Chapter 2

# DEVELOPING RELEVANT AND RESPECTFUL RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

*Gillian Ruch*

## REFLECTING ON A RESEARCH ENCOUNTER

In the course of a research project exploring how social workers thought about and understood their practice, I undertook ethnographic observation in a social work children's support team. The observations lasted approximately four months and involved me spending several whole days per week observing practitioners in their team settings. At the outset of the research I had explained my role in the team as a non-participant observer, but emphasised that I was more than happy to be engaged in conversation and did not see myself as the equivalent of a 'fly on the wall' observer. Towards the end of the research process in the team I undertook individual interviews with each of the practitioners. When I asked at the conclusion of these interviews how each practitioner had experienced the research process, I was surprised by one response in particular: 'I didn't think I could talk to you. I thought I would affect your objectivity.' This response, implying that if she talked to me it would somehow contaminate my research, was particularly surprising as the practitioner concerned was a social worker and a systemic therapist, whose systemic training had emphasised the significance of multiple narratives and subjective perspectives.

## WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE ARE WE? UNDERSTANDINGS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

The significance of the research encounter, described above, has stayed with me for several years as it captures the powerful discourses that pervade the on-going debates surrounding what constitutes 'good' research. In this instance the practitioner concerned would have been imbued, through her social work and systemic training, with a clear sense of the intrinsically inter-subjective nature of social work encounters. One might have hoped too, therefore, that this understanding of the quintessentially subjective nature of social work 'realities' would have translated into her understanding of research in a social work setting. Clearly this was not the case and this is not, I would suggest, an unusual stance for social workers to hold. In his preface to Marion Bower's book *Psychoanalytic Theories for Social Work: Thinking under Fire*, Andrew Cooper captures these social work and research dilemmas in a different register:

> Social work in common with the profession of psychoanalytic psychotherapy has been reluctant and slow to engage with this new culture [evidence-based practice]. This is to be explained partly by the familiar (but again largely phoney) cultural tension between the clinical and practice 'arts' and the research and social policy 'sciences'. Good experimental research designs in the applied social sciences are notoriously hard to achieve, but this is not a reason to abandon the quest. Equally there is much we need to know about social work and psychotherapeutic practice that cannot be quantified. A rich and diverse tradition of qualitative, descriptive and clinically-based research methodologies has evolved in recent decades. For good philosophical reasons but also for reasons that have to do with intellectual defensiveness, creative interchange between different research paradigms has been hard to achieve. We need to advance beyond this state of affairs… (Cooper 2005, pp.xix–xx)

It is precisely these entrenched, perturbing and inaccurate representations of research in social work (and in other human service professions too) and the dilemmas associated with them, that this book seeks to challenge and recalibrate.

In the companion book to this publication, *Relationship-based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*, the changing fortunes of the

relationship in the context of social work practice were traced. The book records the origins of social work in the early 20th century being firmly rooted in relationships and how, during the 1950s and 60s, the professional relationship became the defining characteristic of psychosocial casework. By the 1970s, however, the centrality of the relationship in social work had tailed off dramatically with the ascendancy of more politicised and anti-oppressive-focused approaches. More recently, the resurgence of interest in relationship-based practice and re-affirmation of its significance for effective practice have given grounds for optimism that more humane approaches are being rediscovered (Megele 2014; Ruch, Turney and Ward 2010).

In contrast, qualitative research is a relatively new phenomenon compared to the social work profession and has a different relational trajectory. Developing, as Hollway (2001, p.13) puts it, 'in the shadow of positivism', qualitative research has always had to struggle to justify its existence and its distinctive characteristics, one of which is the focus on relationships in the research process. Consequently, discussions regarding how relationships are understood in qualitative research have largely been determined by the dominant discourse of objectivity associated with positivism, which configures the researcher and research subject as separate, rational individuals. From this positivist standpoint, subjectivity and any notion of relationship are problematic. The overriding endeavour is to minimise their significance – their interference in the research process – by rendering objective, as far as possible, any hint of subjectivity or relationality. In this context, reflexivity, another distinctive feature of qualitative research, is simply a means to an end, that is, the means by which subjectivity can be rendered objective, rather than being understood as important in its own right as a different source of knowing. Hinshelwood (2014), in his comprehensive response to the challenge faced by psychoanalytic research, suggests that one of the issues or problems is how subjectivity is understood:

> The field of observation is a subjective one, yielding subjective data. But in addition the means of gathering data is via an instrument that is equally subjective, the person of the psychoanalyst. Without the objective data of natural science, Freud's claim that psychoanalysis can 'take its place as a natural science like any other' (Freud 1938b, p.158) appears to be defeated. It is perhaps a 'science of subjectivity' instead. (p.9)

Price and Cooper (2012), writing about research from a similar psychoanalytic perspective, but considering its application to a wider field of professional contexts, make a similar point. Referring to the idea of 'social scientific' research methodologies, they suggest that subjectivity needs to be embraced as a rich resource, rather than being perceived as an inevitable annoyance:

> Transference, countertransference, unconscious identifications and projection of unprocessed material into the research supervision arena should not be considered as problems, rather they are the richest and most valuable means of accessing the unconscious field of inquiry. The epistemological debates surrounding the status of such data are real, and we must be prepared to engage with them. But in our view the psychoanalytic observational method is just that – a systematic discipline for studying the subjective and unconscious life that can be acquired in the same way as any other qualitative method. (p.64)

And while these excerpts come from a particular theoretical perspective, we would argue that the issue of how subjectivity, and the research relationships that it accompanies, is addressed, is a central component of all qualitative research, regardless of its theoretical underpinnings.

Compounding this challenging epistemological backdrop has been the ascendency of the evidence-based practice (EBP) movement with all the positivistic trademarks that define it. Briggs (2005), describing this aspect of the contemporary research landscape, refers to EBP as driving:

> a wedge between research and professional experience. The hammer which drives home this wedge is a methodological one, so that aligned on one side, representing EBP are quantitative, positivist, experimental and quasi-experimental, while on the other side are qualitative, observational, naturalistic, methods. Thus the EBP movement has tended to nullify research which is extremely important in social work, and which aims to connect quantitative and qualitative, validation and discovery, comparison and in-depth understanding. (p.18)

In recent years, despite the powerful influence of this epistemological and methodological context, more nuanced and, in our view,

more accurate, representations and understandings of the research subject and research relationships have emerged, and this book is a contribution to these developments.

## UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS: SUBJECTIVE OBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

A distinctive characteristic of qualitative research, if not *the* distinctive characteristic, in all its diverse forms, is the role played by people, whether as participants or researchers, and the relationships that are created between them. According to Shaw and Holland (2014), approximately 70 per cent of qualitative research in social work involved researchers conducting interviews, with ethnographic observation being another popular and widely used qualitative method. Given the centrality and significance of relationships in qualitative research, their careful management from the outset to the conclusion of a project is vital if the full potential of the research is to be realised.

In a chapter by Gergen and Gergen (2000) entitled 'Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations', published in Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) seminal *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, an optimistic and encouraging note is struck with regard to the actual and potential value of research relationships. In the section on 'Research as a Relational Process' they state:

> Experiments in reflexivity, literary form and multiple voicing, for example, have injected new vitality into the research endeavour. Yet there is good reason to press farther in such pursuits. Earlier we stressed the inextricable relationship between research and representation. (p.1038)

They go on to state, 'In this sense every form of representation – like a move in a dance – favors certain forms of relationship while discouraging others' (p.1038).

For Gergen and Gergen the reframing of research as representation, which generates communicative processes as opposed to fixed research outcomes, means that the overarching aim of research becomes the creation of productive forms of relationship.

It is how these relationships are created and sustained in the context of research and their significance for, or even as Gergen and Gergen would suggest, as, research findings in their own right, that is

the focus of this book. Shaw and Holland (2014) refer to how in the process of co-constructing meaning the understanding of behaviour is mediated through a primary emphasis on what things mean to people and on how the meanings emerge through the research process, that is, through the research relationship. And, paradoxically, it is on account of the inevitable and unavoidable nature of these relationships that investigating and surfacing them can be problematic.

