1 Working as a practitioner-researcher

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Overview

This collection is aimed at practitioner-researchers working within the field of young people's services. If you are reading this book, you are perhaps completing a dissertation as part of a university course. You may be a practitioner or manager attempting to develop a research-led approach to policy and practice at your organisation. This chapter explores the nature of practitioner research, and outlines some of the possible tensions and conflicts that can arise when entering the field while acting as practitioner *and* researcher simultaneously. It explores and outlines various notions of participatory action research and praxis, in relation to how research-orientated approaches can directly influence and shape policy and practice.

Our key questions include:

- What is research for?
- What is your role as practitioner-researcher when conducting your study?

The research in which you are involved may be about developing and evaluating local services, producing a needs assessment or community profile, or activating change for a practice-based problem. However, your research may have a more theoretical basis, or may be about creating new knowledge in other fields. With this in mind, it is essential that you are clear about your study's focus, purpose and audience. The research-based work evaluation for funders or management will be substantially different in tone and focus, for example, from an academic dissertation. For instance, the role of research may be a key part of the descriptors used to map your professional role. Currently, the UK National Occupational Standards for youth work stress the need for youth workers to be aware of the tools and processes involved in evaluating day-to-day youth work practice including involving young people in the evaluation process.[1]

The following chapters aim to highlight the main debates in the area, in addition to guiding practitioners towards further materials that can develop research skills and support their work as practitioner-researchers. Given that the UK National Occupational

Standards' practitioner-oriented definition of youth work incorporates a research and evaluation element, it might seem that participatory and action research approaches have a key role in developing both research and youth work practice. Increasingly, many youth practitioners are expected to take larger roles in planning and evaluating practice interventions, in addition to evidencing youth work via a range of qualitative approaches to data collection and the accumulation of quantitative indicators.

The kinds of research you may have in mind may vary considerably – from small-scale consultations looking at young people's needs in a small geographical area, to larger community profiles or evaluations of youth services and education programmes, to theoretically driven work that could form a Master's dissertation. This chapter aims to encourage readers to think critically about what it means to be a practitioner *and* a researcher, and how those identities may complement or clash with each another. We will consider how you might think critically about the nature of power and ethics, how the research agenda is shaped and to what ends. Whilst being a practitioner-researcher might enable you to reflect critically on your practice, improve service delivery and make key links between theory, policy and practice, it may also pose significant challenges about what and whom research is for, and where your role as a researcher begins and ends.

In defining social research and practitioner research, in particular, we borrow from Barrett *et al.* (1999), and argue that research in education and the social sciences is always characterised by at least five principles. Your research should be *systematic*, *critical* and *self-critical enquiry* that aims to contribute to advancing *knowledge* and/or *practice*. In thinking through and planning your own research you should consider the extent to which you are able to meet these basic criteria for good research.

We refer to each element briefly in turn.

Systematic

By this, we mean that research should be conducted in a way that is planned; it should be completed in an appropriate sequence; and it should have a clear rationale. Anyone reading your work should be able to understand exactly how you went about the research and the reasons why you did it in that way. When you write up your work (in either a dissertation or a research paper), your writing should reflect the rationale that underlies the work itself.

Critical

In social research, criticality and the adoption of a critical stance are fundamental. This means that you should scrutinise everything that you do, everything that you are told and all that you infer from your completed research. It means continually asking *how* and *why* questions ('How can I best research that question?', 'Why should I do it this way?', and so on). You should also adopt this stance in relation to your reading: look for the possible reasons *why* some claim that a writer makes might not be true or correct. *How* is the writer making her arguments and to what extent does that represent

a *particular* position rather than a general truth, as claimed? Criticality will help you to become more sensitive to the nature of argument and truth claims.

Self-critical

Being self-critical takes the idea of criticality a little further and helps you to focus on you the researcher. Being self-critical means that we have to think about our own *position* in the research and as a researcher (sometimes referred to as *positionality*). We have to be very clear about who we are as researchers and what we bring with us. For example, the fact that I am a white middle-aged man or a black woman from a certain class background may mean that I have particular ways of understanding the world around me. How might that understanding shape the way I choose particular research questions and go about researching them? How might it encourage me to understand the responses made by participants? What impact does my identity or my values have on interpreting the significance of those responses? Being self-critical applies to every aspect of social research, from the beginning of the project to its conclusion.

Enquiry

Social research probably starts with a sense of curiosity and an interest in a particular question or puzzle that emerges in your practice or more broadly in your professional or academic life. It might simply be concerned with asking the question 'What's going on here?' or it may be something much more complex about aspects of policy, organisation, management, young people's lives and experience, and so on. This means that in planning your research project you should have an explicit purpose in mind.

Knowledge and practice

We argue that your research project (i.e. what your research is for) should make a contribution to knowledge about young people, communities or services for young people and communities (depending on your research question). Because you are a practitioner-researcher, it should also contribute to the development of practice, where possible. Your work should therefore make a contribution to what we know and what we can do.

