

The “proof” of the pudding is not just in the eating. Savouring the richness of the research process experience

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Abstract

There is much written on research methodologies and the merits of each within academic texts. Researchers provide written accounts of their methodologies, their results locating these in literature previously reviewed. New ideas, models and frameworks of knowing develop from the discussion of the findings than contribute greatly to knowledge within a given discipline. What is seldom captured is the actual process of engaging in research, the ups and downs of the journey, whose voices are captured and for what reason and the relational and ethical dilemmas along the way that need to be negotiated. This article aims to give voice to my experiences of a research process with social care students as I attempted to develop a new model of relational reflexivity within their education and practice preparation. I discuss some of my experiences as a practitioner researcher as they relate to the research aims, design and method of inquiry. I offer my perspective as a way of challenging the clean-cut process often portrayed, where the researcher objectively and seamlessly goes through the various stages of the research process, before arriving at their conclusions in a tidy and comprehensive fashion.

What does “real” research look like?

A review of most research journals sees most articles presented within a certain format—a review of the relevant literature, an overview of the methodology utilised, and a presentation and discussion of the results. There is little if any space given to the process itself, the dilemmas that emerge and need to be dealt with along the way. So, the question for me is why are we tidying out the process and the research journey in our written texts? Wouldn't it be useful for others to know that research does not always happen in the way we originally plan, and it can be a messy (Law, 2004) process? Rather than displaying the end product wouldn't it be interesting to hear how within the process itself we are constantly reorienting ourselves in response to what is emerging within the moment with participants and within the contexts and systems the research takes place within? This article attempts to address this gap by giving voice to

some of my experiences of conducting research with social care students using a relationally reflexive method of inquiry. It shows that research is a moving, relational and systemic encounter not a fact-finding or results orientated mission but involves both the participant and researcher in relationally reflexive activity.

Who are the researchers?

I am going to let you in on a secret. For many years I was scared of “doing research”. I was a practitioner, firmly positioned in that camp leaving research to the “real academics” in universities with large research budgets. Shortly after I took a position as a lecturer, I attended a social work conference. I remember feeling upset when one of my peers, a social worker, expressed surprise that I was there and still interested in social work practice given I had defected to the academic world. It is unfortunate that we place ourselves (or are placed by others) in different groups. We are lecturers, practitioners or researchers, we pick a side and stick to it.

But over the past four years my view of myself and indeed of research has changed dramatically. I have held these three roles concurrently, each contributing to my personal and professional development. The change came from being a student on the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice where my ideas on what counts as knowledge and research were challenged as I was encouraged to use my experience as a systemic therapist and appreciate the striking family resemblances between systemic inquiry and research methodologies (Simon, 2014, p. 3). Rather than seeing research as something separate to practice, we are within our work as therapists or educators continuously observing, noticing, reflecting on ourselves and others and are always potentially engaged in research. The only decision, therefore, is whether or not we decide to formalise this research role, obtain ethical approval and are motivated enough to write up our “findings” to inform others.

Whose voice is it anyway?

In my research I was keen to capture the experiences and opinions of social care students as within their training I wanted to help them be more reflexive of themselves, their family and life experiences in preparation for practice with clients. I wanted to design a new model of reflection for education based on systemic and relational reflexivity. From a systemic and social constructionist epistemology, students needed to be part of the research process *with* me. I resisted the potential for Othering by capturing student voices in the room, their feedback afterwards and in their reflexive diaries after each session. There were countless times when the dialogue in the room provoked my reflexivity as a researcher and as an educator. This reflexivity meant as a researcher I was upfront about my feelings, history, thoughts and even bodily responses and these guarded me against the potential of Othering (Krumer-Nero & Sidi, 2012) by seeing each person’s account as uniquely personal but always partial.

The emphasis was not just on the student learning but also on my own teaching practice as I adopted a collaborative and not knowing approach (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) within the reflexive groups. One student Emily, found that the process helped her to be more reflexive of herself not just about her abilities or skills which had previously been the case but her understanding of herself and her reactions to others on placement:

I think we spend so much time reflecting on our abilities or on other people we don't actually reflect deep enough. I think these may be the classes that I will have a lightbulb moment of 'I am acting this way because of this event'. If I look back on my reflections for placement (*before*) maybe this is why I have never felt I got the hang of it. Maybe I needed to get more personal than staying on the surface because what am I really learning from that?

