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research article

Facilitated practice-based research: a model of empowerment to reduce research anxiety in social work practitioner researchers and reframe cultural capital

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This article presents initial findings from an ongoing participatory action research project and aims to understand the problem of why, despite attempts to address this through, for example, social work practice research, practitioners still experience research anxiety. One way to understand this is through Bourdieu's field theory: social work students, practitioners and educators have essential research skills and knowledge but do not possess the symbolic capital to reframe these in the field of social work research and are habituated into research anxiety. The participatory action research approach taken asked the question: how can we bridge the gap between social work research and practice? Through collaboration with a local charity, an empowerment model was developed and tested as a potential solution: facilitated practice-based research. This is a research programme conducted in practice, about practice and using practice terminology. Findings from two focus groups participating in this approach suggest that practitioners do habituate research anxiety: they can conduct research but name it differently, and their research confidence needs development through recognising it and beginning to name their work as research. It is concluded that if research anxiety in practitioners is not addressed by reframing their capital, opportunities could be missed for embedding research into social work practice.

Key words research anxiety • facilitated practice-based research • symbolic capital • empowerment • reflexivity

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to present an empowerment model for developing social work¹ practitioner researchers: facilitated practice-based research (FPR) (© University of Sunderland). The intention is to open dialogue about how practitioners can be empowered to reframe their research skills and knowledge, as well as making a call to reflexivity in the academic community about how concepts of 'legitimate' knowledge are still being reinforced. This article theorises that the field of social work research is a complex social phenomenon, and it is only in understanding the

mechanisms within it that meaningful change can occur. Beginning in 2019, a piece of ongoing participatory action research (PAR) has been conducted by the author with community practitioners to address the question: how can we bridge the gap between social work research and social work practice?

Diagnosing the problem

Social work and research anxiety

In 1987, Irwin Epstein (1987: 71, quoted in Epstein, 2016: 4) wrote: ‘no other part of the social work curriculum has been so consistently met with as much groaning, moaning, eye rolling, hyperventilation and waiver-strategizing as the research course’. Yet, despite attempts to address this through various means (such as those of Chakradhar [2018] and Powell and Orme [2011], relating to pre-qualification and the practice research paradigm, explored later in this section), this anxiety ‘still rings true today’ (Epstein, 2016: 4) – a view shared by the author due to their own lived experiences as a lecturer who teaches research to social work students and practitioners (explained later). This article explores the issue of research anxiety from the perspective of empowering those who are (or would be) interested in research if that anxiety was addressed.

This ‘research anxiety’ continues to exist across European and international social work education and practice (Perkins et al, 2020: 170), as well as in practitioners themselves. Powell and Orme (2011: 1568) refer to this as a ‘circle of resistance’: as students become practitioners and then some become educators, they take this research anxiety back into the education environment, thus beginning the process anew. Therefore, those teaching research (even practice research) to social work students face ‘challenges in capacities and perceived capabilities to teach research’ (Kwong, 2017: 3). Further potential conflict emerges because of the demands on how professional social work courses are taught within higher education institutions (HEIs) and additional pressures like the Research Excellence Framework (REF),² where UK HEIs are held accountable for their use of public research funding. Thus, tension emerges between addressing accountability for practice and accountability for research. These challenges, in effect, culminate in differences between those seen as social work *academics* (research-focused) in HEIs and those seen as social work *educators* (practice-focused). Accordingly, developments in the social work research field largely come from research-focused academics, which creates further gaps between practitioners and those teaching social work in HEIs (Powell and Orme, 2011).

Social work practice research

Various approaches have emerged to contest the discourse concerning what ‘legitimate’ social work research *is*, what it *should* be and how it should relate to practice. The appetite for research-informed practice emerged in the form of evidence-based practice (EBP), which emphasises the use of what was conceptualised as ‘scientific evidence’ to inform practice (Krysiak and Finn, 2013: 23). However, interest in EBP has not necessarily translated into regular practice use. As Boichichio et al (2021) found, those in practice question its value, as it does not mirror what is actually happening in practice and instead subscribes to a different epistemological

approach. EBP has thus been challenged, for example, for reinforcing the divide between research and practice by positioning social work practitioners as solely 'research consumers' (Dodd and Epstein, 2012) and for not demonstrating respect to them (Fisher, 2020).