All social research studies need a clearly identifiable research question as a starting point. This question establishes the boundaries of the enquiry, the parameters of the study, and enables researchers to develop and design a clear research strategy – including methodological and epistemological framing. The kinds of theory underpinning researchers' understanding of the social world often pose different kinds of research question, and such differing questions need different methods. For example, if a researcher were interested in measuring levels of homophobic bullying, a question such as the following might be posed:

- What were the levels of reported homophobic bullying incidents in secondary schools in the last year?

This research question concerns the social problem of 'homophobic bullying' and seeks to establish the level of this problem in schools. The question suggests using a largely quantitative approach. This might include statistical analysis of reported incidents and questionnaires for institutions, and also involve reviewing school homophobic and general bullying policies, and the reporting protocols that are in place. This would provide empirical measures that could be used across time and location to identify whether levels of bullying had changed, and whether this was an issue in particular school locations, or amongst particular groups of students.

A researcher who is interested in lesbian, gay and bisexual young people's personal experiences of the social world might pose a different question, such as:

- How do young gay, lesbian and bisexual people narrate their experience of 'coming out' in school?

This question is about trying to grasp the ways in which these young people's accounts provide understanding of individual pupils' experiences of being 'out' in educational spaces. The question suggests a plan that incorporates such methods as individual and/or group interviews rather than large-scale questionnaires, in order to capture individual and group narratives. Whilst such a study could not provide the comparative statistics offered by the previous homophobic bullying question, narratives of bullying as a lived experience may be present in the students' accounts. Similarly, LGB students may also have accounts that do not involve bullying, and may instead include positive experiences and acceptance in school. Of course, a researcher may choose to take a blended, multi-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The point here is that particular epistemological framings and research aims shape the kinds of question and methods used. Whilst both research questions are interested in sexualities and schooling, and the findings may touch on the 'social problem' of homophobic bullying, each would have a distinct set of methods shaped by the different macro and micro understandings and perspectives of knowledge in the school settings. Both research questions would also be potentially insightful in creating policy and practice interventions within educational settings.

Epistemology is a term used to describe the theory of knowledge: how do we know what we think we know? There have been a number of main traditions that sociologists have used to frame their particular approaches epistemologically to social research. We will briefly consider two here: positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism arose at the inception of many of the social science disciplines. At its heart is the notion that researchers can study society in a scientific way. There have been various proponents of positivist methods throughout the history of sociology, including such notable, and very different, sociologists as Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. Positivism adopted many methods directly from the natural sciences, and has an emphasis on collecting what Durkheim referred to as 'social facts'. By analysing such 'facts', sociologists are believed to be able to provide scientific explanations for social events,

and identify solutions for social problems in order to develop and shape theories about society.

The second influential approach, *interpretivism*, is often associated with such sociologists as Max Weber and Georg Simmel. This places the emphasis not on the collection of *social facts*, but rather on understanding the accounts and the meaning making and social significance people have about their social worlds. Such an approach highlights multiple 'realities', in opposition to the Durkheimian position that emphasises that 'social facts' (broadly speaking, culture and 'collective representations': all the shared meanings, symbols and ways in which we understand who we are) are external to and constraining of individual conduct. Such sociological traditions frame the nature of critical enquiry and understandings, and these approaches shape the research methods, mode of analysis and claims one might make for data.

What is practitioner research?

Our broad argument is that research, as an activity, constitutes a vital and rich space where youth practitioners may engage critically with debates from the field, policy and practice, and link theory and practice. In and of itself, research provides scope for self-reflection, and personal and practitioner development, beyond that the development of knowledge for its own sake, or an examination of how one might develop progressive practice in any given area.

Everyday practice for many contemporary youth practitioners will include various forms of data gathering, recordings, needs assessments, and programme and project evaluations. The push for 'evidence' in many youth settings may sometimes seem to be activated on the basis of particular empirical measures – those of accredited and recorded outcomes, school league tables, about demographic, descriptive user statistics, and quick-run surveys. However, Issitt and Spence (2005: 63) note: 'face to face practice, by its very nature is not concerned primarily with gathering evidence and creating meaning, but rather with personal and social change'. The kinds of change perceived as important by face-to-face practitioners may be of little interest or legibility in the kinds of evidence criteria and empirical measures required by policy and practice settings. Such differences in recognising and perceiving change between practitioners and policymakers/funders might suggest that a broader base of empirical measures and 'evidence' may be necessary in order to capture this wider range of activity and meaning in practice settings.

Whilst data gathering as an exercise may be an everyday part of youth practice, this differs significantly from social research, in that the latter is orientated around an inquiry to provide deeper understandings of the social world and/or in response to a sociological problem. The kinds of 'evidence' and data that practitioners are asked to gather, and that might be seen as persuasive in securing further funding or justifying the existence of a youth project, are often largely quantitative (i.e. numerical and statistical data) in order to be included in wider metric measures. For example, in recent years, UK youth services have often produced Best Value Performance Indicators to demonstrate the cost effectiveness and reach of local services in relation to percentages of local young people

participating in local youth activities and/or achieving accreditation. Youth practitioners may collect data of that kind for their youth project, yet this form of ongoing monitoring differs from social research in the kinds of knowledge produced. The data gathering is primarily based on attempting to demonstrate outcomes through cost effectiveness and achievement of pre-defined policy aims, for example, rather than on solving sociological problems or providing theoretical analysis of the cultural and material practices of youth services and young people's participation.