This was a positioning that students liked describing me as being on an "even keel" with them that allowed a greater honesty and reflexivity on their practice with service users.

Beginnings

Within this research process one of my objectives was to develop an alternative model of reflection for social care students and preparation for their practice that would have a more systemic and relational focus than the traditional models utilised (Kolb, 1984, Gibbs, 1988). Each group participated in seven sessions before going on placement with follow up session towards the end of their placement. In the first session I concentrated on "warming the context" (Burnham, 2005) so that we would feel safe to explore and reflect on our personal and lived experiences. Newbury & Hoskins (2016) say that one of the challenges of relational teaching is dealing with emotional safety and they advise that lecturers discuss this with their students at the outset of the teaching. Taking this into account, at the first session with each group, we set some group rules together which included being non-judgemental, respectful of others and aware that they "can't just pop in and out of" the process. These ground-clearing activities (Jones, 2010) and this context-setting were valuable and prepared us for the work we would do together and is something that other practitioner researchers might find beneficial when engaged in a similar method of inquiry.

Relational Ethics throughout the process

When deciding whether or not to engage in research, worries about the practicalities and difficulties in obtaining ethical approval can dissuade practitioners from research engagement despite an interest in a topic located within professional practice. However, rather than seeing ethical approval as an end in itself within post-postmodern inquiry our *values* are a major focus in the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2008) and ethics are not seen as something to pay attention to as an "add-on" but ethics are the "guiding light" throughout the research process (Simon, 2014, p. 16). Within my research I held two ethical strands simultaneously, ethical issues around conducting research using a group process with students and ethics regarding the practical aspects of research which Tracy (2010) terms *procedural ethics*.

After obtaining ethical approval I was still cognisant of how the groups might evolve and the need to deal with ethical issues before, during and after the process in terms of student well-being, data collection and storage. When conducting a group like this, Aponte (1994) points to the importance of maintaining a boundary between professional training and personal therapy to prevent the exploitation of trainees or students by lecturers who may hold more professional power. One of the benefits of engaging in practitioner research was that as a systemic psychotherapist and lecturer I have lots of experience in maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients and students. Notwithstanding

this, my ethical concerns were also addressed by outlining the model to be used in advance to students as Totsuka (2014) and Aponte (1994) suggest, being supportive of them pursuing personal therapy, and constantly focusing on reflexivity as a means of enhancing their development for professional practice (Aponte, 1994).

I invoked a position of “ethical self-consciousness” and practised “relational ethics” (Tracy, 2010, p.847) throughout the process by engaging in ongoing reflexivity of my actions and the consequences of my research on others and had extra safeguards in place to avoid a misuse of lecturer power such as the anonymising of student diaries when grading their assessments and the use of the External Examiner.

Given we were discussing experiences on placement in smaller groups, I felt it was likely that safeguarding concerns might emerge. The limits to confidentiality concerning the safety of vulnerable persons, children and young people were outlined at the outset (Health Service Executive, 2014; DCYA, 2017) and this was invaluable as a student did get upset in one of the sessions regarding how an older person with Dementia had been treated by another staff member on a previous placement.

Getting messy within research

Postmodern research, Law (2004) suggests, can be messy and I realised this when the process was disrupted or did not go to plan. Sometimes other matter, not just humans affected the process with sessions had to be rescheduled due to snowfalls and Storm Ophelia when the college was closed. Simon (2021) distinguishes between activities related to the professional role (in my case as a lecturer) such as teaching and assessing student work, and activities associated with the researcher role, such as the gathering of material and ethical approval. At times I felt I walked a professional tightrope balancing these roles simultaneously. From a researcher point of view, the video camera was useful but at other times I felt it interfered with my professional practice as an educator when it did not work (or rather I did not work it) properly. For example, on one of the Placement Review Days I wrote about my frustration after the session:

A Messy Moment

As a group, we meet again today as part of the student’s Placement Review Day. This group have been on placement for four weeks now and I am excited to hear how they have gotten on. I am curious to hear if they feel this group might have impacted on their practice in some way. I am hoping to video the session as I have done with the other groups. Some students set up the room and they take their seats. I try and set up the video but for some reason, it will not record. I begin to panic. I try and try. I switch it off and on. I do what I always have done but still, nothing happens. The Go Pro is recording but it is not pairing with the phone. I can’t think clearly. Students are talking about their holiday plans. I ask a few times for help, but nobody knows how to work it. I am hot and sticky. I apologise for the delay and keep trying and trying. I need to get the recording to capture the session, but they just want to get on with the session. A student comes up to help with no success, while another says not to worry about the video. This is meant to take the pressure off, but it only frustrates me more. Do they not realise I NEED THE VIDEO! As I try again another voice says: “Come on Karen. You are eating into our time”. Inside I feel like crying, but I cannot show this. I smile and say we will go on without

it as it is more important that they have the time (Personal Reflexive Diary, 21st May 2018).

I wondered afterwards if the video camera had been overworked if it was protesting, feeling overused or the weight of expectation on itself and like me was worried about performing. While I was convinced the session had not been video-recorded, from an ethical point of view, I had to be careful to not lose interest in students and their experience, despite my frustration that it may not have captured our interactions and dialogue.

My reflexivity within the process also brought some uncomfortable moments for me. When some students spoke of their experiences of caring for others in their family of origins I heard the uncensored wobble in my voice as I recounted my personal story of looking after my brother Niall who had Downs Syndrome. Times when I made mistakes or when things did not go to plan were not covered over to create the illusion as “some kind of perfect” but were potential gems and encouraged others to speak of their dilemmas, experiences and concerns about their practice.

Gathering research material

My experience of research methodologies—even those that are qualitative nature, up to this point had been an ordered, clean-cut, de-contextualised process, devoid of any colour. The research was reduced to its’ constituent parts, so it could be easily replicated by others as if the context did not matter. A good researcher was rigorous and unbiased who did not compromise the outcome of the research by showing any aspect of themselves to the participants or making any connection with them.

But I was not interested in this type of research. I wanted to get messy, to relate to students and see where the process would lead us. I didn’t want the gathering and reviewing of data to be a means to an end, a sterile, no-nonsense procedure. I wanted it to be an interesting, colourful, and personal experience that would mirror the experience we had together in the reflexive groups.

When conducting video reviews, I did not transcribe every word as with some forms of qualitative research, but paid attention to my responses as I watched, noting what resonated with me in terms of student experience or my practice as a lecturer within the group. Viewed through a social constructionist lens Ann Cunliffe (2004) sees learning as leading to an embodied, physiological, or emotional response, what she terms as an “*Aha! moment*” for persons involved or what Simon (2014) refers to as *noticings*, aspects of the session that were interesting to me or resonated with my practice. As I watched the videos I paid attention to the movements, the dialogue between us, and times when I was “struck” (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 85) by what I was watching and listening to. I transcribed pieces of the conversation that puzzled, interested, or moved me. I watched my interactions with students, rewind, watched them again, jotting down thoughts about what I had noticed within each session. My noticings were recorded in my reflexive journal which added another layer of reflexivity as I wrote down my reactions as I watched the video or after a group session. On one occasion while watching a video of one of the reflexive groups I noticed the changes within my teaching style:

I have adopted a very different approach to teaching within this process. I cannot believe I am being so upfront with students and that I can say that my practice might need improving. Instead of pretending that I know all the answers or how to be in every situation, I am honest rather than all-knowing. But I am a little concerned that

because students are first years, they might think this means I am not confident in what I am doing or experienced enough.

In addition to the video recordings and my reviews of these, there were other sources of rich material such as student feedback sheets, pieces of dialogue and our reflexive diaries. A year later I was still thinking over ideas that had been generated in the groups and was continuously influenced by other theoretical and philosophical ideas in my conversations with supervisors, colleagues and students. During this incubation period (Moustakas, 1990) I decided it might be useful to watch the videos again, at a meta-level looking in to see what new perspectives might emerge for me. While time-consuming this brought a more relationally reflexive aspect to the research that might have been missed if I had concentrated on searching for content or dialogue alone and added another layer of reflexivity and increased the richness of the study.

