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Eight Criteria for Quality in Systemic Practitioner Research

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Abstract

This paper describes the rationale and context for eight key markers of quality in qualitative systemic practitioner research. The criteria are designed for systemic practitioner researchers who are researching from the position of practitioner-at-work. The criteria include Systemic Practice, Methodology, Situatedness, Relational Ethics, Relational Aesthetics, Reflexivity, Coherence, and Contributions. They build on existing criteria for quality developed within the fields of post-positivist qualitative research and professional practice research by embedding them in systemic practice theory, activity and values. Distinctions are made between practitioner research and research about practice, and between positivist and post-positivist research. This eight-point framework brings together existing systemic methods of inquiry which recognise the importance of understanding context, movement and relational know-how. The paper proposes that systemic or relationally reflexive practice is already a form of collaborative inquiry or action research in which any action, research included, inevitably contains intention and acts as an intervention. While working with people in small and immediate systems, systemic practitioner researchers are critically reflexive in understanding how local issues are connected to wider socio-political systems and discourses.

Introduction

> red makes a kind of black
> makes a kind of black that blue doesn't
> it's a black that you see when you close your eyes
> it's something you know intimately
> and it's that sort of knowing
> that I feel is the real subject of the work
>
> (Anish Kapoor 2009)

> We live in a numbers dominated world. We know after a decade of critique in the health, welfare, and educational fields that the evidence-based measures of quality and excellence rely on narrow models of objectivity and impact. Researcher reputation, citation, and impact scores are not acceptable indicators of quality. They should not be the criteria we use to judge our work, or one another. They should not be allowed to shape what we do.
>
> (Norman Denzin 2017, p.9)

This paper introduces criteria suited to evaluating quality in systemic practitioner research. By using criteria for systemic practitioner research based on historical and contemporary systemic practice theory, we can validate and render transparent how we appraise what counts as quality in our practice and in our research. Systemically coherent criteria which honour professional knowledge and know-how support the development of qualitative research into systemic practice. The criteria are designed for research conducted from within the doing of relationally reflexive professional practice namely, *practitioner research*.

In order to evaluate quality in research designed to understand more about how systemic practice works, we need to step into the activities and relational spaces of professional practice to find ways of researching our practice which render visible the careful co-ordinations of everyday life. This requires criteria which reflect professional knowledge, knowing and know-how (Nowotny et al 2008; Scott et al 2004) which sit comfortably alongside the responsibilities of relational practice.

The criteria in this paper are a fusion of i) criteria for what counts as quality in qualitative research (Denzin 2003; Ellis 2000; Richardson 2000; Tracy 2010) and ii) systemic practice principles, values and theory (for example, Burnham 1992; Markovic 1993; McCarthy & Byrne 2007; McNamee 2004; Selvini Palazzoli et al 1980). They evolved out of a need to be able to demonstrate quality in systemic and dialogic practitioner research in the wider community and specifically for the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire and former KCC. They are suitable for any relationally reflexive practitioner researcher needing to provide a framework for showing quality in researching their own practice.

Systemic practitioner research recognises the social constructionist principle that we construct realities with each other through our everyday exchanges, policies and legislation (McNamee & Gergen 1992; McNamee & Hosking 2012). Systemic social constructionist ideology supports a post-positivist paradigm which understands research as constructing realities and not a means of representing realities - unless hyphenating the word to emphasise the inevitability of subjective *re-*

presentation of our realities (Fine 1994). Systemic social constructionist research renders visible the influence of our ideology on the production of information, on what counts as information and accepts that research material can be presented and interpreted in a number of ways, sometimes used for conflicting agendas.

In this paper, I offer eight criteria for assessing quality in systemic practitioner research and discuss how it is both useful and ethical for practitioner researchers to identify criteria by which they expect the quality of their research to be evaluated. The criteria include:

i) Systemic Practice
ii) Methodology
iii) Situatedness
iv) Relational Ethics
v) Relational Aesthetics
vi) Reflexivity
vii) Coherence
viii) Contributions

The criteria are described in more detail later but first, a few words on practitioner research and also on criteria.

What is Practitioner Research?

Practitioner research is research conducted by professionals as part of and from within their everyday professional practice. It is different from research *about* practice or about non-practice topics which could be undertaken by either practitioners or non-practitioners. Practitioner research is based on insider research principles which involve contextually responsive and interpretive research based on pre-existing professional knowledge, knowing and know-how which can be surfaced and included through first person inquiry. It aims to enhance the practitioner's professional knowledge and practice development, and to share learning for the benefit of clients, colleagues or communities.

Practitioner research is part of our daily practice (Anderson 2014; St George & Wulff 2014). Practitioner research methodologies arise out of the practice under investigation. They commonly involve a form of first-person ethnography (autoethnography, relational ethnography, performance ethnography), first person collaborative action research, various forms of dialogical inquiry, reflexive inquiry, phenomenological approaches, heuristic inquiry, writing in different forms as methods of inquiry, and arts-based research. All the above-mentioned approaches reflect methodological developments in post-positivist qualitative research as documented, for example, in the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011, 2018).

