

Research and
Research Methods for
Youth Practitioners

Edited by Simon Bradford and Fin Cullen

Research and Research Methods for Youth Practitioners

Rigorous research is crucial to effective work with young people, and increasingly youth practitioners need to be able to develop, review and evidence their work using a variety of research and assessment tools. This text equips students and practitioners with a thorough understanding of research design, practice and dissemination, as well as approaches to evidence-based practice.

A clear practice framework informs the book, outlining the significance of research to youth work, especially in relation to designing and developing services for young people. *Research and Research Methods for Youth Practitioners*:

- analyses the practitioner-researcher role
- explores the ethical context of research in youth work
- offers a thorough analysis of key methodological questions in research in practice
- provides a guide to data collection and analysis
- presents five principal research strategies for youth work: ethnographic work and visual methods; interviewing and evaluation; surveys and evaluation; the use of secondary data and documentary analysis; and researching virtual and online settings
- discusses the implications of research for work with young people as well as its dissemination.

Written by experienced researchers and practitioner-researchers, each chapter in this accessible textbook includes an overview, a critical discussion of the pros and cons of the particular method or approach, a case study, a practice-based task, a summary and suggestions for further reading. This textbook is invaluable for student and practising youth workers. It is also a useful reference for other practitioners working with young people.

Simon Bradford is Reader in Social Sciences in the School of Health Sciences and Social Care at Brunel University, UK.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr Michael Lewis Day,
friend and teacher, 20 February 1940–3 March 2010.

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Introduction

Simon Bradford and Fin Cullen

The contemporary landscape presents youth practitioners (and, more importantly perhaps, *young people*) with enormous challenges. Recent policy shifts (Every Child Matters and Aiming High for Young People, for example, in the UK) have demanded a new reflexivity on the part of youth professionals, and have led to new kinds of services for children and young people. During the last decade, the concept of professionalism in the public services has been carefully scrutinised, and professionals across Europe and elsewhere have become increasingly subject to regimes of audit and performativity. More recent political changes in the UK and other countries (including aspirations for a ‘smaller state’ and increased reliance on voluntary and third sectors), if implemented, will shift the configuration and governance of public services, leading to radically altered provision for young people and communities. For example, the inception of the ‘Big Society’ discourse from the coalition government in the UK will alter the provision and types of services available to young people. Changing political priorities will also shape future provision, and we can expect much more attention to be given to services that target very specific groups and geographical locations. In this context it will be important for managers and practitioners to be able to undertake and draw on good research to provide evidence for success in their work.

Macro political and economic changes in the post-recessionary world are transforming the social and material settings in which young people grow up. New (and reworked) definitions and discourses of youth need will shape the services that emerge or develop over the next few years. Many young people will experience increased disadvantage and their aspirations are likely to be tested and sometimes dashed. In such circumstances, youth practitioners will be important sources of support. Crucially, service providers in the voluntary and third sectors (some of which may have limited experience in the field) and professionals will have to be able to acquire accurate and robust knowledge of the circumstances of young people and their communities. This will be necessary to ensure that services are relevant and appropriate for young people, but also to be able to argue cases for support from funders. The importance of careful planning, data collection and analysis to practitioners’ and service managers’ work (practice and policy development) is central to this book’s overall approach.

The book starts from the conviction that effective professional intervention and development with young people and communities can be made only on the basis of carefully planned and thoughtful research (although well-designed organisations, skilful practice and competent managers are also vital). Good research provides necessary knowledge and insight into the circumstances that young people face in their daily lives and the basis upon which policy-makers and professionals can make good judgements about interventions. To be an effective and critical youth practitioner thus necessitates an engagement with and development of analytic and research-based knowledge and skills. This book aims to support this.

The book is aimed at practitioners and managers in youth practice (youth work and related settings of work with young people and communities) and students undertaking courses of qualifying professional education for work with young people at either undergraduate or master's level. Because each chapter includes case studies, practice-based tasks and suggestions for further reading, the book can be used as a source for teaching and learning in both formal and informal settings.

The aim is to provide help to practitioner-researchers and managers in developing their capacity in undertaking effective research in their work settings. The book identifies key methodological questions in practitioner-research, provides a guide to data collection and analysis, and offers a thorough discussion of the presentation of research findings and the contexts in which that might occur.

The often contested, complex and attenuated relationship between research, policy and practice is identified, but a clear practice framework informs each chapter. This emphasises youth work's value stance and, in particular, it raises important questions about young people's participation in research.

Organisation of the book

The contributors to this book are all active researchers, educators and practitioners in the fields of youth and education. As practitioners, they have participated in a range of research projects, and they have first-hand experience of the complex challenges of 'doing research' in youth practice contexts.

In the opening chapter, Fin Cullen, Simon Bradford and Laura Green ask what research is for, and outline the possible tensions and conflicts that can arise when entering the field as a practitioner *and* researcher. The practitioner-researcher role is explored in some detail. [Chapter 1](#) also investigates and outlines Participatory Action Research (PAR), and discusses how research might directly influence and shape both policy and practice. Finally, it touches on questions of research, power and ethics.

