have not a place in this kind of research to avoid contaminating the research

material. Psychotherapists and counsellors conducting research were expected to put aside their professional ways of knowing and learn to count, to measure and participate in other dissociative research practices that separated the researcher from the practitioner – and, therefore, professional knowledge and ways of knowing. Everyday professionals lost their voice and identity as storytellers, as contributors to a community knowledge base - an unintended consequence of a well-intentioned few who worked to generate a robust evidence base that would help the systemic profession continue to have a place at the professional table (Stratton et al, 2013). This created a break over many years in certain kinds of professional knowledge. Only positivist forms of knowledge generation were accorded authority and entitlement to be published in professional journals.

Qualitative research has re-found a place in the professional arts of social work, community work, education, nursing, psychotherapy and counselling. In addition, the humanities, arts and social sciences also recognise the use of qualitative first-person research to illuminate hidden and silenced areas of experience of under-researched communities and areas of practice (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, 2005). First person practitioner research offers more specific knowledge that can only be produced through personal-professional ways of knowing. The professional researcher brings or possibly chooses which of their many selves, their ways of knowing, areas of knowledge to bring into the research: their ethnicity, culture, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, social or professional status, socio-economic class, relationship with education, for example. First person research includes critical reflection on how contextual intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) and splintersectionalities (Urbistondo Cano and Simon, 2021) of the researcher are influential or created during professional or research practice.

Historically, research was carried out in universities for the benefit of academics - knowledge transfer was a one-way street. This has been changing as evidenced by, for example, the flourishing of professional doctorates internationally; and the development of Knowledge Transfer Partnership schemes in 1975 (KTP, 2022) which supported universities to work with local communities and businesses to develop and use academic knowledge for the benefit of a community. There is a widespread recognition that academic knowledge and professional knowledge have equivalence with the potential for mutual learning. The International Conference on Professional and Practice Based Doctorates, hosted by the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education fosters knowledge generation across a very wide range of professions such as building design, dance, instrument making, education, psychotherapy, organisational, arts and health care studies and so on. Conference presentations necessarily involve an explanation of the methodology used to understand what counts as knowledge and how such knowledge can be accessed, understood, described and shared. Distinctions have been made between professional knowledge and academic knowledge (Scott et al., 2004; Gibbons et al., 1994; Costley, 2021) and criteria developed to evaluate quality in first person research (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Cho and Trent, 2009; Denzin, 2003; Richardson, 2000; Simon, 2018; Tracy, 2010).


## Why distinctions matter

First person inquiry, however rigorous, often needs to be validated by academic organisations or organisations adhering to traditional ideas about what research looks like. Managers and committees

can be baffled by how research can take place within professional practice and how it can count as research. Professional research methodology tends to be bespoke to respond to the unique circumstances of the professional researcher and their professional context, so the research methodology does not echo more familiar named off-the-shelf brands of research.

My experience from leading a professional doctorate and sitting on various research ethics committees is that significant problems can arise when submitting documentation or describing your research which blurs professional practice and research. Here are some examples:

- Managers are confused. They are not sure how to give permission for the research to take place when they are not aware what it involves and how it is separate from the professional practice. If a request is not clear to a manager, the most likely outcome is that they will ask for more information of just refuse permission for the research.

- Research ethics reviewers get confused and irritated. They feel they are being asked to assess ethical issues relating to professional practice in a different organisation over which they have no jurisdiction and feel ill-equipped to appreciate matters of professional safety or risk. They wonder how what they are assessing is research when it looks like professional practice alone.

- Potential research participants are confused by what they are being asked to give permission for. This is more complicated if research participants are clients or junior colleagues who may feel it is safer to mask their confusion and just agree.

- Supervisors and assessors who are less familiar with practitioner research will advise using more traditional research methods to introduce their own filter to enable them to distinguish between the research and the professional practice under investigation.

- Colleagues and friends will either feel foolish that they don't understand what you are doing or think what you're doing isn't really research.

It is not the responsibility of research examiners, academic assessors or ethics reviewers to assess the ethics or viability of professional practice decisions, but they do need to assess the impact of research on practice and who is involved in what activities.

Questions often arise about what the data collection process is and about the data analysis. These are terms from positivist discourses that confuse practitioner researchers into thinking they need to get a net and go out to catch something which must then be scrutinised through scientific filters. It is more useful to think in terms of creating research material over data collection. This allows the practitioner researcher to select what they consider to be important or relevant episodes. Similarly, it is more suitable to replace the modernist concept of data analysis with critical reflection and sharing learning as this allows professional knowledge and know-how to influence what material to create and how in order for it to reach the professional audience effectively.