Thus, one of the key questions any practitioner needs to consider is whether, for instance, 'good youth practice' is in any way the same as 'good research'. For example, the UK based National Youth Agency currently defines youth work as:

> Youth work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society, through informal educational activities which combine enjoyment, challenge and learning . . . [Youth workers seek] to promote young people's personal and social development and enable them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society as a whole.[2]

McLeod (1999: 8) defines practitioner research as 'research carried out by practitioners for the purpose of advancing their own practice'. This somewhat limited definition orientates practitioner to research in the realm of personal practice – perhaps in developing or evaluating interventions, or possibly in advancing the skill base of the practitioner. However, McLeod's definition has been seen as somewhat simplistic and reductive; after all, practitioner research is often concerned with a much broader realm beyond that of personal development and practice (Shaw 2005).

Indeed, Shaw (2005: 1231–1232) suggests a more critical engagement with the relationship between 'mainstream' academic and practitioner research and asks:

> What is the relationship between practitioner research and 'mainstream' academic social work research? Is practitioner research simply a street market version of mainstream research, or is it a distinctive genre of research? What is the quality and value of such research?

Whilst Shaw is examining social work, the questions about the interface between academic research and practice are deeply pertinent. Shaw's argument is that much practitioner research has been perceived as 'employer-led, "applied", and based on an expectation that it should lead to results that are directly useful' (Shaw 2005: 1242). We concur that practitioner research has both the capacity and the capability to be rigorous and critically engaged with debates within policy and theory. We would also contest limitations or lower expectations of practitioner research as being fundamentally a separate genre of research from 'mainstream' forms, or an intellectually diminished version of academic work. Indeed, these approaches are not necessarily exclusive. One might simultaneously move towards a progressive practice, generate new social theory *and* provide a forum for critical reflection as a practitioner.

We also maintain that there is a range of ways that practitioner-based research should be acknowledged as having particular value. We identify four here:

1   Generating insights from a practitioner perspective in order to improve and develop practice.
2   The capacity for research-informed critically reflective practice to activate broad social change.
3   Using a practice base to generate theory and influence policy.
4   As an important stage of staff development in its capacity to provide spaces for critical reflection.

This is broadly what we discussed earlier in arguing that research should contribute to the production of new knowledge that can advance practice (i.e. develop or improve practice). We also think that the generation of knowledge to develop theory (i.e. knowledge that can develop our understanding of the social world and improve our explanations of how it changes, develops or remains the same) is a crucial responsibility for social researchers generally, and for practitioner-researchers specifically. However, to do that means a strategic and responsive approach that moves beyond the kinds of 'evidence' that you may be collecting as part of your everyday practice, and towards some of the approaches detailed in this volume. Your research may involve collaborative work with colleagues and young people for one or more of the objectives referred to above.

Who are the practitioner-researchers?

Scholars have identified practitioner research as a growing area within health, education, welfare and youth services (Jarvis 1999; McLeod 1999; McWilliam 2004; Shaw 2005; Sikes and Potts 2008; West 1999). Indeed, Sikes and Potts (2008) note that there are growing numbers of 'insider' researchers studying within education, health and welfare organisations, through either their continuing professional higher education or the mainstreaming of research as an active part of professional development within many practice settings. Scholars acknowledge the heterogeneity of both practice and research in the wide range of practitioner-researcher settings, and the varying motivations of this diverse group (Jarvis 1999; Sikes and Potts 2008). Practitioner-researchers thus include undergraduate and postgraduate students, those in employment settings tasked to develop small projects to influence policy decisions, others involved in internal team evaluations, and 'others who undertake research to satisfy their own curiosity. These are practitioner-researchers, but they are often not recognised as researchers' (Jarvis 1999: 7).

Jarvis's (1999) description of practitioner-researchers highlights the issue that practitioners who undertake research may be not be recognised by their 'research' endeavours. Pertinent issues here include those of authenticity and 'expert' knowledge in the realms of both youth practice *and* social research. It is important that practitioner-researchers clearly identify how they will navigate the twin issues of recognition and expertise in developing and disseminating their research.

However, there remains tension. Research, as an activity, might be perceived as the preserve of research 'experts', and 'expert practitioners' may struggle to identify themselves within this dual role. The expertise here springs largely from the kinds of

reified knowledge that 'expert' researchers may seem to possess about epistemology (the theory of knowledge), methodology and ethics, and how this might translate or be engaged with in the realm of the practitioner.

This is particularly important when practitioner-researchers are involved in exploring their home organisation and area of practice, perhaps even focusing on their work with colleagues and clients in a particular youth setting. Within such fields as youth work, notions of 'expertise' may also be contentious, inasmuch as what it means to be a youth practitioner, a professional and an expert researcher might be contested both within and outside the field. However, we would also argue that 'expert' research knowledge is an important area to be acquired if practitioner research is to be effective in building new knowledge in the arenas of theory, policy and practice.