Practice-based research (PBR) emerged as an alternative, emphasising the need for social work 'research [to be] conducted by practitioners for practice purposes' (Dodd and Epstein, 2012: 5). Through reflection and dialogue about what kind of research is beneficial to social work practice and how practitioners should be involved, social work practice research (SWPR) emerged, beginning with the Salisbury Statement (2008, cited in Joubert and Webber, 2020a), and culminating in the publication of *The Routledge Handbook of Social Work Practice Research* (Joubert and Webber, 2020a).

Interested colleagues met in 2008 for the first International Practice Research Seminar in Salisbury, aimed at beginning an open dialogue on the meaning of practice research, and emphasising the need for partnerships between researchers and practitioners, and to address issues of empowerment (Salisbury Statement, 2008, cited in Uggerhøj and Wisti, 2020). Subsequent SWPR conferences have each addressed further developments: establishing that this is not a different approach, but a meeting point between practice and research (Helsinki Statement, 2012, cited in Uggerhøj and Wisti, 2020); widening the concept from Europe to worldwide, as well as from social work to other professions and those in receipt of welfare-related services (New York Statement, 2014, cited in Uggerhøj and Wisti, 2020); and taking the global perspective further, while highlighting the context-specific nature of practice research (Hong Kong Statement, 2017, cited in Uggerhøj and Wisti, 2020).

Taken as an overarching paradigm, SWPR is now identified as being about knowledge development to improve practice, emphasising a focus on the well-being of service users. It is also collaborative in order to address power differentials, attempts to address the gap between research and practice, and can be change oriented (Austin, 2020). This *knowledge development process* is often based in agencies focused on service evaluation and improvement. It emphasises collaboration with multiple stakeholders (Fisher et al, 2016), which includes practitioners and researchers.

In its rudimentary state, SWPR is thus about bringing together 'practitioners, researchers, services users and educators in a negotiated process of enquiry' (Joubert and Webber, 2020b: 1). Its aim is to move social work practice from something largely driven by theoretical concepts and experiential learning to something driven by research evidence (without privilege given to any one approach over another). Joubert and Webber (2020b) argue that it is no longer the case that social workers do not have an appetite for embedding research. However, Shaw and Lunt (2018) identify two distinct types of SWPR: either practitioner-led or academic partnership. They highlight certain differences between these, such as the particular tone used in outputs from practitioner-led research (practice reports), compared with outputs from academic-led research (journal articles). In addition, Fisher (2020) emphasises that this research does not have to be conducted by practitioners themselves, and Uggerhøj (2011a) suggests that research is best done by practitioners *in partnership* with researchers. Fouché (2015) argues that there is still a tenuous relationship between social work research and social work practice but that this does not need to be explored in order to do SWPR successfully. However, it is posited that there may be unintended consequences to this where students and practitioners are

socialised into believing that research and practice *are* separate, and that they are *not* researchers.

The social work research field

Pierre Bourdieu aimed to provide a conceptual tool for understanding complex social phenomena and how power operates in social life within particular fields (Emirbayer and Williams, 2005). Specifically, Bourdieu enabled consideration of ‘field specific struggles over power’ (Emirbayer and Williams, 2005: 715), which allows better understanding of how certain individuals and environments operate and interact with one another.

Bourdieu (1998) presented the concept of *habitus* to mean the dispositions acquired by an individual as they operate within a particular *field* – a specific social network where struggle occurs for dominance by a particular group to improve their standing and ensure their group’s survival. These fields are hierarchically structured, and within them, individuals are engaged in a continuous struggle for power, with success based on both inherited and acquired *capital* (Garnham and Williams, 1980). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), areas of capital can be economic, cultural, social and symbolic, and they only exist in a certain way within a particular field.