## Distinctions between professional practice and research practice

The following table demonstrates distinctions between

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | titles | 6. | responsibilities |
| 2. | questions | 7. | reflexivity |
| 3. | objectives | 8. | outcomes |
| 4. | methodology | 9. | outputs |
| 5. | activities | 10. | location |

### *Example*

As part of your professional work, you are planning to run a group for foster parents of young adult refugees. You want the group to provide the main material for your research study.

*Table 1*

## Distinctions between Professional Practice and Research Practice

| 1 | Title of Professional Work Project | Title of Research Project |
|---|---|---|
| | Support groups for foster parents of young adult refugees. | Fostering knowledge. Groupwork with foster parents of young adult refugees. |
| **2** | **Professional questions** | **Research questions** |
| | <ul><li>How do my co-worker and I set up and facilitate foster parent groups safely and effectively?</li><li>How do we ensure our practice is responsive, ethical and flexible?</li><li>What kinds of decisions are we making with people in the group and how?</li><li>How are the power relations across gender, race, age, ability, religion, neurodiversity, sexual orientation and so on being acknowledged and playing out in the group?</li><li>What measures am I taking to ensure I am countering internalised and external colonising discourses?</li><li>How am I co-ordinating with my co-</li></ul> | <ul><li>What am I doing in my professional practice and how can I develop accounts of my professional practice?</li><li>How is my membership of different communities – researcher, professional and refugee – influencing my professionalism, my humanity, the groups and the research?</li><li>How can I stay conscious of how my research may affect this community?</li><li>What can I learn by studying how we as professionals coordinate with the group members and each other?</li><li>How are the power relations across gender, race, age, ability, religion, neurodiversity, sexual orientation and so</li></ul> |

| | | |
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| | worker and they with me?<br>• How am I positioning myself as a professional and as a member of a refugee community?<br>• How and what can we as a service learn from the experience of foster parents of young refugees?<br>• How can we put this learning to work in supporting the foster placements of other young adult refugees? | on being acknowledged and playing out in my research and the literature I am drawing on?<br>• What measures am I taking to ensure I am countering internalised and external colonising discourses?<br>• How is theory and research on support groups and foster parent experience relevant to running groups for foster parents with refugee young adults?<br>• How am I developing theory and practice?<br>• What can be learned from offering support groups for foster parents of young adult refugees to create a community of knowledge?<br>• How can this learning be shared to support the fostering of other young refugees?<br>• How do I collate all this information into a coherent, ethical and accessible whole? |
| **3** | **Professional objectives** | **Research objectives** |
| | • To create a support group for foster parents of young adult refugees. (Community development)<br>• For the group to create an informal foster parent community of specialist expertise that connects people so they can share experience and learning with each other, and become a community resource for others. (Community development)<br>• To support the group in collating their experience into a documentary or publication so they can become a community resource for others. (Community development)<br>• To learn more about foster parenting skills and challenges. (Professional Development) | • To study my professional practice in-depth and extract learning for myself and for others. (Professional development)<br>• To develop a critical and reflexive account of this professional practice situated in a critical and reflexive discussion of relevant historical and transdisciplinary literature. (Professional and academic development)<br>• To share learning with others working in the field to support work with this community. (Research development)<br>• To write and present for a public professional audience about this work. (Publication and training development)<br>• To add more academic, professional and experiential contextual depth to the professional experience. (Professional |

| | | and academic development) |
|---|---|---|
| | • To learn from the group what activities, support and formats they find helpful, and what professional resources they would find useful. (Professional Development)<br><br>• To put foster parent knowledge and professional learning to use in developing future groups for foster parents of young adult refugees. (Community & Professional Development) | • To think again with and beyond the professional objectives to see what else is worthy of note that may have been missed in the practice and in the research. (Professional and research development)<br><br>• To create an overall cohesive study which i) documents a critically reflexive and practical narrative of the group activities and learning; ii) situates this account in a wider collection of essays which critically discuss policy, training and support of this user group; iii) reflects on my professional practice learning; iv) discusses implications for practice and policy of the research into this area of professional work. (Research development) |
| **4** | ***Professional methodology*** | ***Research methodology*** |
| | • Facilitated groupwork with co-workers.<br><br>• Reflexive inquiry.<br><br>• Action research.<br><br>• Video review.<br><br>• Collaborative storytelling or documentary making. | • Reflexive ethnography.<br><br>• Reflexive inquiry.<br><br>• Video review.<br><br>• Collaborative storytelling or documentary making.<br><br>• Writing as a method of inquiry. |
| **5** | ***Professional activities*** | ***Research activities*** |
| | • To develop and conduct a consultation process with potential group members about the group.<br><br>• To design the group format, process and programme of topics and activities taking group members' feedback into account.<br><br>• To inform and recruit potential group members about the group.<br><br>• To design a Group Member Information Sheet (audio and text) and a Group Member Agreement Form | • To develop and conduct a consultation process with research participants about the research.<br><br>• To design the research process and activities taking potential research participants' feedback into account.<br><br>• To inform and recruit potential research participants.<br><br>• To design a Research Participant Information Sheet (audio and text) and a Research Participant Agreement Form (audio and text). |