What is distinctive about practitioner research?

There is a wide variety of purpose, focus and methods used within practitioner research. Not all practitioner-researchers conduct research that has a direct applied focus on practice; nor do they necessarily conduct research in their own practice context. Importantly, then, when assuming the identity of practitioner-researcher, one should remain *critical*. As a researcher and a practitioner you need to be mindful of the overarching purpose of the research, the processes of knowledge production, and the kinds of knowledge and evidence that may be produced in a particular context. In order to explore the possible range and scope of practitioner research within youth work and other allied fields, it is important to consider the purposes of social research more broadly, both within and outside university and other research institutes. It is helpful to consider the status and claims of different kinds of knowledge in policy and practice settings. Bloor (1997) highlights the criticism that has developed around the focus and nature of knowledge in debates over the purpose and use of social research in directly influencing policy and practice. Critics of practitioner research point to the 'unscientific' nature of unqualified researchers conducting social enquiry, and questions are raised over whether practitioner knowledge is the same as scientific knowledge.

> The other strand of criticism of practice-orientated social research is that articulated by commentators such as Schön (1983), who have followed Schutz (1962) in arguing that professional work does not entail the deployment of scientific knowledge, but rather involves the deployment of a different kind of knowledge altogether, knowledge-in-action, which is rigorous but not comprehensive, task-orientated but not systematic, and experiential rather than research based. In this reading, social research has little of value to contribute to practitioners' work.
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> (Bloor 1997: 223)

However, as Bloor later notes, if the research is directly interested in considering practitioners' everyday work as its topic, then it does require the systematic research-based deployment of scientific knowledge, which is thus not necessarily constructed as separate and distinct from the realm of knowledge-in-practice.

Some of these debates that attempt to locate the 'right' types of objective and 'scientific knowledge' replicate those within feminist research. In such areas, experiential and subjective knowledge may be perceived to be sufficiently lacking in systematic rigour, in comparison to the earlier traditions within the social sciences of large-scale studies searching for social 'facts'. Feminist critiques have framed the need to challenge androcentric and elitist constructions of scientific knowledge (Stanley and Wise 1993). Whilst such a critique seems to posit 'scientific knowledge' as almost an omnipotent, large-scale kind of knowing, the small-scale, detailed focus of other kinds of practice-based knowledge is seemingly diminished. We argue that both traditions are valuable in different settings and in relation to particular research problems. There are established and valuable traditions within qualitative social science research that are specifically orientated to small-scale, rich analysis of people's social worlds – the interpretivist tradition (what Geertz (1973) calls 'thick description') that we mentioned earlier. Practitioner-orientated research, which often takes small-scale and qualitative approaches, enables practitioners and researchers to develop a deeper relationship with the field and focus on everyday practice. Bloor (1997) argues that this focus will encourage practitioners to engage further with such debates in social research.

Others critics of practitioner research doubt the transferability and representativeness of 'small scale "me-focused" studies' and view the apparently theory-free orientation of practice enquiry as a kind of 'flabby new humanism' (McWilliam 2004: 114). Yet, as we highlight throughout this volume, practitioner research does not always take a qualitative approach; nor is it necessarily always primarily interested in directly influencing practice. However, practitioner research can and often does engage deeply with theory, and can take a variety of forms, from small-scale insider studies to larger-scale comparative quantitative enquiry, and such a range of methodological perspectives frames the chapters within this volume.

Before we go on to explore approaches used by practitioner-researchers in the field, it is worthwhile considering what we think is the distinctiveness of practitioner knowledge. McWilliam (2004) notes that advocates of practitioner research make many claims, including that such *insider* work is somehow 'more authentic' and 'more ethical' than traditional forms of *outsider* research. Explicit within this notion is that 'practitioner research has more potential to give voice to the voiceless, amplifying rather than submerging marginal populations and projects' (McWilliam 2004: 114). This emphasis on the experiential is in itself a central part of modern youth work traditions and modes of informal learning. However, despite claims for 'authenticity', one might wish to trouble such claims and call for a more nuanced approach that critically interrogates both the nature of practice and the kinds of knowledge held by the practitioner research community.

The notion of 'reflexivity' – widely used within social research – is useful here in adopting the critical and self-critical stance we highlighted earlier. Many practitioners may already be familiar with ideas of critical reflection within practice settings, in both challenging and exploring practice as a technical exercise and reflecting on the practitioner's role and the broader structural approaches to practice. A tradition of reflexivity lies within social science research. Reflexivity concerns an awareness that the researcher

cannot be detached and stand outside the subject matter when conducting social research. This may also incorporate social researchers' exploring personal reflections on their values, politics, social status, relationships and experiences and how these shape and influence their research.