Taking the field of social work research in the UK, it can be argued that academic institutions and their academic researchers dominate the possession of capital:

- Economic capital: HEIs have more access to funding for research. Good outputs in the UK’s REF mean status and even more access to funding.
- Cultural capital: those based within academic social work research environments have more access to further educational qualifications.
- Social capital: academic social work researchers can access more networks, such as international conferences.
- Symbolic capital: academic social work research is perceived as ‘legitimate’ social work research, and its language is intellectualised.

In applying Bourdieu, we can see the field of social work research as dominated by academic discourse, and this dominance is constantly reinforced through greater access to economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. As suggested by Uggerhøj (2011b) and highlighted by Kwong (2017), endeavours have taken place to protect and maintain the research of social work as an academic discipline; thus, *social work research* could be seen as something conducted by those in academic institutions, with doctorates and so on, and not necessarily by practitioners. Due to the symbolic capital of what will be referred to in what follows as ‘academic’ social work research, this continues to reinforce all the other capital advantages. This symbolic capital is evident in the intellectualisation of language within academia, something Bourdieu (1992: 37) refers to as ‘linguistic habitus’. Therefore, those who possess what is seen as the *right symbolic capital*, in effect, judge those who do not (Bourdieu, 1989). Social work students and practitioners are therefore socialised into believing that they do not have the right symbolic capital and therefore habituate research anxiety into themselves: research is something separate, is not related to practice and is something to fear. Through habitus, field and the nature of how capitals operate, social work students internalise this belief that because social work research and social work practice are separate,

they are practitioners and therefore *not researchers*. They are both influenced by and influence the field; thus, not on the field of *academic* social work research positions them as not researchers, and they also position *themselves* as not researchers. In effect, this disadvantages and disengages social work students and practitioners.

This is not, however, conceptualised as a conscious strategy on the part of *academic* social work research; rather, it is posited that these are unconscious, unintended and unexamined actions, something Bourdieu refers to as ‘doxa’ (Inglis and Hughson, 2003: 167). By not challenging the discourse that separates research and practice, solutions (such as SWPR, it is argued) can still unconsciously reinforce the symbolic power of *academic* social work research through identifying certain people as *researchers* (that is, those within academic settings, with academic qualifications and approaches) and others as *not* (that is, practitioners). Therefore, unless this is challenged, it is argued that research anxiety in practitioners, which emerges through their learning and continues into their practice, is likely to remain.

Practitioner researchers

While it is acknowledged that the *primary* role of a social work practitioner is in service provision, ensuring practice is research informed does not mean that practitioners cannot also conduct research themselves. According to Flynn and McDermott (2016: 14), a *practitioner researcher* is a ‘practitioner who undertake[s] research on or in their own practice’. Practitioner researchers identify relevant research questions that emerge from their day-to-day practice, and the practitioner researcher is positioned as an insider researcher. A significant benefit of this approach is that findings can be implemented into practice speedily.

When considering the skills and knowledge needed to be a *good* researcher, it can be argued that social work students and practitioners already *do* possess these. The Researcher Development Framework (RDF) in the UK was devised based on empirical data to highlight ‘what makes excellent researchers’ (Vitae, 2022: 3), and looking at the categories, it is clear that what social work students and practitioners already know and do can be applied to most of them. For example, a practitioner’s ability to communicate with others, their high level of subject knowledge, their understanding of values and ethics, and their ability to assess and understand issues and devise plans are all skills that can be directly transferred to research. Something that has been highlighted in SWPR, however, is that with the dominant discourse still separating research and practice, social work students and practitioners do not easily make these links. This therefore suggests that practitioner researchers remain a relatively untapped resource in the field of social work research, so a model of empowerment is needed to facilitate the reframing of their cultural capital in order to gain access to their knowledge and experience.