| | | (audio and text). <br><br> • To create confidentiality and safeguarding agreements with and on behalf of the group and the host organisation. <br><br> • To host the group and respond to its needs and group dynamics. <br><br> • To record group sessions through written notes and/or video recordings. <br><br> • To review these notes and video recordings i) to assist with facilitating the group process; ii) to assess the needs of the group; iii) to help plan future sessions and meeting group needs; iv) for the purposes of supervision including peer-supervision. <br><br> • To support the group in creating a public resource for other foster parents of young adult refugees. <br><br> • To conduct an end-of-group evaluation with group members. <br><br> • To write a report on the group with group members for the organisation's annual report. | • To create confidentiality and safeguarding agreements for the research. <br><br> • To make an in-depth reflexive first person ethnographic study of the group process from its inception through to conclusion and evaluation. Eg, make notes and observations on the professional material while reviewing the video recordings of the group sessions, and co-worker planning and review sessions, and our notes made before, during, after the group sessions and to transcribe material. <br><br> • To create a multi-layered, polyvocal account of inner and outer voices in time with the events and through retrospective review and discuss with co-worker. <br><br> • To study and critically discuss literature relating to the subject. This includes research, policy, professional theory and practice with foster parents of young adult refugees. <br><br> • To critically review the advantages and limitations of this research approach to studying this professional practice. <br><br> • To consider recommendations for further professional practice and/or research for supporting foster parents, their training and policy. <br><br> • To write papers for publication on aspects of this work and the research and to present the professional practice with its research findings at professional research conferences. <br><br> • To discuss areas of the findings with colleagues and research participants and incorporate their feedback into the final research. <br><br> • To create feedback loops between the research and the professional groupwork which enhance practice and new information. |

| 6 | *Professional responsibilities* | *Research responsibilities* |
|---|---|---|
| | <ul><li>To invite group members to co-design and adapt the programme to suit the needs of group members.</li><li>To ensure potential group members feel they have choice to participate in the group and that they know they can leave the group at any point in time.</li><li>To establish a shared agreement on confidentiality and safeguarding.</li><li>To create channels for group members to communicate safely if they feel unsafe or unhappy about any aspect of the group.</li><li>To keep records of group members and of attendance and store and transport this material in accordance with organisational/professional and data protection policies.</li><li>To reflect on group process with special attention to subject relevance, power relations in the group and how to facilitate the participation of all group members.</li><li>To consult with co-worker and group members on the direction and process of the group.</li><li>To retain my professional registration and professional indemnity insurance.</li></ul> | <ul><li>To ensure potential research participants understand that they can participate in the group and not participate in the research without prejudice.</li><li>To ensure that only the voices of group members who agree to participate in the research are included in publications or presentations arising from the research.</li><li>To ensure all research participants understand that I will be using the professional recordings and notes from the groups to study the material from the group further for my research. To do this, I have prepared a Research Participant Information Sheet (audio and text) to accompany the Group Participation Information Sheet (audio and text).</li><li>To ensure that research participants are clearly informed i) how they can agree to participate; ii) how they can say they want to not participate; iii) how they can withdraw their participation during the research; iv) and what the time limit is for the possibility of withdrawing from the research. To do this, I have prepared a Research Agreement Form (audio and text).</li><li>I will meet with potential research participants separately a few weeks before the group starts to invite them to the group in person and to explain the distinctions between the group and the research process. I will read aloud the information sheet and the agreement form with potential research participants and answer any questions they have.</li><li>To offer information to research participants to communicate safely if they feel unsafe or unhappy about any aspect of the research including their words.</li><li>To anonymise all identifying details of</li></ul> |