If we accept that social research is not a value-free exercise, then the notion of research reflexivity enables the social researcher to think critically about the nature of the research, the claims made for the data, the positionality of the researcher, and the ethical framing of the research. Such reflexivity within practitioner research would focus on the research process, relationships, and the claims made for the data, and would critically reflect on claims of 'authenticity' and the process of knowledge production.

This is not to say that practitioner-orientated work cannot be highly illuminating (and reflexive) in exploring tensions between theory, policy and practice. Too often, practitioner knowledge might be seen as mainly linear and primarily orientated towards securing change in practice. This is a worthwhile and useful tradition, but we would argue that practitioner-based research also has the capacity to provide robust dialogues and the generation of new theoretical frames that may speak to existing theory and policy.

Practice-based task 1.1 The practitioner-researcher role

Consider the following:

- First, create a list of your current work activities in your present role as a youth practitioner.
- Create a list of the activities you will be involved with as a social researcher.
- How much of an overlap is there between these two roles? For example, will your research take place in the same physical spaces with the same client group during your youth practice?
- Discuss with a fellow student or in your research journal how you might manage the different emphasis and agenda in these roles.
- Finally, take some time to design information and guidance sheets to explain your research idea for use with young participants and their parents/carers. This should be designed in line with the capacity and age group of your imagined participants.

Action research and participatory approaches

The previous section highlighted practitioner research's many forms and purposes. This section explores one approach that has been linked to practitioner research for over three decades, and more recently orientated towards the 'what works' agenda: *action*

research. The purpose is to introduce action research and explore a range of action research-related approaches that have previously been utilised in education and community work settings by practitioner-researchers. This will include various forms of action research and participatory action research. We discuss action research here as part of a wider framework that may be of potential use for those attempting to combine youth work and/or educational practice and research. Indeed, many of the following chapters discuss research methods that may be used alone or in combination within or outside a wider action research project. Action research provides a focus here, as it is a broad approach that can be amenable to practice-orientated contexts, especially when practitioners wish to initiate change and critically reflect on practice.

Various definitions of action research are commonly used in academic and practice contexts. However, the 'action' aspect revolves around practicality, with action researchers enabling a change within a practice context. As Frisby, Maguire and Reid (2009: 14) write: 'Action research aims to bring theory, method, and practice as people work collaboratively towards practical outcomes and new forms of understanding.' This linking of theory and practice and the power mechanisms in play in particular settings enables practitioners to use action research as a site of critical self-reflection. As Carr and Kemmis (1986: 162) note: 'Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.'

A highly flexible, dynamic action research approach can use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and thus may incorporate survey data, focus groups, participant observations, and practitioner reflection. Action research has thus proved highly popular amongst practitioners seeking to initiate change or seek solutions to practice-orientated issues. Over the past four decades, action research has also been particularly influential in education and youth practitioner-based contexts, as it owes much to 'ground up' solutions and has a capacity to be participatory in involving other practitioners and young people. As Rapoport (1970: 499) states: 'Action research is a type of applied social research differing from other varieties in the immediacy of the researcher's involvement in the action process.'

Action research has been used in several different ways. Rapoport (1970) perceives researchers as 'change agents' (Bennis 1966) seeking solutions through joint collaboration, and certainly one might thus see its clear use in community work and other educational settings. Kurt Lewin's (1948) spiral cycle of *planning–acting–observing–reflecting* may be familiar to many readers who already use a similar model of experiential learning within their everyday youth work or education practice. Lewin's model is based on the idea of action research being a form of democratic practice, and as such it has been highly influential in education research with its emphasis on the values of the practitioner (Robson 1993). Such applications mean that models of action research have been especially prevalent in such areas as education, community development and youth work research traditions.

We suggest that the various approaches and methods that constitute action research have particular relevance to the work of youth practitioners especially, because the methodology has a focus on experience, and participation has much relevance to the

kinds of enquiry and the values inherent in the everyday work undertaken within the field. Moreover, within some of the earlier traditions, commitment to 'praxis' (a kind of theoretically informed practice) reflects the value base of many working within informal education and youth settings in linking and developing theory into a committed practice that might be seen to shape the everyday world (Smith 1999: 1).

Participatory action research (PAR) takes these ideas some steps further in developing a commitment to working collaboratively with the 'researched'. Many readers will be familiar with the participatory practices that form an everyday part of their work, and are enshrined within (at least the rhetoric of) public service policy. Of course, the levels and capacity for such 'youth participation' vary from organisation to organisation and within projects that actively seek young people to become active as researchers and participants.

Research *with* and *by* young people has had growing significance in recent years in academic, policy and practice arenas. For many youth workers reading this chapter, empowerment-based approaches stressing self-advocacy and the political engagement of young people will be far from new. Of course, practitioners may experience limits in how they might develop emancipatory research practice in youth work and education settings when faced with the conflicting challenges and tensions of everyday practice demands. As a youth practitioner, you may work collaboratively with young people as co-researchers to examine a given collaboratively defined research problem. Such an approach emphasises aspects of process and has a 'commitment to research contribution and "giving back" to community collaborators' (Cahill 2007: 298). Such an emphasis on process, participation and social justice remains at the heart of the mainstream traditions of much youth work practice (West 1999). Again, PAR may thus represent a 'good fit' for many practitioners, with the approaches and methods widely used within such arenas as youth work, informal education and community development. Indeed, Cahill (2007) argues that PAR offers a helpful framework for community practitioners working towards social justice and democratising the research process, particularly when working with relatively disempowered groups, such as young people. In such participatory approaches both young people and youth practitioners would work collaboratively as agents of change in the research process.