Practitioner researchers are more likely to be conducting "process research". Practitioner researchers may not be as interested in evaluating an approach as in using research to expose and discuss a situation or an approach in order to generate understanding and share learning and usefulness for others. Consequently, in this kind of study, the research material is often described as *material* and less as *data*. The producer of the material is not seen as separate from the material but part of it – because they are part of what they are researching. They will not attempt to finalise an interpretation or produce conclusive findings. There may not be an expectation of analysing material so much as speaking from within complex, shifting practice in a deeply reflective and subjective manner. There

may be more than a single speaker in the text. The practitioner researcher is likely to develop creative ways of writing ethically about and from within practice relationships, and offer a rich, critical discussion of the material, related theory and ethical matters. Relationally reflexive practitioner researchers need to produce reflexive writing which inspires reflexivity in their readers.

What are we good at? Inquiry! Reflection! Sense-making!

Let's pause for a moment to reflect on a few of the many things that we as systemic practitioners bring to the research picnic:

- Systemic therapists, leaders, trainers and consultants are trained to postgraduate level in methods of inquiry, communication skills, theory of knowledge, the philosophy of discourse, relationship theory, and systems theories. Professionals who are trained systemically are competent in an unusually extensive range of questions to explore complex aspects of human behaviour, beliefs and relational activity. Furthermore, we have an in-depth, critical understanding and appreciation of how inquiry can produce or overlook some truths over others.

- We are experts in setting up conversations with people on a wide and often difficult range of subjects. We are trained to be competent and ethical in engaging people, in establishing a dialogical culture and addressing inequality of voices in inner and outer dialogue.

- We are skilled in practically and ethically eliciting information and feedback from our conversational partners. We have ways of checking understanding, of sense-making with others and on our own. We explain context for conversation and check that our understandings and expectations match.

- We are natural collaborative action researchers. Negotiate > Act > Reflect > Negotiate > Act > Reflect> Negotiate > Act > Reflect.

- We are always involved in ongoing first-person inquiry on our own, with clients, with colleagues, with employers. We use self and relational reflexivity to navigate complex relational co-ordinations by reflecting in, on and after the moment of relational activity.

- We are critical thinkers and pragmatic actors who adapt, abandon or utilise theory to suit the needs of occasion. We are prepared to be surprised by what we learn and not marry our hypotheses or idealise our working methods.

- We have a preoccupation with ethics-led practice using continuous inner and outward accountability for decisions. We adjust our ways of speaking, our words, our plans and actions to accommodate the hopes and abilities of our conversational partners and other stake holders.

- We are good at analysing our work, speaking about it, explaining what we are doing, why, how and to what hoped for effect. Through supervision, training,

writing, and everyday conversation we develop new accounts, new theory. We ask, “What was happening here?” and “What else was happening there?” We encourage multiple perspectives. We are experts at describing relational space, ways of knowing, talking and creatively reframing or challenging restrictive ideas and practices.

- We have a philosophical and pragmatic understanding of the impossibility of objectivity and single “truths”. We are critically reflexive about theory and practice. We are trained to prepare for the inevitability of prejudice and how to address prejudice - our own and that of others. We have a critique of how language works in spoken and unspoken ways to influence the social construction of knowledge in the context of imbalanced power relations. We are trained to anticipate the consequences of how we use our linguistic power to describe people and communities.

- We understand that “truth” is problematic and rarely exists with a consensus. We are pragmatists and work with what we have, with the resources available to us. We know that we live in a multiverse of stories and that some of these stories are more helpful than others.

Systemic practitioners are clearly not lesser relatives in practices of inquiry and knowledge generation! Academic researchers normally start their research with a fraction of this expertise. These points make a convincing argument for how established systemic knowledge practices can start to reframe relationally reflexive professional practice as a form of inquiry, as research.

Some words about criteria

Criteria are values which organise our thinking about what counts and about how we develop accounts. It is important to acknowledge that all criteria for establishing value are products of specific cultures, moments in time, trends in science, different paradigms – to meet the needs of differing contexts. Systemic criteria can support the development of new research practice and new professional practice by employing key systemic theories, values and practices as scaffolding.

If we accept that systemic practice is already using many methods of inquiry, and expects rigorous reflection on what counts as knowledge, we should play to the strengths of what, as practitioner researchers, we can bring to research and not simply expect to learn from academia.

Our gift to the qualitative research field is that i) we offer a relational perspective on criteria for quality in qualitative research and ii) we offer a systemic critique of the taken-for-granted narrative of the individual as a site for study and instead portray a relational perspective on the world (people, theory, events, experience, time and space).

The gift to the systemic practice field is the relationally oriented criteria for evaluating quality in systemic practice research. As a profession, we need systemic practitioner researchers to be sufficiently familiar with criteria for quality in research so they can critically identify, adapt or create criteria to use in each new research context.

There continues to be a rich debate on criteria in the qualitative research field. Criteria highlight the importance of writing texts that move the reader to learn or do something differently, which employ literary strategies to tell authentic stories well, and to always research with a social justice agenda (Ellis 2000; Denzin 2000, 2003; Bochner 2000; Richardson 2000; Liz Spencer et al, Cabinet Office, UK 2003; Tracy 2010; Cho and Trent 2009). In the fields of counselling, psychotherapy and organisational research, there are strong advocates for including research criteria arising out of professional practice such as reflexivity (Etherington 2004; Stiles 1993; Morrow 2005; Cunliffe 2009).