| | | research participants, their families and foster children in research reports or presentations.<br><br>• To anonymise any organisational context where possible in research reports or presentations.<br><br>• To keep my research notes and writings securely stored in accordance with organisational or professional and data protection policies.<br><br>• To study how and why I adapt the way of working to meet the needs of individuals or the group.<br><br>• To source and critically reflect on a wide range of related literature and practice.<br><br>• To engage with research supervisor feedback.<br><br>• To achieve research ethics approval before commencing recording or creating research material. |
|---|---|---|
| **7** | ***Professional reflexivity*** | ***Research reflexivity*** |
| | • reflexivity-in-the-moment of professional practice.<br><br>• retrospective reflexivity on professional practice. | • reflexivity on the study of professional practice.<br><br>• reflexivity on the reflexivity in studying professional practice.<br><br>• reflexivity on and as research practice. |
| **8** | ***Professional outcomes*** | ***Research outcomes*** |
| | • An enhanced sense of wellbeing, confidence and useful learning for group members.<br><br>• Enhanced sense of wellbeing for fostered young adult refugees.<br><br>• The establishment of a community resource for foster parents of young adult refugees.<br><br>• Increased respect and profile of foster parents and potential for increased recruitment of parents. | • In-depth critical and reflexive written study of practice and theory relating to groupwork with foster parents of young adult refugees.<br><br>• New theory and groupwork practice for fellow professionals.<br><br>• Contributing to developments in systemic practices with marginalised communities.<br><br>• Troubling and extending what we think of as "family" or refugee" or "groupwork".<br><br>• Material towards a book or publications |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Decrease in placement breakdown.<br>• Learning for group facilitators and host organisation about foster parent groups.<br>• Learning for group facilitators about themselves, their practice, managing multiple group memberships. | on creating community resources with foster parents of young adult refugees.<br>• Contributing to academic research on the relevance of reflexivity in qualitative research. |
| **9** | ***Professional outputs*** | ***Research outputs*** |
| | • Documentary or publication for foster parents of young adult refugees.<br>• Evaluation forms.<br>• Internal report on group project. | • Professional training courses.<br>• Workplace presentations or workshops.<br>• Conference presentations.<br>• Community presentations.<br>• Research reports critically reflecting on existing professional practice and research and proposing new professional practice learning and new theory.<br>• Publications, exhibitions, digital media etc. |
| **10** | ***Professional Practice Locations*** | ***Research Practice Locations*** |
| | • At local community centre.<br>• Video review in workplace private office.<br>• With clinical supervisors in London or online (UK). | • In my home office in London.<br>• In the university library.<br>• With research supervisors online via Zoom (Oslo and London) or at the university. |

## Some final thoughts

Practitioner research is still a new and old form of research. It's old in that the learning-as-we-work approach was the model for developing knowledge for most of the helping professions resulting in presented or published case studies out of which theory was made. Practitioner research is in part new because it is taking place more than a hundred years after those first case studies and much has changed. There is a greater valuing of client/service user/participant/co-researcher feedback in professional practice and research. The politics and ethics of who reports has changed to encourage all parties to have editorial input over their story. Nothing is written or publicly shared about clients/service users/participants/co-researchers without their agreement and editorial influence. We do not make theory about others simply on our own as professionals. "Nothing about us without us!" is a slogan adopted by South African disability activists in the 1990s to challenge policy design and service provision which had not involved consultation with people with disabilities. This is now an

ethical guide across the helping professions and research which always include representatives of communities as consultants to the design and delivery (Salter, 2021; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005). It reflects a shift away from colonial, white supremacist thinking about whose minds and bodies should be taken into account. More qualitative approaches to research have been developed and there is a strong move in research culture to foreground the voices of community members and to challenge the colonising influences on practice and research (Conquergood, 2002; Dillard, 2012; Madison, 2019; Pillow, 2019). In postpositivist practitioner research, critical reflexivity is used to explore and challenge the ideological origins of theory and its influence on what counts as knowledge, "normal" and quality in professional practice. Knowledge is neither neutral nor innocent; there is no such thing as objective knowledge or an uninvested researcher. Bias is inevitable and so must be embraced with transparency and creative aesthetic to see how many contextual factors contribute to making sense of professional or research process and material.

Understanding the distinctions between research practice and professional practice takes time. A rushed research proposal or ethics application is unlikely to offer the degree of clarity needed. While some overlap in research questions or activities is inevitable in practitioner research, it is very unlikely that all professional responsibilities are the same as research responsibilities. It is important for professional researchers i) to understand the distinctions in the philosophy of professional knowledge and research knowledge and ii) to be able to speak clearly about the distinctions in their own research between professional and research activities, aims, and so on. Doing research as a practitioner should be exciting and rewarding. With clear distinctions, the research process will go much more smoothly for all involved along the way!

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