However, there are key differences between everyday youth practice and sites of critical enquiry. Whether your role is as a youth worker, educator or youth justice worker, the main thrust of your everyday practice is usually not about systematically generating new knowledge and theorising about social worlds, beyond that of youth practice orientation. The various action research models have not been without their critics.

From a traditional social science perspective, action research approaches may be seen as lacking rigour, and from a positivist stance, they have been criticised for failing to achieve the necessary detached 'objectivity'. Within academic and practice contexts it may not be feasible for young people to be involved in all stages of the research process, including the initial research design, especially when acknowledging funding deadlines or the requirements of an academic course. Indeed, young people may not be interested in or familiar with some of the abstract theoretical analysis that sometimes characterises academically orientated research. Yet this does not suggest that

participatory approaches should be deployed only in applied and/or practice contexts. Cahill's work connects with theoretical work considering the construction of knowledge and the purpose and nature of education and research (Cahill 2004, 2007).

Case study 1.1

A feminist participatory action research project

As a practitioner-researcher, Laura undertook Ph.D. research within girls-only youth and community work settings. The project investigated possibilities for flexible sports participation with non-active girls. The research project used feminist participatory action research (FPAR). FPAR is participatory; defined by the need for action; and creates knowledge, but not for the sake of knowledge alone. By using FPAR within youth and community settings, two groups of young women (a young mums' group and a young women's group) were encouraged to examine their experiences and develop sports projects that suited their diverse needs and values. Research proceeded through three broad phases:

1   Interactive group discussion activities opened up debates about contradictory discourses of femininity and sport, exposed fears and concerns, and began to unpick patterns of disengagement.
2   Planning of needs-led physical activity projects. Youth groups were given full responsibility to select sports/physical activities, and where, how and when they wanted to participate. Young women collaboratively debated which activities they felt able to participate in and which they wished to avoid, and applied for project funding. They recruited, interviewed and employed female coaches.
3   Participating in and evaluating the projects.

The highlight of the project was the movement of initially 'non-sporty' young women into eventually engaging in and enjoying physical activity. Initially, young women often voiced negative opinions towards sport, but by the completion they evaluated their experiences as enjoyable and exciting. Both young women's groups participated in further youth-led physical activity projects following the completion of the research.

There were a number of key challenges facing this research approach, particularly around the differing expectations of all of the project stakeholders (young women, funders, university regulators, and local authority managers), whilst at the same time ensuring the collection of useful data. The priorities of other stakeholders conflicted with the priorities of the young women and the research goals: for example, funders contributed financial backing but subsequently specified activities on which this could be spent, which limited the

young women's autonomy on the project. The practitioner-researcher identified a range of ways to aid balancing these conflicting demands via the use of service-level agreements and developing an ongoing dialogue between stakeholders.

Another significant challenge was the need to distinguish between 'good research' and 'good youth work'. This balance needed constant attention throughout the projects: for example, in balancing a participatory structure in which the young women led the projects against risks of overburdening or creating a feeling of obligation, and acknowledging that young people were not inclined to participate in all aspects of the research process (data analysis).

Collaborative approaches create space for young people to be creative, reflective and innovative, and to develop projects that meet their own diverse needs and desires and from which they can learn much. Youth work settings are often ideal sites for carrying out such research approaches, as the core values and emphasis on relationship building of youth work and FPAR mesh together extremely well. Youth work practitioner-researchers are ideally placed to deliver these kinds of projects by drawing on their professional skills and credibility both within organisations and with young people. The FPAR approach in this case study created an environment of mutual, informal learning with an emphasis on possibilities for reciprocity between researcher and participants. However, this was not always a smooth process and FPAR facilitators must be mindful of potentially challenging ethical issues that arise within the research/practice context.

There remain potential limits and challenges to the suitability and scope of participatory approaches such as PAR and FPAR in some practice contexts, especially when working in highly sensitive or specialist areas. In an exploration of how youth participation agendas were taken up on the ground in UK-based children and young people's services, Middleton (2006) found that such opportunities remained patchy; and where youth participation existed, these approaches remained of limited popularity with young people. This resulted in a fairly limited group of self-selecting young people becoming actively involved, thus limiting project claims about representativeness.