Post-structuralist writers who critique objective truth and scientific method (McNamee & Gergen 1992; Lather 1994, 2007) offer criteria for quality in research. Patti Lather proposes that any set of criteria arising out of a post-structuralist paradigm will inevitably be open-ended and context sensitive (Lather 1994). She introduces a playful array of definitions of validity such as ironic validity and rhizomatic validity which are relevant to systemic practitioner research (Lather 1993). As a practice community, we could use relational ethics as a basis to develop what Norman Denzin calls “moral criteria” (Denzin 2017). Rather than using criteria to support traditional ways of attempting to represent the world, we must offer a postcolonial and “complex set of questions, namely, who had the right to speak for whom, and how?” (Denzin 2017, p.11).

Research into the fluid and improvised collaborations of contextually responsive systemic practice requires new criteria that are designed to investigate the complexity of psychotherapeutic practice, organisational culture, relationships, training and supervision. The micro processes, visible, audible, sensible, imperceptible, in everyday practice need studying in ways appropriate to each context to develop meaningful learning for practitioners and which offer detailed and accessible description woven with reflexivity.

These eight criteria situate practitioner research within a context of critically situated reflexivity. All the criteria are reflexively linked and they will change and develop as we exercise critical reflexivity on encountering new contexts and cultures. The criteria serve several purposes. Firstly, we need to be able to participate somehow in the discourse of the first order worlds in which we live which expect clearly articulated outcomes, methodologies and generalisable quality standards. Secondly, we need to provide rigorous and imaginative criteria which are coherent with systemic theory, practice and ethics. Thirdly, unlike modernist expectations of creating criteria which will concretise quality standards, these systemic criteria are offered as stepping stones, subject to change, as signposts *for now.*

Eight Criteria for Quality in Systemic Practitioner Research

1. Systemic Practice

a) Research focus is on systemic practice.
b) Creative use of systemic theory and practice.
c) Rich detail of relational movements from within practice, inner and outer dialogue.
d) Professional judgement.
e) Accounting for unexpected and expected material, planned and improvisational co-ordinations, changes from original design.

2. Situatedness

a) The research asks and answers the questions: How come the researcher is doing this research? Why now? With what intentions?
b) The research topic is illustrated with examples from professional practice.
c) Critical knowledge and discussion of the literature relevant to
    I. the focus of the inquiry
    II. systemic theory
    III. philosophical or ideological context
d) The research is critically situated in relevant and comparative national and international literature and other material.
e) Discussion about what counts as knowledge, evidence or relevance to the subject.
f) Detail of how literature and other material are being sourced.
g) The practice research is critically situated within local and global contexts: e.g. human, technological, political, economic and environmental systems.

3. Methodology

a) The methodology arises out of the practice in focus and is supported by systemic thinking.
b) Discussion of philosophical and ideological premises, paradigmatic situatedness underlying the methodology, and explanations for coherence and incoherence.
c) Substantial, critical and reflexive discussion of the methodological framework, accounting for the choice of approaches, limitations and advantages of the approaches.
d) Critical reflection on the strengths and limitations of i) the design process, ii) capturing or creating research material, iii) the means of reflecting on the material, iv) presenting material and v) possible consequences for the researcher and others.
e) Methodological innovation, critical thinking, a balance of imagination and rigour, theoretical and structural irreverence.
f) An account of what the methodology adds to systemic practice research.
g) Identification of criteria by which the research can be judged and why.
h) All methodological terms are explained with an indication of how and why they are used in that way.

4. Relational Ethics

a) The research is ethics-led over method-led. Ethics is not an add-on.
b) Rich consideration of power relations, differences in lived experience, belonging and identity, and how these matters play out in the multi-systemic worlds of professional practice inquiry, research relationships and wider socio-political systems.
c) Reflexive discussion and appreciation of ethical issues in the research study over the entire lifespan of the research study from initial planning; in connecting to other work in the field; throughout creating, collecting and collating material, reflection and sense-making activities; in presenting the research, reporting to stakeholders, and in wider publication or dissemination.
d) Critical discussion and evidence of how research has enhanced professional work and has not undermined it.

e) Clear description and critical discussion of how research activities and use of material have been negotiated with participants and how this complies with relevant research governance.
f) The research has a stated social responsibility objective, addressing real concerns for people, organisations and the communities in which they live, showing how the practice in the inquiry improves the lives of others.
g) Demonstration of how the research enhanced personal / professional learning or experience for participants.
h) The researcher writes in a dialogical style, anticipates the reader, and avoids finalising.
i) Researchers are visible throughout reports of the research, speak in the first person and from within lived experience and practice relationships.

5. Relational Aesthetics

a) The presentation of the research has aesthetic merit.
b) The researcher has chosen a style of writing and presentational format that works for them, for the participants, for the audience and for the subject.
c) The researcher has integrated the discussion of the literature and stories from other sources well in their chosen format.
d) Research writing is presented in a style which provides readers with an accessible and reflexive space to make their own meaning alongside the researcher's own reflections.
e) The researcher anticipates a systemic and non-systemic audience.