Sense-making within the research process

Having accumulated such rich research material, I wondered how I might present it coherently for the reader. One night I had a moment of clarity as I watched the Great British Bake Off (Channel 4, 2018) with my daughter. As we watched I thought of my research methodology, imagining it as a cake with all different layers to it. Not just an ordinary cake, one of those colourful Rainbow Cakes with different vibrant layers-red, blue, yellow, pink, and green, covered with American-style cream frosting with buttercream between each layer, so it all fits together nicely.

I began to see my research material as colourful layers, all separate but together creating one rich creation (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A Rich Layered Research Process

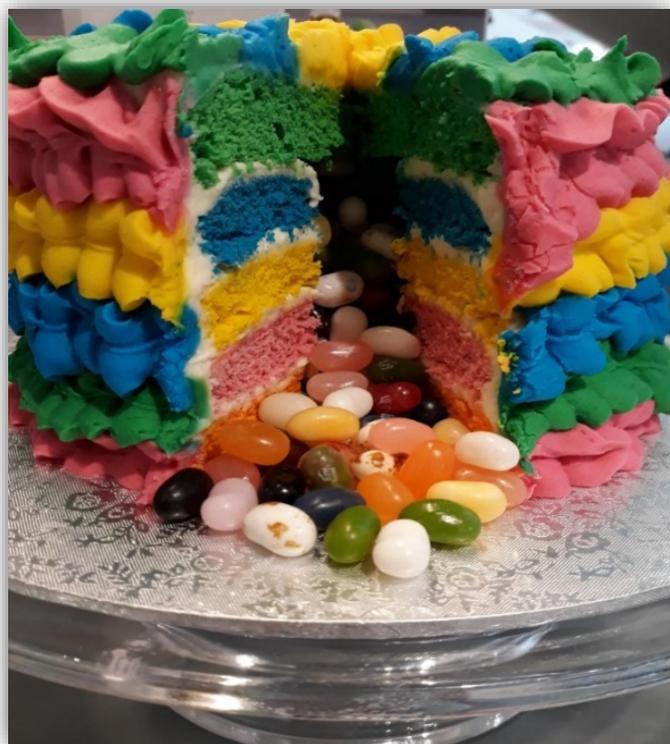
I wondered if these layers, all colours of the rainbow, could depict the different contexts we were coming from within the research process as a layering of texts (Richardson, 2005) capturing the different voices, writings, experiences, and contexts of participants within the research process. On their own, these individual sponges do not look very appealing and it is only when the layers are held together with that beautiful buttercream does the cake look attractive.

While this was a useful image I did not want to create an illusion that the research process was a clean-cut one with standardised structured layers one on top of the other, independent of each other or a hierarchical structure with some aspects more important than others. Barad (2007) says, things are not separate entities, but are inseparable *intra-acting* agents entangled with each other. This process had been an intermingling of voices and perspectives all collaborating and contributing to the richness of the teaching experience and I wanted to portray these pieces not as separate things but as entangled and immersed with each other.

Figure 2: Research as an inter-mingling cascading process

On holiday in the Lake District, I visited one of my favourite shops somewhere that stocks every piece of equipment a kitchen desires and has a gorgeous café upstairs. As I walked around, a glass display caught my eye. In it was the colourful layered Rainbow Cake again but this time in its' centre were all varieties of sweets tumbling out to surprise the consumer (Figure 2), even more, when the cake would be cut. I thought about the messy unstructured moments of my research and the intermingling, cascading pieces that swept me and others up in it.

Our involvement with each other had benefitted our practice as a social care student and lecturer, so I felt this cake with these little surprises within it was a better depiction of the research process than the original cake.



In Summary

Research studies have traditionally been written in a cohesive and structured way with little attention given to the actual process, or hints at any difficulties or dilemmas encountered on the way. Within systemic social constructionist thinking research like and other human activity is relational involving an ongoing reflexivity, a re-orientating and an engagement in a process of meaning-making with the other person. This article provides some ideas on how systemic practitioner researchers can engage

in research in a way that fits for them which values the uncertainty, the mystery and the challenges encountered within the research process itself. The potential value of these moments should not be overlooked, but embraced in our writings and academic texts, and in doing so research activity will not be seen as the preserve of a few but a meaningful and enticing option for many practitioners.

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