Adopting a devil's advocate position in relation to the debates regarding subjectivity and objectivity, Price and Cooper (2012, p.57) pose a rhetorical question: Can objective research 'unmediated by the human sensibilities and language of the researcher…ever really speak to the emotional dimension of a social setting?' Hinshelwood (2014), in his efforts to address the challenge of subjectivity in the context of the natural sciences, provides something of an answer in his suggestion that seeking to realise orthodox scientific status is a false aspiration. Instead he proposes a more realisable and realistic ambition: the promotion of the 'science of subjectivity' (p.9). Contributing to these discussions and debates, Hollway (2009, p.160) advocates that we need to go 'beyond the binary of realism and relativism by working rigorously through the implications of the principle of using researcher subjectivity as a way of knowing'.

Understanding the pivotal role relationships play in the research process requires careful attention being paid to them. The imperative for this is heightened given the criticisms of qualitative research that abound (Briggs 2005; Hinshelwood 2014). The significance of a trustworthy and comprehensive reflexive strategy is immediately apparent, although not necessarily easily achievable. Most research methodology books that explore qualitative research relationships and the crucial role of reflexivity configure it in rather narrowly defined ways, as a conscious and tangible phenomenon (Bryman 2001; Ritchie and Lewis 2003), and from this perspective it is operationalised in relatively straightforward ways, such as the production of a reflective diary. In contrast, the distinctive relationship-oriented approach of this book, which is significantly, but not exclusively, influenced by psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks, invites the reader to engage with the complex and contested ideas surrounding researcher subjectivity, objectivity and reflexivity. We seek to deepen and expand our understandings of how reflexivity operates to embrace the

unconscious, invisible aspects of relationships, from which research relationships are by no means exempt.

## THE PRACTITIONER RESEARCHER IDENTITY

Distinctive to the chapters that follow is the professional identity of the authors. All have been, or still are, social work practitioners and find themselves researching aspects of practice that have for some reason or other caught their attention. The practitioner researcher identity that arises out of this constellation of circumstances is in its own right a fascinating and complex phenomenon. In the chapter that follows, Ilse Julkunen explores how in recent years understanding of the centrality of practice research and the pivotal nature of the relationships that is established with research partners and participants.

Drawing on the language of ethnography, one of the challenges that practitioner researchers encounter is 'how to make the familiar strange'. In many instances, and the chapters in this book are no exception, practitioner researchers are researching familiar territory. Not only is it familiar, it is often quite ordinary, and hence requires a 'theory of noticing' and 'deep attentiveness' (Hollway 2001, p.6). Yet, paradoxically, as Hollway acknowledges, 'parochialism is universal' (Hollway 2001, p.6). Price and Cooper (2012, p.55) similarly recognise how the ordinary everyday is often initially perceived as uneventful, as if 'nothing happened'. But if, through careful observation, attention focuses on 'everything that happened', the ordinary becomes both interesting and extraordinary.

## RECIPROCITY IN RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

It would be inexcusable to be considering the centrality of relationships in research processes without mentioning the place of ethics. In so much research literature discussions about conducting ethical research place considerable emphasis on the significance of research being non-maleficent (Ruch 2014). While an indisputably important feature of research, the preoccupation with not harming anyone has led to far less attention being given to the capacity of research to generate beneficence; and use of the term 'beneficence' alludes to something more than simply remuneration of individuals in cash or kind for

their participation in a research project. It refers to the unexpected benefits that arise in the context of the research relationship. Writing about this elsewhere (Ruch 2014), I highlighted both the intentional and unintentional benefits that can arise for participants in research projects. Developing these ideas led to the recommendation that prior to the commencement of a research project consideration needs to be given to all potential forms of beneficence. Drawing on Bion's (1962) psychoanalytic concept of 'containment', it is possible to design and conduct research in ways that address the relational and emotional dimensions of the research process from the outset and throughout a project's life. Acknowledging the significance of relationships in research from the start maximises the likelihood of them contributing to more informed findings specifically and to more beneficial relational experiences in general:

> According to Hollway and Jefferson (2012) attention to 'process' brings with it recognition, respect and containment. This processual stance acknowledges the ongoing ethical responsibilities that are central to psycho-social research and to 'containing' research relationships, referred to by Clarke and Hoggett (2009, p.22) as 'relationality'. For alertness and attentiveness of this order to be sustained, researchers need a willingness to become vulnerable themselves through exposure to the challenging experiences that research generates. In addition it requires researchers to possess the reflexive skills and strategies to make sense of these embodied dimensions of the research process. The creation of 'containing' research relationships, with the capacity to facilitate the development of relational benefits that permeate beneath the surface of the research, requires researchers who are morally active and contextually situated (Shaw, 2008; Hugman, 2010) and who are themselves well contained. (Ruch 2014, p.535)