6. Reflexivity

a) Demonstration that reflexivity is present as an ethical way of being in relation throughout one's practice and research.
b) Sophisticated examples of self and relational reflexivity, local and global reflexivity.
c) An honest, transparent and reflexive account about the selection of material and interpretation and/or use of the material.
d) Critical and reflexive thinking about the literature incorporated in the texts and how it might apply across different socio-economic, cultural contexts or areas of life experience, identity or professional practice.
e) Evidence of transformation in the researcher's thinking and practice.
f) Sufficient detail about the presence and influence of the researcher including inner and outer dialogue, thoughts in progress, noticings, feelings, the concrete and the transient.
g) Critical and reflexive appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of being a practitioner researcher.
h) Rich discussion of distinctions between systemic practice and systemic research, where or whether they occur.
i) Critical consideration of where and how voices of others are included in the research.

7. Coherence

a) All areas of research activity reflect the values and relational ethics of systemic practice: negotiations with participants, collection of material, engagement with literature, writing and presenting the research etc.
b) The suitability of approaches for reporting or sharing strategies with the research focus.
c) Sufficient coherence between the ethics submission and the reports on outcome and process of the research or explanation for incoherence.
d) Coherence between title, research focus and content.

8. Contributions

a) Evidence and discussion of how the research makes an original and impactful contribution to the field of systemic practice and systemic inquiry, to members of the public, or other professionals, communities or organisations.
b) The research offers useful and innovative elaborations of theory for systemic practice and systemic practice research.
c) The research takes the reader further in their relationship with the subject and/or methodology.

Becoming systemic practitioner researchers (again)

We cannot not think systemically. We understand talk, especially that of an inquiring nature, as transformative. Systemic thinking has an ethical intention to ensure we are working with bias mindfully to promote equality and consider the best ways of responding in each unique situation. We need to study our existing systemic ways of knowing and seeing in order to find ways of speaking about our work and explore what constitutes quality.

The professions of psychotherapy and organisational practice were founded on the methodology of case studies and ethnographies. Early professional practice was also a form of action research, using experimental methods, reflexive inquiry and writing as a form of inquiry.

The rich and extraordinary body of systemic theory and practice arose out of different forms of collaborative and reflexive inquiry: team case discussion, video review of consultations, learning from client feedback, self and relational reflexivity, supervision, the Macy conferences, reading and discussion groups, writing papers, conferences and workshops, starting new journals, attempts at new relational co-ordinations with families and teams.

What are these relational co-ordinations? They involve ways of asking, responding, consulting, listening to inner and outer dialogue; maintaining an exquisite balance as one walks a risky edge between inner and outer dialogue aware of immediate and delayed consequences.

Where do relational co-ordinations take place? Between consultants and clients; between team and therapist; between hypotheses and unexpected twists; between emotion, embodied knowing and cognition; between referrer and service users; between policy and professional ways of knowing; between method and innovation; between greetings and endings; between ways of talking; between silences.

These are some of the places in which we practice balance, take risks, work with and despite mess and chaos, and inevitably discover new learning - whether by accident or intentionally. Meetings are rarely neat and formulaic. It follows that practice research undertaken by the practitioner will benefit from an approach that accommodates and shows processes of unpredictable, multifaceted movement and communication in everyday practice. This is not incidental to what happens but an integral part of the therapeutic, teaching, leadership or consultancy process and therefore inevitably part of a reflexive first-person research process. This research can only be done by the practitioner as a researcher from within and between the reflexive movements of inner and outer dialogue. Practice research conducted by an observer, trained or untrained in relational professional practice, results in the loss of important knowledge and information which is inevitably invisible, unrecognisable and insensible to such an observer.

Many areas of reflexive practice (counselling, osteopathy, acupuncture) are generating *practice-based evidence,* evidence which emerges out of practice through the knowledge practices of that profession. Robert van Hennik has taken this further by integrating research and systemic therapy in what he calls Practice Based Evidence Based Practice (PBEBP) in Feedback Informed Therapy in Systems (FITS) (van Hennik 2018; van Hennik & Hillewaere 2017). Other systemic practitioner researchers have also been developing many useful practice-based research methods: Dialogic Participatory Action Research (Olsson 2014); Relational Constructionist Research (McNamee & Hosking 2012); Praction Research (Simon 2012); Embodied Dialogical Inquiry (Vedeler 2011); Pragmatic Inquiry (Juhl 2012); Essay Writing as Dialogical Inquiry (Kebbe 2014); Discursive Qualitative Research (Borsca & Rober 2016); Phenomenological-Relational Study (Pedersen 2012); Reflexive Conversational Inquiry (Barge et al 2014); Performance Methodologies (Bava 2005); Relational Ethnography (Simon 2013); Feedback Informed Therapy (Tilsen & McNamee 2015); Collaborative-Dialogue Based Research (Anderson 2014); Research as Daily Practice (St George & Wullf 2014); Rich Portraiture (Day 2014); Responsive Temporally Framed Narrative Inquiry (Salter 2018).