PAR approaches within youth work and education contexts are often framed within peer *education* and enquiry. Many practitioners will be familiar with the idea of 'peer education'. However, the notion of 'peer' is itself fraught with difficulties. Young people may have very little in common, other than chronological age, with other 'youth'; and whilst generational separation may emerge because of policy contexts and practice delivery settings, young people may not be able to provide insights with other young people simply because they are all aged sixteen. Wider structural issues, such as gender, ethnicity, culture and social class, come to have a place in creating the capacity and space for such research interactions and engagement. As critiques of peer education approaches have been careful to point out (Bessant 2003; Bragg 2007), these might be perceived as a kind of 'ventriloquism', where young people are set up as 'experts' in

educating or researching their peers for what remains an 'adult' policy-driven agenda in which notions of 'authenticity' and voice need to be opened up to critique. As Heath *et al*. (2009: 70) argue: 'There is a danger that where a specially selected group of young people are actively involved in research it will be assumed that this research is therefore a more valid representation of the views and experiences of all young people.'

The difficulties and challenges around tokenistic involvement might be overcome by focusing on topics that have a direct relevance to young people. This particularly under-lines much of the participatory research work supported by the UK National Youth Agency but remains problematic for those researchers who may want to explore more theoretical and/or abstract concerns. Similarly, unequal power relations are not fully negated through the use of peer and participatory research approaches, although many advocates for participatory youth research have taken a variety of approaches to dimin-ish such inequalities. Readers already familiar with the much-used Hart's ladder (Hart 1992) will acknowledge the limits of such a model. 'Poor' participatory approaches may leave research with and by young people at the lower rungs of manipulation, decoration and tokenism (Cahill 2007). However, although versions of this ladder have been drawn
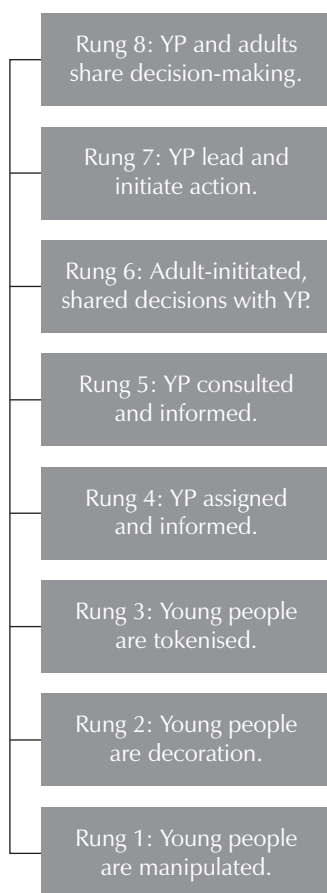
Rung 8: YP and adults share decision-making.

Rung 7: YP lead and initiate action.

Rung 6: Adult-inititated, shared decisions with YP.

Rung 5: YP consulted and informed.

Rung 4: YP assigned and informed.

Rung 3: Young people are tokenised.

Rung 2: Young people are decoration.

Rung 1: Young people are manipulated.

Figure 1.1 Hart's ladder of youth participation

Note: Hart identifies Rungs 1–3 as forms of non-participation

Source: Hart (1992)

on in citizen involvement, user participation and volunteer action approaches, there remain some severe limitations with this model. For example, the metaphor of a ladder imagines a gauged level of involvement and does not completely engage with an individual or groups' starting point or capacity for engagement.

Ethics, power and practice: what is research ethics?

Social research in common with youth practice is not a value-free exercise, but is deeply enmeshed in the power dynamics of the wider social world and the politics in play within these research settings. As a practitioner-researcher your research *and* youth practice are thus fundamentally shaped by power relations, especially in terms of your capacity to identify the area of research and consider who might be seen as the research subject. This holds true whether you choose to conduct research on home territory (your youth club, project, tutor group, etc.) or move into other spaces – for example, in the wider assessment of community projects in a neighbourhood.

A range of definitions of 'ethics' focuses on notions of appropriate behaviour around the 'morality of human conduct' (Edwards and Mauthner 2002: 14). Ethical principles within social research are usually focused on consent, privacy, respect, deception, harm and confidentiality. Readers can find details of how to find a range of national social research organisational codes at the end of this chapter. Later, Rogers and Ludhra in Chapter 3 consider the issue of research ethics in greater detail. At this point, we briefly want to touch on issues of practice and research ethics and values. The power dynamics within social research in youth settings are multiple and complex. As Case study 1.1 highlights, even in a setting that may appear conducive to participatory and youth-led approaches, there remain key challenges deriving from power disparities. Focusing on youth work, West (1999: 183) writes: 'the relations of power are threefold: first, power of the adult (youth worker) over young people; second, power of the researcher over the researched; and third, power of professional over client group'. This means that the power relations within a research project must be critically examined, and participants should be protected from undue harm and distress resulting from involvement in the study. Practitioner research conjures up specific ethical dilemmas in the workplace, in which relationships can be significantly changed (Sikes and Potts 2008). Not all youth practitioner-researchers may focus on the experiences of youth; indeed, you may be evaluating services and/or the experiences of other professionals. This may include the kinds of scrutinising and audit practices that have emerged within inspection regimes, such as Ofsted in the UK. To these we can add the growing use of peer review and observation within practice settings, which can lead to professionals feeling that they are under the researcher's gaze (Perryman 2006; Sikes and Potts 2008).