I go on to say:

> Currently containment is conceived primarily as an unexpected 'benefit' arising from the research relationship. The findings from this research suggest that it is possible to explicitly design research with the potential to be containing and capable of generating relational benefits, with the associated positive implications for

> the research process and outputs. A note of caution and realism is necessary too. It is not inevitable that research designed to offer containment will do so. Nor is it a foregone conclusion that 'containing' research will automatically generate relational benefits. It is imperative, therefore, that our understanding of these complex but potentially enriching dimensions of the research process is expanded. Therein lies the challenge for qualitative researchers. (Ruch 2014, p.536)

It is perhaps the potential of reciprocal relationships that Gergen and Gergen (2000) are also alert to:

> The researcher ceases to be a passive bystander who generates representation products communicating to a miniscule audience. Rather, he or she becomes an active participant in forging generative communicative relationships in building dialogues and expanding the domain of civic deliberation… with this challenging re-conceptualisation of research we can and should become progenitors of relational practices. (p.1039)

## MAKING AND SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS IN RESEARCH

The chapters that follow provide diverse and lively accounts of relationships with a wide range of individuals and groups. Common to them all, however, is the capacity of each researcher to engage sensitively with not only their research participants but also with key gatekeepers and significant 'others' in the field who had influence over how/if the research was commenced, how it was conducted and how it was concluded. These accounts reinforce for the reader the importance of researchers being mindful of the *breadth* of relationships, in terms of who needs to be approached in order for the research to progress, and of the *depth* of the relationships with regard to the often intimate and sensitive issues they can evoke. Negotiating access, entering the research field and leaving it require attention to detail and a thoughtful, reflective mind-set, qualities abundantly displayed in the subsequent chapters. Without these relationships the research that is reflected on in the following chapters would not have got off the ground.

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Chapter 3

# DOING PRACTICE RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

## BUILDING RELEVANT AND SUSTAINABLE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

*Ilse Julkunen*



### INTRODUCTION

There are many studies that confirm that research relationships are essential if we are to increase our understandings of effective dynamics in social work practices, find more sustainable solutions for practice and develop welfare policies and practices within the complex dynamics of the social work field (Dal Santo *et al.* 2002; Julkunen and Karvinen-Niinikoski 2014; Marthinsen *et al.* 2012; Shaw and Lunt 2012). However, few studies have critically examined how relationships are formed and sustained in research and how they impact on the research findings. Ethnographic studies have shed light on the researcher's access to the field and action research approaches on multi-voiced and heuristic research processes. Social work, however, may be unique in representing a field of complex dynamics associated with global and local practices that meet the challenges of the prevailing social and political domains (Dominelli 2012; Wrede *et al.* 2006). This responsibility raises the issue of how we can build up a knowledge base that is socially robust and goes beyond the question

of how effective social work is (or evidence-based knowledge). White and Stancombe (2003), for instance, argue from a practice-based perspective in social work for the importance of acknowledging the knowledge and experience that the immediate actors in frontline practices and in policy implementation obtain while carrying out their decision making and interventions. Sirpa Wrede and her colleagues, from a research perspective in the field of health care, similarly (2006) argue for context-sensitivity in research processes, emphasising the capacity of multi-voiced practice and experience to generate robust knowledge for practice.

This book tries to dig into the productive forms of research relationships in practice-based research in social work and give examples of studies in real-life settings where these relationships have been scrutinised. Hence, the focus is not only on the research process and research findings but also on an actor relational approach for understanding the relationship formations in practice-based research processes. I will start by explaining what I mean by practice-based or practice research and present some theoretical foundations for analysing the dynamics of the research relationships. I argue that these may increase our understanding not only of the impact relationships may have on research findings but also on the relationship-formation processes that are relevant in practice-based social work research. In dealing with relationships in practice-based research settings, I seek to emphasise sustainability. Sustainability is important but in a complex sense. It refers to looking for sustainable spatial solutions, which are well embedded locally and historically, and to sustainable social solutions, which are broadly supported (see, for example, Boelens 2010).