Stan Tucker, in [Chapter 2](#), offers a framework for designing and developing a research project. Tucker emphasises the importance of understanding research as a process in which a number of linked stages (including defining a problem, choosing a methodology, collecting, analysing and interpreting data) have to be planned and worked through by the practitioner-researcher in order to produce good-quality research. In particular, [Chapter 2](#) stresses the importance of identifying a clear research question at the outset of the research process. Without this, good research is unlikely to be possible.

In [Chapter 3](#), Chrissie Rogers and Geeta Ludhra consider the nature and significance of research ethics and relate this to questions of social difference, consent, ‘voice’ and participation. The chapter draws attention to a range of dilemmas that are likely to be faced by the practitioner-researcher in research with young people and communities. Rogers and Ludhra problematise the notion of *informed consent* and interrogate its meaning for practitioner-researchers. They suggest that informed consent should reflect a real commitment to young people’s participation and inclusion in the research process from the planning stages through to dissemination of the research findings. Where young people are intensively involved, they suggest, research that offers good research-based accounts of young people’s lives (sometimes including troubled and difficult aspects of these) is possible.

Alexandra Allan looks at ethnography and the use of visual methods of data collection in [Chapter 4](#). Allan highlights the value of ethnographic research and the use of visual methods in researching the detailed cultural dimensions of young people’s daily lives. Ethnography’s capacity to collect rich data makes it ideal for understanding young people’s cultural practices and the social relations in which these are structured. Visual methods have become an important means of collecting data on young people and youth cultures, and they are especially useful in involving young people themselves.

In [Chapter 5](#), Clare Choak suggests that contemporary society has become saturated by interviews and interviewing (through television and the media generally) and that people are routinely familiar with the interview as a data collection tool. Interviews – and asking questions – have become a principal means for practitioner-researchers to collect data. Choak outlines different kinds of interviews and discusses how the data that are generated by these might be used to inform youth practice.

Marilyn Clark and Albert Bell consider quantitative research methodologies in [Chapter 6](#). They emphasise the importance of rigour in quantitative research design, identify the strengths and limitations of quantitative methodologies in practitioner research, and dispel some of the misunderstandings and myths that surround them. They show that quantitative surveys are an important means of acquiring potentially large quantities of data that can provide important insights into young people’s views. Clark and Bell identify a number of important ethical considerations that practitioner-researchers should take into account in quantitative studies.

In [Chapter 7](#), John Barker and Pam Alldred discuss the use of documentary evidence and secondary data. They point to the vast array of documents that characterise late modern societies and suggest that these provide the practitioner-researcher with potentially important data sources. Secondary sources – government reports, historical documents or official records, for example – contain large quantities of data that provide insights into young people’s lives, and a number of substantive secondary sources relevant to youth practitioner-researchers are identified. Most importantly, Barker and Alldred indicate that practitioner-researchers should treat these documentary and secondary data sources critically. As they point out, documents are socially constructed and invariably reflect the positions and power of those producing them.

In [Chapter 8](#), Nic Crowe discusses the possibilities for practitioner-researchers to collect data from online and virtual sources. Crowe argues that virtual worlds and online gaming arenas (such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*) have become

important leisure-time settings in which young people construct aspects of their social identities. Virtual ethnography, Crowe suggests, should be seen as a source of interesting and important data on youth cultures. This is both similar to and different from ethnography undertaken in the material everyday world, and Crowe considers some of the arguments put forward by Allan in [Chapter 4](#) in relation to virtuality. The chapter identifies some key research strategies for collecting data in virtual settings.

For many practitioner-researchers there is also a clear political need to let policy-makers, funders, other scholars, managers, young people and the wider public know about their research findings. The processes and challenges involved in the dissemination of research are considered in [Chapter 9](#). Here, Judith Bessant and Rys Farthing identify some important criteria for distinguishing ‘good’ research, particularly highlighting the key role of the values and ethics of practitioner-researchers. In acknowledging the potentially fraught relationship between research, policy and practice, Farthing and Bessant explore the wider political context in which this is set. This includes the identification of methods, processes and tactics that are involved in successfully engaging and communicating research findings to a range of differing key audiences. The chapter encourages practitioner-researchers to be alert to structures and relations of power, politics and the ‘truth claims’ that they might make for their work, arguing that these matters have crucial significance in the way that particular messages are heard and understood by the audiences and consumers of research findings.

Finally, [Chapter 10](#) explores the broad policy and practice context within which research *with* young people and on services *for* young people is undertaken. Drawing on work by Silverman and Bloor, Cullen and Bradford identify potential positions or roles that might be adopted by social researchers, and relate these to the work of practitioner-researchers. The chapter goes on to take a critical view of so-called evidence-based policy and practice, and concludes by exploring the contribution that the practitioner-researcher might make to policy and practice in contemporary work with young people.

1

Working as a practitioner-researcher

Fin Cullen, Simon Bradford and Laura Green

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 policy-makers/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.

(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.