Systemic social constructionist practitioner research is perturbing, disruptive, creative, generative, transformative and unexpected – and not homeostatic, representational, eliciting of a single truth. The history of paradigm shifts in family therapy shows how we are still on the move. The early Milan approach was an attempt to perfect a formulaic approach (Selvini Palazzoli et al 1980) in which relational ethics were subordinate to theory. The critique of supposed objectivity in family therapy by Black, Minority Ethnic, Feminist, LGBTQ practitioners showed the systemic community that there were all manner of prejudices and power imbalances in therapeutic and consultation relationships dressed up as theory or formulation (Boyd Franklin 2002; Goldner et al 1990; Hardy & Laszloffy 1995; Hoffman 1990; McCarthy & Byrne 2007; McGoldrick 1998; Simon 1998). The postmodern critique of scientific knowledge was embraced by our profession and "knowledge" was understood as fluid and emergent in the context of relationships and wider cultures. We broke the separation of observer and observed, understanding this as a philosophical and theoretical impossibility (Maturana & Varela 1979). Cecchin encouraged us to be irreverent about our relationship with taken-for-granted ways of inquiring and what we are being asked to perform.

> "It is impossible to be neutral. You always have some opinions about what is going on and your opinions are going to have an influence. The big challenge is to the belief in reality; looking for scientific truth and what is really going on. What is the real story with the family? What is the real diagnosis? This is the medical model. What is the real reason behind what is going on? You

> think that what you observe is there. But we find what we look for. The recent change in the past five or ten years is the realisation that there is no reality to discover. You are not discovering the reality, you are inventing the reality."
>
> (Cecchin 1996)

Positivist and post-positivist practice and research

The term "post-positivist" is useful in the context of social constructionist systemic research as it is this that separates out some forms of knowing from others, not qualitative versus quantitative. Positivist qualitative and quantitative approaches subscribe to the idea that the researcher should stand well back from the research subject(s) and hold their breath while collecting the data so as to avoid contamination of the evidence and leave the scene of research as they found it, unchanged.

The recommendation to manage the self of the researcher through the practice of bracketing (Fischer 2009) is based on a modernist assumption that it is possible to separate out the self from the observed. In co-constructionist systemic practice, not only is bracketing the self considered impossible but also undesirable as it would result in the loss of the echo and synergy of a dynamic and interactional dialogical whole. Code challenges the positivist belief that, "knowers are substitutable for one another in the sense that they can act as 'surrogate knowers' who can put themselves in anyone's place and know exactly what she or he would know." (Code 1995, p.16). As Lincoln and Guba remark, "Objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the *imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower*." (2000, p. 181).

Post-positivist research recognises that you always affect the context you are studying, and furthermore, that you *should* set out to constructively and collaboratively change the site of inquiry through the doing of research. Post-positivist researchers not only declare their bias but put it to work and offer rich transparency as rationale, background and learning for the study. This is not simply a trend in research. It connects to concerns expressed by oppressed and colonised groups of people who have been researched and had all manner of falsehoods, intentional or otherwise, written about them which have often led to the development of policies which have served to oppress these groups further and render invisible issues of concern facing those communities (Clifford & Marcus 1986; McCarthy & Byrne 2007; Simon 1998; Visweswaran 1994).

In the positivist sciences, research into people's every day home and workplace practices has been understood as the application of theory to practice or as the evaluation of their practices in the light of an academic theory. In both these approaches to research, researchers are outsiders, usually academics, but not practitioners. When we aspire to positivist research, we take this position. This is not practitioner research.

Practitioner research is researching as a professional from within the everyday reflexive know-how of in-the-moment practice. As practitioner researchers we generate what has been identified as Mode 2 knowledge - *professionally produced knowledge and ways of knowing* (Scott et al 2004; Nowotny et al 2008). The theory of Mode 2 knowledge is used across the professional research field to recognise that i) knowledge is generated within the context of production; ii) professional practice often involves innovative trans-disciplinarity, using a socially distributed range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies; iii) form and content of knowledge are necessarily and reflexively linked,

non-hierarchical and transient; iv) there is professional accountability and reflexivity; v) criteria for quality reflect broader, composite, multi-dimensional concerns.

In post-positivist systemic inquiry, research emerges from within the movements which make up relational activity between people, things and places, for example. This was influenced by many of the recent paradigm shifts such as the linguistic turn which advocated a social constructionist view of language, discourse theory and critical review of what counts as knowledge, knowing and know-how in our everyday lives (Andersen 1987; Anderson & Goolishian 1988, 1992; Anderson 1997; Anderson & Gehart 2007; Bakhtin 1984; Burnham 1992, 2005; Dewey 1925, 1934; McNamee & Gergen 1992; Shotter & Katz 1998; Shotter 1989, 2011; White & Epston 1990; Wittgenstein 1953). Relational practice is understood as an emergent co-construction, as a form of reflexive action research. Instead of seeing language as an already established, self-contained system of linguistic communication that sets out a set of rules or social conventions that people make use of in talking about things, we can see it as a much more dynamic, embodied, participatory activity closely related to how we communicate through gestures *which are still coming into being*.

To embrace this view of language involves a different ontological approach to the world. Knowledge is emergent in the doing of relational activities – and continues to develop. We live in a living, dynamic, indivisible world of events that is always coming into being. We understand another person's utterances in terms of the responses they spontaneously arouse in us *and* as their responses to us or others or something else (Vedeler 2011; Shotter 2016). This view supports other linguistic theory such as on the power of language to reinforce or challenge narratives which restrict or open up stories of possibility. When we use this view to inform how we approach an inquiry into professional practice, we are starting in a different place to that of an outsider trying to gather "objective" material, a thing in itself, outside of a relational context. The invitation to generate relational co-constructionist research opens up exciting opportunities to learn more about our relationships, our work and the communities in which we live and work.