## REFLECTING ON PRACTICE RESEARCH

Being involved in practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying effective and promising ways in which to help people and it is about challenging troubling practice through critically examining it in order to then develop new ideas in the light of experience. It involves a commitment to locally based collaboration between researchers and research settings and practitioners and practice settings in the planning, generating and disseminating of research, and a participatory and dialogue-based research process

designed to develop practice while also validating different types of expertise within the partnership. Practice research in social work is an evolving approach with much of its recent development based on an international discussion, which started with the Salisbury Forum group in 2008 (Salisbury Forum 2011). The Forum comprised an international group of researchers convened to reflect on the evolving definition of practice research and issues involved in negotiating practice research activities with multiple stakeholders.

Practice research strives to create a reflective relationship between practices in different contexts and the prevailing conceptions and theories in the social sciences. The research process is attached to the practice and its development and is focused on increasing the visibility of social work, not only in terms of describing the practice but also attempting to continuously re-evaluate how it is conceived (Saurama and Julkunen 2011). It is a question of epistemic practices (Knorr-Cetina 2001), critical reflection and thinking (Fook and Askeland 2007; Ruch 2009), dialogic processes as a source of knowledge production (Bakhtin 1981; Engeström 2014; Shotter and Gustavsen 1999) and socially distributed expertise (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001) for testing concepts and theories, as well as for validating the results in multiple and natural settings.

The process of capturing the real-life settings of professional practices and welfare policies can be designed in various ways and with various methodological approaches. The methodological dimensions of practice research include a reliance upon academic research standards and an in-depth understanding of the concrete and pragmatic issues of social work practice. Alongside this is the capacity to challenge practice in new ways (empirical, exploratory, emancipatory and theoretical) and the interpretation and dissemination of findings through dialogue with service users and practitioners that reflects a learning process (Austin *et al.* 2014). Building on the work of the Salisbury Forum, the Helsinki Forum (2014) discussed the principles and values of establishing partnerships and relationships between research and practice, highlighting the importance of the negotiation between the various partners as a specific element of the practice research process. In this context, practice research partners are equal, but different, and share different interests within the collaborative process.

Practice research is not reflected in a single philosophy or methodology but rather seeks to define practice-based knowledge

through shared understandings. Uggerhöj (2014) has described it as a meeting point between practice and research that needs to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established, because real operational change requires the involvement and participation of several different stakeholders and actors. The crucial issue in practice research is that involvement is required throughout the different phases of the research process. This emphasis on interaction and a balanced discussion between different parties provides opportunities for people to change and gain meaning through interacting. The interaction enhances the process of co-operation and collaboration in the convergence of practice and research methods (Julkunen 2011; Miettinen, Samra-Frederichs and Yanow 2009).

## CLOSE INTERACTION OF SOCIETY AND SCIENCE

Practice research brings together the daily practice of practitioners and academic researchers with tools of research and may form a purposeful blend between different contexts of practitioners and researchers (Engeström 2015, p.129). What is critical and interesting in practice research is an exchange of perspectives and knowledge. Practitioners are not meant to become researchers and researchers are not meant to become practitioners. The knowledge coming out of the negotiation will challenge traditions and understandings both within practice and within research; moreover, it will challenge the participants' collaboration skills as both partners will not only meet their usual partners but also others – with different interests (see, for example, Uggerhöj and Julkunen 2015). The partners both construe their inter-subjective understanding and at the same time they remain unique individuals who sustain and defend their independent positions within their inter-dependent relationships (Bakhtin 1981; Engeström 2014).

Drawing on a science of the concrete (Flyvberg 2001) and contextualised knowledge (Nowotny *et al.* 2001), practice research places itself in a position between academia and professional practice. Flyvbjerg discusses the science of the concrete and phronetic science and points out:

> research focuses on values, the authors get close to the people and phenomena they study, they focus on the minutiae and practices

> that make up the basic concerns of life, they make extensive use of case studies in context, they use narrative as expository technique, and, finally, their work is dialogical, that is, it allows for other voices than those of the authors, both in relation to the people they study and in relation to society at large. (p.63)

The science of the concrete includes dialogue with those who are studied, with other researchers, and with decision makers as well as with other central actors in the field; it thus shares the notion of co-evolving science as Nowotny *et al.* (2001) have put forward. The starting point is that knowledge is formed through interaction with people when people are able to encounter one another. Knowledge cannot be apprehended solely as a commodity to be transferred from one person to another irrespective of its origin. Nowotny (for example in 2003) addresses the issues of how to organise spaces of translation, claiming that validity should be repeatedly tested not only within the practice but also outside the community in different networks. It necessitates interaction that takes place in public spheres and involves an interaction between many actors, each of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes. It is this emphasis on within and outside that is interesting from a relationship-based approach.

## UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS: AN ACTOR RELATIONAL APPROACH

Working with practice research issues for a decade in a university, community and practice setting at the practice research unit of Mathilda Wrede Institute in Helsinki, I have come to the conclusion that the key ingredient for practice research in social work is getting clued up on research issues, by which I do not simply mean that the translation of research into action goes through close collaboration. Being clued up means something more:

- Being well-informed, possessing reliable information on a particular subject.
- Being shrewd, having or showing keen awareness, sound judgement and often resourcefulness, especially in practical matters.

- Possessing a sharp intelligence, hardheadness and often an intuitive grasp of practical considerations.

And this is where I want to draw attention to what we may mean by research use. Do we look at research as dissemination and thereby put all our efforts into organising smooth translations? We tend to forget that translating practices into research and research issues into practice is not a static process but involves significant shifts in how we as actors interpret, construe and relate to each other.

Much of the need for practice research has focused on the disconnection between research, practice and policies, especially the limited use of research findings by practitioners and policy makers who fail to see how research can contribute to the development of practices and policies. In evaluating the dissemination and utilisation of practice research, Dal Santo *et al.* (2002) emphasised the importance of organisational and community factors in enhancing research utilisation. For research to be utilised, the knowledge generated by research must be relevant to the dilemmas facing practitioners and policy makers. At the same time, the nature of the communication channels between researchers and practitioners needs to be taken into account when assessing the likelihood of research utilisation. They concluded that the most important factors in enhancing research utilisation are to establish clarity in the early stages of defining the problem at hand and to strengthen communication in the agency researcher partnership during the whole process, especially noting the importance of identifying potential conflicts between the different actors involved.

With regard to the complexities of linking research to practice and practice to research, Latour (2005) reminds us that ideas are spread by people who are *interested in the idea*; therefore, we need to critically assess and take into account how actors are involved within these research and development contexts. We also need to identify who the actors are that we need to involve.

By focusing on *leading* actors, Luuk Boelens (2010) draws upon the ideas of Latour (2005). For Latour the facts are realised and distributed only because an increasing number of actors become interested and involved through sustainable and flexible alliances. Building on the concepts of 'leading or focal actors' emerging out of evolutionary

economics and urban sociology (Boschma and Frenken 2006; Yeung 2005), Boelens argues that it is possible to make their interests coincide on meaningful issues. The more they coincide, the more durable they will be. So, instead of pushing towards objectivity and representative democracy, Boelens pinpoints power and subjectivity as central themes in the actor-relational approach. Furthermore, he draws on Michel Calloon's (1986) translational approach or a participant engagement framework. Calloon developed this well-known framework while studying the anchorage of scallops in the Mediterranean area. He was concerned to find answers to how scallops could be anchored again in the area and he understood that he needed the assistance of key local actors: the team researcher, the fishermen and the scallops. By including the scallops Calloon made way for including the human and non-human elements in practice. In the beginning these three universes were separate and had no means of communication with one another. At the end a discourse of certainty had brought them into a relationship with one another in an intelligible manner. This would not have been possible without the different sorts of displacements and transformations, negotiations, and the adjustments that accompanied them. It was also possible because at the outset no a priori category or relationship was used. Calloon himself was overwhelmed by the process, but only afterwards. He asked: Who at the beginning of the story could have predicted that the anchorage of the scallops would have an influence on the fishermen? Who would have been able to guess the channels that this influence would pass through? These relationships became visible and plausible only after the research.