These substantive issues of power in *who* establishes the research agenda, analyses the data and writes up and disseminates the research, and for what purpose, can fundamentally impact on peer relations within a practice setting. Ethical issues within intra and inter-professional research might include the real dynamics and possibilities of whistle blowing or substantially altering workplace relations beyond that of the study (Sikes and Potts 2008).

Moreover, ethical dilemmas are also present in the changing focus and dimensions entailed in youth practitioners altering their relationships with young people to become researchers with young people within their overall professional capacity. Key to this is reflecting on how you might manage research and practice relations before, during and after fieldwork, in order to cause no harm to other colleagues, clients or indeed yourself as a practitioner-researcher (Sikes and Potts 2008).

Practice-based task 1.2 Research ethics

Either in a research journal or with a colleague, discuss the following:

- What policies and procedures, such as confidentiality, child protection and information-sharing protocols, are you obliged to uphold as a practitioner in your current work setting?
- How might these policies impact on the scope for research with either young people or fellow practitioners in your work setting?

There is a need here to be mindful of the significant ethical dimensions of entering the field in the dual role of researcher *and* practitioner. As a practitioner, you are probably familiar with the various codes of ethics, licensing procedures and ethical guidance from various professional associations. If you are a youth worker, your work will be guided by codes of professional practice, such as those published by the UK National Youth Agency, as well as local agency guidance on confidentiality and child protection. Such guidance often outlines the kinds of 'professional' behaviour, boundaries, and structures of accountability that organise your practice. On the other hand, you will probably also be required to follow institutional ethical codes for social researchers.

Such dual guidance positions (professional and research) may sometimes conflict, so planning and design issues, such as child protection and the limits of confidentiality and 'informed consent', need to be carefully thought through before commencing the research. At the end of this chapter there are web addresses for obtaining research ethics guidance that can provide an initial foundation to how practitioners manage these potentially competing and conflicting codes. When working as a practitioner-researcher, the specifically *ethical* dimension of research practice may go beyond the requirements that may be covered in a professional code of practice. When one is working as a researcher, particularly within one's home organisation and with a regular client group, questions of power, consent and coercion become especially salient.

Youth professionals regularly navigate the tensions and clashing priorities of professionalism *and* professional values and organisational demands (McCulloch 2009). Ethical practice is thus contextual, situational and relational, negotiated in line with the prevailing situation and the obligations and tensions of any given setting. Whilst 'participatory' approaches may at first glance appear more clearly aligned with national statements of the values within many youth and educational practices than traditional

forms of 'outsider' research, the kinds of knowledge production undertaken, the setting and the context, all impact on how a practitioner-researcher may negotiate a contextual ethical practice. Working out what counts as ethical research practice means taking all of these into account. These ideas are developed further throughout this volume.

Summary of main points

In summary, the main issues we have explored so far are:

- Your research should aim to be a systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry to create new knowledge.
- Practitioner research may be done for a variety of reasons to shape theory, policy and practice.
- Many scholars have attempted to make special claims for the value of practitioner research.
- Practitioner-researchers need to reflect critically on their 'insider' role and the ethical and power issues this may have on their research.
- Action research and participatory approaches are used within practitioner research in social work, education, community and youth work.

Further reading

For an overview of the role of practitioner-researchers, Jarvis (1999) is a good starting point.

Jarvis, P. (1999) *The Practitioner-Researcher: Developing theory from practice*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.

If you decide to take a participatory approach, there are a number of useful introductory resources in the area. Kellet (2005) takes a step-by-step approach to explain how to support children within a school setting in research design, collection and analysis. Kirby (1999) provides an overview of ethical and procedural issues when involving young people in research projects. The more recent collection by Tisdall *et al.* (2009) provides a range of case studies and practical examples of activities for potential researchers to explore the range of questions arising before entering the field.

Kellett, M. (2005) *How to Develop Children as Researchers: A step-by-step guide to the research proces*s, London: Sage.
Kirby, P. (1999) *Involving Young Researchers*, York: York Publishing Services.
Tisdall, E., Davis, J.M. and Gallagher, M. (2009) *Research with Children and Young People: Research design, methods and analysis*, London: Sage.

Research ethics resources

Many researchers follow the ethical procedures in place at their home institutions, for example, by submitting an application to the university research ethics committee. Various national and international research organisations produce guidance on ethical research for social researchers. In addition, some NGOs, such as Barnardo's, publish particular codes of ethics for their social researchers working with children and young people.

• The British Educational Research Association website: http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php.
• National Youth Agency (UK) website: http://nya.org.uk/dynamic_files/yrn/toolkit/Stage%206%20YRN%20Toolkit.pdf.

Ethical codes for youth workers can be found in:

• National Youth Agency (1999) *Ethics in Youth Work*, Leicester: NYA.
• Youth Action and Policy Association, NSW (Australia) website: http://www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/ethics/codetextwithcomment.php.

Notes

1   Find a full list of National Occupational Standards for Youth and Community Work at: http://www.lluk.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/National-Occupational-Standards-for-Youth-Work.pdf.
2   See http://www.nya.org.uk.

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