There are some important ontological choices in doing process research. We can ask, "What are we doing here?" and "To what effect?" which are first order ontological questions. Asking "Why are we doing this?" is a first order epistemological question. Going on to ask a second order epistemological question, "How do we know what we are doing here?" evokes an examination of the basis of one's knowing. It introduces more reflexivity, more ethical engagement: "How am I making sense and what am I more likely to notice or overlook?". Third wave ontology is not so much about being or knowing but about being in a perpetual reflexive state of becoming and knowing, knowing through becoming through doing. Ontology and epistemology fluidly entwine in the mutually shaping and re-orientating relational activities of learning, understanding, acting and becoming (Vedeler 2011). We are always on the way to somewhere else, learning and responding as we go.

Systemic practitioner research encourages the development of new practices and is curious about accounts of the fluid and shifting connections between experience and explanation, between theory and practice. The stories we might find helpful could come from anywhere: contemporary and historical systemic theory, philosophy, communication theory, the arts, social sciences, the physical sciences – and, of course, from our lived experiences, stories people tell us and that we tell each other.

These methodological developments in systemic practitioner research echo post-positivist methodological movements in the wider qualitative research field which signal a new era in what systemic therapists can do when they turn to their existing ways of knowing and enlist the help of

i) pivotal systemic thinkers who contributed to understanding complexity in communicating systems and developed critical systemic thinking about the relationship between first and second order accounting practices and their consequences (for example, Andersen 1987; Anderson & Goolishian 1988; Boscolo et al 1987; Burnham 1992, 1993, 2005; Cronen & Pearce 1985; Pearce 1989; Epston & White 1990; Hoffman 2001; McCarthy & Byrne 2007; McCarthy 2010, 2016; McNamee & Gergen 1992; Maturana & Varela 1979; Selvini Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata 1980; White 1991).

ii) contemporary thought leaders beyond the systemic fields who have critiqued method-led ways of extracting what counts as knowledge about human life and point out the limits of what kinds of knowledge can be generated under colonial and patriarchal knowledge practices (for example, bell hooks 1994; Rosi Braidotti 2011, 2013; Karen Barad 2007; Patti Lather 1994, 2007, 2013; Donna Haraway 2015; Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari 1987, 1994; Cynthia Dillard 2000; Lorraine Code 1995; Wanda Pillow 2003, 2015; D. Soyini Madison 2012; Alicia Youngblood Jackson & Lisa Mazzei 2012; John Shotter 2011, 2016).

Research as intervention

Research in our field tends to contain a social justice or critical responsibility agenda in its intention to improve lives and promote equality. The aim of systemic practitioner research leans towards producing innovative and leading-edge systemic practice rather than attempting to *prove* something. The research task then is two-fold. We ask, "How can we do something here that matters?" and "How can we show them out there that what we do here matters?" – in that order. The how to show arises out of the practice relationships and activities in focus. In post-positivist qualitative research, the people or practices at the heart of an inquiry are situated within critical and reflective descriptions of the relationships between immediate and wider systems-in-focus, local and global systems and discourses, and political, socio-economic and cultural structures and discourses. This offers opportunities to highlight the significance of the reflexive relationships between different levels of context or spheres of influence (Simon 2012) when focusing on an area of lived experience or practice.

Karl Tomm's papers on interventive interviewing were pivotal for systemic inquiry in that he showed how asking questions was never innocent and never without consequence.

> "Every question asked by a therapist may be seen to embody some intent and to arise from certain assumptions. Many questions are intended to orient the therapist to the client's situation and experiences; others are asked primarily to provoke therapeutic change. Some questions are based on lineal assumptions about the phenomena being addressed; others are based on circular assumptions. The differences among these questions are not trivial. They tend to have dissimilar effects."
>
> (Tomm 1987, p.1)

Systemic social constructionist practitioner research understands that knowledge is never separate from the circumstances of its production. Theory and research methods are not standalone, decontextualised, god-given approaches to the generation of knowledge. They are each products of their era, culture, professional, social, political and economic agendas. Somebody made up each

research method for a particular purpose. The systemic community has also been innovating ways of speaking, understanding and checking understanding to suit particular contexts. We need to be proud of this heritage and critical of any method requiring our context to fit with it and ask, "How come some ways of speaking or researching in this world, or in this era, are accorded more validity than at other times or in other cultures?". This way we open up practical, ethical and creative space - and fresh confidence – to support how we can inquire into our practice and draw on core systemic methods of inquiry, values and principles. This form of *systemic* inquiry reflects the relational ethics of our professional practice. We, and the people with whom we are working, our co-researchers, become not simply the means through which data collection occurs but the knowers and knowledge producers from within the collaborative processes of doing something together.