This example mainly shows that the distribution of roles (the scallops that anchor themselves, the fishermen who are persuaded that the collectors could help restock the Bay, the research colleagues who believe in the anchorage) is a result of multi-lateral negotiations during which the identity of the actors is defined and tested. The process started with a problem definition and with conflicting expectations, and ended in new conceptualisations and shared meanings. These processes display changing relevancies inscribed in the activities people came to know through practice (Engeström 2014).

Calloon found that four key questions needed to be asked in order to scrutinise the elements of the complex process. These can be summarised as follows:

1. *Problematisation:* It is important to ask what the issue and phenomenon are that require a solution and how the problem is identified by the different actors.
2. *Interest:* How invested are the different actors in the solution to the issue and how do they conceptualise their roles and responsibilities?
3. *Visions:* Here it is crucial to analyse how the different actors see their role in a new setting and how they can be encouraged to change and have new visions.
4. *Mobilisation:* The anchorage of new working models and what forms of allies are mobilised.

These four stages are comprised of critical elements for both understanding, organising and analysing the research relationships. Although this framework seems to hold a specific structure, a prerequisite for research relationships is openness and flexibility towards actor identification. The actors may live, spend time or work in the locality and have an involvement with the issues in question. However, Boelens points out that actors who are distantly connected may also be involved. The only criterion, he says, is that the actors are able and willing to act like leading actors. This is consistent with the view that actor-network associations are fundamentally open and cut across different universes. Innovation often emerges from these crossovers.

Engeström (2014) has interestingly added a new dimension in looking at the interplay in research in practice by focusing on the process of meaning construction. With an emphasis on dialogue her starting point is that the object of human conduct is reflexively constituted, being outside and inside at the same time. Humans choose aspects of things that are relevant for them emotionally and cognitively, but the meaning construction cannot be presupposed; rather the focus should be put on the actors' awareness of boundaries to be crossed. She claims that we need to pay more attention to the subjective mechanisms that allow actors to enter an extensive space where the potential for the developments of new insights and new knowledge can be found.

## DISCUSSION

Karin Knorr-Cetina (2001) has emphasised that the emergent phenomena of the modern knowledge society challenges traditional ways of understanding the meaning and nature of practices. She refers to the concept of epistemic practices as open, question-generating and complex, appearing to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely. A central understanding in this is emergence. Phenomena, events and actors are viewed as mutually dependent and mutually constitutive, and they actually emerge together in dynamic structures, as Tara Fenwick (2010) discusses in relation to the complexity of researching professional collaboration. For a professional practice, such as social work, this means that the embedded relationships – both human and non-human – emerge through the continuous rich and recursive interactions among these elements. It means also that we need to understand that real-life settings are 'criss-crossed by other places and temporalities, as well as by absent third parties' (Engeström 2014, p.122). From a research perspective the focus should be on tracking inter-relationships among different levels and dimensions.

More concretely, it implies an openness to the dialogue and negotiation process. To be able to establish negotiation processes throughout a practice-based research project, each partner needs to be open to critical assessment regarding the traditions associated with doing research and/or social work practice. Emergence not only enables continuous adaptive change, it also enables self-organisation (Fenwick 2010), just as Calloon's example showed us.

In order to build a more unified understanding of the focus of practice research, the collaborative or co-productive knowledge production processes require a process of managed communication between different stakeholders (Nowotny 2003). Calloon (1986) pinpointed critical elements of a careful initial analysis of the present problematics being focused on and the importance of negotiating actor relations throughout the process. Practice-based research starts and defines the processes by recognising the importance of relationships that promote respect and understanding among the other partners, as part of a negotiated and shared struggle.

Boelens' notion, building on the translational approach of Calloon of leading focal actors, suggests that the problematisation phase includes and describes a system of alliances and associations between

different actors, thereby defining the identity of the process and what the different actors 'want'. The critical issue is to identify possible actors or stakeholders who are ready to invest in the exploration of opportunities and possibilities. It is more a 'bottom-up' perspective, engaging actors both from within and outside of the professional practice, thus emphasising both power and subjectivity. This may open up sustainable, trusting and long-lasting relations, which take on important significance in practice-based research.

The complexities embedded in epistemic practices, such as social work, urge us to trace the on-going dynamics that both reveal and create 'what matters'. The chapters in this book all scrutinise practices in social work and by doing so try to trace the inter-relations and dialogues embedded in it that have significance for both the research process, as well as the research findings.

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