Resisting the flip back to positivism: and navigating ideological disorientation

> "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."
>
> (Lorde 1984)
>
> "As clinicians, we should accept linear explanations as long as we do not believe them, because this kind of cause and effect, descriptive orientation to the world does not help us to construct a frame of curiosity. Linear explanations, as Bateson has demonstrated, have the effect of terminating dialogue and conversations."
>
> (Cecchin 1987)
>
> "My suggestion is that as practitioners, we should not rigorously subject ourselves to the words of theorists; we should not think or act within their frameworks or systems. For that would be to subject ourselves to their imagined world, to their theoretical scheme of things, and to alienate ourselves from the world we already share with those around us."
>
> (Shotter, 2011, p.106)

It is perhaps important to note the influence of the recent compulsory diverting of systemic practice by allied positivist professions such as psychiatry, medicine, and to a degree, psychology, into manualised practices is a major threat to the profession – and has obvious implications for systemic research. The instruction to systemic practitioners to learn and use new imported techniques risks distracting us for long enough that we forget or are too worn down to protect our rich systemic heritage of robust academic theory, disruptive and constructive philosophy, innovative practice, dialogical ways of speaking, preoccupation with ethics, social justice and equality, and a commitment to challenge to unnegotiated practices of power and embodied expertise.

In addition, the systemic professions have lagged behind in the public relations that research has offered other professions who are more research generative and have been more prepared. This has resulted in an unusually long gap in the history of the psychotherapies in sharing learning *from within the doing* of everyday practice. The primary response within our profession has been to concentrate on i) the development of suitable tools for gathering a certain genre of evidence in order to ii) generate evidence that systemic therapy works (Stratton et al 2013; Stratton 2017). We have focused on

outcome research in an era of efficacy studies. We have played the main game to show that systemic therapy works. There is now confirmation that these evidence-oriented studies have made a useful but limited impact in the case for systemic therapy in specific contexts, for example, eating disorders and psychosis (Stratton 2017). The drive to develop a strong evidence base has been necessary but has also had some secondary consequences and there are several problems that need addressing or redressing.

Firstly, systemic research has, in recent times, taken the shape of systematic outcome research. *Systematic* is very different from systemic in that the former is pre-planned with a road map to predict the course of a journey. *Systemic* involves preparation, not planning (Shotter 2016) in order to respond from within the midst of unpredictable needs and movements of participants in therapeutic or supervisory conversation. Both systematic and systemic have their own criteria for rigour. They each have associated methods of analysis which generate ways of learning from material. Systematic analysis attempts to generate data which are reproducible. Systemic research understands that data (meaning-making activities, storytelling, experimental co-ordinations, for example) are not separate from the context of its production. The outcome research studies *about* (conducted from outside of) systemic practice have relied on positivist and non-practitioner research criteria for evaluating quality of research designed for researchers taking a traditional "aboutness" perspective (Shotter 1999, 2011) in relation to their subject.

Secondly, the recent domination of positivist research in systemic training programmes and systemic journals has inadvertently implied that everyday systemic methods of inquiry are redundant in the search for evidencing or understanding practice. Practitioners have been implicitly encouraged to revert to first order thinking about their subject, about "information gathering" practices and about the framing of inquiry and "outcomes" of knowledge. Systemic therapists often feel pressure to become quasi social scientists, to step outside of their normal methods of inquiry and professional role to research a topic related to their work. The danger in training our practitioners to conduct academic research not directly connected to practice process is that we take practitioners away from their well-developed ways of knowing and doing, and in effect, deskill them. This produces poor quality research and leads to two outcomes: i) the suggestion that the profession needs to bring in "real" researchers from outside to do "proper" research well and ii) that we train our practitioners more thoroughly in traditional non-practitioner research methods. You may see the circularity in this problem. Systemic therapists are, not surprisingly, confused by this flip back into modernist methods of accounting and are discouraged by the tacit devaluing of existing systemic forms of inquiry and our critical postmodern thinking about what counts as "knowledge".

Thirdly, I have noticed in my teaching of systemic practice and in supervising systemic masters and doctoral research that smart and experienced systemic practitioners often feel they must now jettison all they have been taught, all that they have learned on the job as if it is irrelevant to the doing of research. It is as if they feel they have been asked instead to learn from scratch a foreign language called "research". And when teaching masters research to qualifying students, there is a risky moment at the beginning of the class when, as a tutor, I see eyes glaze over, shoulders give up, sighs make an audible Mexican wave around the room and everyone, me included, is wondering if they will make it to the tea break or the end of the course. Yet, by the end of this first session they feel inspired, engaged, energised and continue a such throughout the research process. How research is described to systemic practitioners and how it is taught is key to the success and continuation of the profession. We cannot afford to have more systemic practitioners switch off or feel deskilled in relation to

research. It is important to note that most systemic research is conducted by masters students and most of that is not finding its way into the public domain.

Fourthly, a major concern is the neglect of process or practitioner research leading to a gap in the development of practice knowledge. Comparatively little qualitative research into systemic practice has been generated in recent times. This leaves the field with less opportunity for shared learning from the complex depths of practice and fewer systemic professionals feeling that they have a platform in journals to speak with colleagues about their practice through writing. There is an urgent need for systemic practitioners to be turned (back) on to knowledge generation arising out of practice know-how and practitioner knowing. Without this rich learning, our profession and our journals are in danger of losing their way. As a professional community, we risk becoming dissociated from knowing how to be with people in constructive, ethical ways, from being able to reflect on extraordinary and complex activities from within the doing of systemic practice.

Finally, there is a confusion about who the research audience is for systemic research. Practitioners often understand research as needing to be generated for people with decision-making power outside of the profession and not for practitioners themselves. The alienation from research felt by many systemic practitioners necessitates that we find ways of rehabilitating the story of research as directly useful to the professional community. We can be our own research audience.

Looking ahead - with confidence and systemic creativity

It is the case that systemic questions were not designed to elicit proof so much as open up reflection and information about how things are working between people and explore the presence and influence of some ideas over others. This is why it is important to understand systemic practitioner research as situated in a post-positivist paradigm which values this approach to knowing and knowledge generation. We need to be able to demonstrate how *new learning is continuously co-produced in systemic practice and* how we understand and live our ethics in transformative practice and in transformative research (Simon 2016). This learning is fluid and changing of all participants, including the practitioner researcher.

Consequently, it is vital that we use systemic practitioner research criteria as guidance, as reference points, so we can be clear about what we do and how we can generate and share learning safely and ethically from within practice. Criteria for systemic practitioner research can help colleagues from our own and other disciplines make informed decisions about the quality, ethics and viability of our research.

Research ethics committees or institutional review boards need to be assured that research conducted by practitioners from within the living moment of professional practice is safe and ethical. This is why we need to speak in the first language of ethics committee members whose professional knowing may be situated in positivist discourses and demonstrate clearly to them which criteria we are using, why and how.

Most of the outcome research points to the therapeutic relationship as the deciding factor in whether therapy is helpful or not. We need to keep exploring how systemic practice works and notice with a critical eye how and why it evolves. So how do we generate and share learning about how *we* work and resist the impatient and narrowing demand of positivist culture to generalise learning, finalise knowledge and create fixed ways of working with people?

There is a need for more research about *what happens between conversational participants in practice.* We could call it process research but practitioner research is a more precise term suited to our context. Depending on one's research aims, we don't need to prove anything. "Proof" is the language of cul-de-sac evidence ("case closed") – finalising practices from within positivist discourse. Shotter advises,

> "We must teach ourselves, not only to act, intellectually, as best we can in relation to states of affairs in *statu nascendi*, that are still coming into being, but also, to accept that what we are trying to deal with can never in fact be fully finalized and must be left open to yet further development."
>
> (Shotter 2016, p.177).

We are so well equipped as a professional community to develop ways of using qualitative research and show the highly skilled workings within practice. We need to show how losing control, regaining balance, finding our way safely with others through uncharted territories is what we do well; that working with teams, families, individual and communities is not a predictable, formulaic exercise but one involving perpetual movement and re-orientation to ensure that the co-ordinations with all present are ethical and constructive. It is a challenge to show how we really practice, what really happens in our inner dialogue, in our bodies, in outer talk; how being lost or confused is inevitable and how skilled we are in managing the process of using orientational activities with our conversational partners. But as Laurel Richardson says, "a postmodernist position does allow us to know 'some-thing' without claiming to know everything. Having a partial, local, historical knowledge is still knowing." (Richardson 1994, p.518).

Systemic practitioners are systemic researchers. It is important that we remember our indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing and know-how when exploring our own practice. To restrict ourselves to only certain ways of researching practice will stifle the development of our profession.

Research, like supervision, offers the opportunity to widen a discursive space around often quite unseen practice. Michael White, drawing on Foucault, asks what other voices may be present but not yet heard? (1992). This is an interesting research question and not one which is answered through analysing outer talk alone. New learning is unlikely to arise out of constrained or prescribed ways of speaking/writing. John Shotter points out, "If our ways of talking are constrained in any way - if, for instance, only certain ways of talking are considered legitimate and not others - then our understanding, and apparently our experience of ourselves, *will be constrained also*." (Shotter 1989, p.141).

In conclusion

The eight criteria for quality in systemic practitioner research arise out of accepted qualitative research criteria and systemic practice theory and philosophy. The systemic practice community can use these to demonstrate the presence of quality in systemic practitioner research. Systemic practice is already a form of inquiry. The in-depth trans-disciplinary theoretical knowledge we possess and generate about human relational experience, communication, behaviour and emotion prepares us to study our subject and devise suitable methodologies for studying our practice. The extensive range of methods of inquiry which our profession has developed along with its practice of reflexivity, philosophical study of knowledge, knowing and know-how, establishes the systemic profession as highly equipped to conduct research using our existing knowledge and discursive practices. We need

to pause and check the impact of stepping back into first order scientific ways of accounting, sharing knowledge and writing to avoid the loss of our own unique and sophisticated accounting practices. We especially need to take care of our training programmes to ensure we foster creative practitioner researchers and not simply academics dispossessed of their rich professional knowledge.

Research, in the systemic field, needs to improve its reputation starting with how it is taught, how it is conceived, how it is written for it to be experienced as engaging and relevant to the systemic communities. The narratives of what research can be need expanding to include and be led by practitioner research and practitioner knowledge. To be considered worthy of publication and influencing of policy, systemic practitioner research needs to demonstrate what the quality standards are for qualitative practitioner research. This can be done though using these criteria developed from both systemic practice and qualitative research within a post-positivist paradigm.

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