Developing a solution

The problem of research anxiety initially emerged through the author’s own lived experiences (Clark et al, 2021). The author commenced working as a qualified social work practitioner in statutory child protection, while simultaneously conducting PhD research about an aspect of child protection (Deacon, 2015), so the tension between practice and research was lived through every day. Some of the challenges

that emerged concerned differences in such concepts as: social work interviews versus research interviews; evidence and analysis in social work assessments versus evidence and analysis in research; and social work reports versus research dissemination. These highlighted epistemological differences in how these concepts were understood and acted upon, as well as in what determines ‘acceptable’ knowledge (Lorenz, 2003). Through reflexivity, however, the author was able to observe these differences and adapt to the research environment.

A post-doctoral opportunity arose for the author to work on a funded project to teach research skills to community practitioners so that they could complete a research project. There were 15 participants, with qualifications ranging from none to master’s level, so a short research programme needed to be devised which ensured that it was accessible to all. Therefore, research terminology was minimised (removing the *linguistic habitus* of research), while core concepts remained. The programme took place within an HEI, so the community practitioners came into the university setting for the teaching input. This research eventually led to dissemination through three journal articles, two stakeholder presentations and one research seminar presentation. However, this project still reinforced the positionality and status of the *academic* researchers, so while it was about working in partnership with others, this was not necessarily an *equal* partnership in terms of the symbolic power – the academic researchers, in effect, led the project. Thus, this added to the author’s post-doctoral focus on bridging this gap, challenging the barriers between research and practice, and how they are managed.

In 2019, the author was approached by a local charity organisation working with families and other stakeholders in North-East England, which has seen an increase in relative child poverty (to the highest in the country, according to the North East Child Poverty Commission 2021). The aim was to develop the research capacity of two community practitioners to conduct a community research project and to support the emergence of a research culture in that organisation. In addition to the organisation’s research, the author and the practitioners collaborated in the PAR project (McIntyre, 2007), focusing on the gap between social work research and practice. The author’s developing research programme was implemented and then reflected on as a potential solution. Following the completion of the programme, the practitioners engaged in focus groups reflecting on the effectiveness of the programme. This has continued, and still continues, in collaboration with three further organisations: another charity organisation where the same programme was implemented (but conducted online due to COVID-19) and two local authorities where the approach has been adapted and is being tested to ensure it meets the specific needs of UK statutory organisations.

FPR: an empowering solution

To respond to the issue and impact of research anxiety on practitioners, FPR has been co-developed by the author over the last five years and tested, in action, at two organisations (the third and fourth programmes are still ongoing at the time of writing). FPR is an eclectic and interdisciplinary intensive research-mindedness programme for practitioners, facilitated by an academic-based practitioner researcher. Its aim is to facilitate practitioners to conduct a practice research project by engaging in participatory research with service users within a practice environment.

The approach taken in this programme is to conceptualise key research principles in a way that makes sense to practitioners, considering the ontological and epistemological position of the profession, while maintaining and facilitating academic rigour by supporting practitioners, through action, to implement participatory research projects aimed at improving practice using creative methodologies. This approach is by no means a quick fix (Heyns et al, 2017), but it is a way to achieve authentic collaboration between rigorous academic research and research by practitioners in order to improve practice. The aim is therefore to develop a new, sustainable research culture within organisations and in practitioners themselves by developing their research capacity, decreasing their research anxiety and reframing their capital, that is, the skills and knowledge needed to conduct research that they already have.

This is achieved by first ensuring the programme takes place within the practice setting (or another setting chosen by the organisation), so that a high-challenge, high-support environment can be implemented to encourage reflexivity on how practice is received (Deacon, 2022). To address the issues already set out in this article, it is essential that practitioners are in a comfortable and familiar environment to begin the process. Reflexivity is something familiar to practitioners, both through reflection learned in education and through practice supervision; thus, the programme begins in a familiar physical (practice-based) and cognitive environment. The quality of the relationship between practitioners and the facilitator is crucial to this approach, as within a knowledge-exchange setting, positioning the practitioners as field experts means that *their* knowledge is sought by the facilitator.

Further cognitive familiarity is embedded by temporarily *minimising* research terminology. Practice epistemology is habituated in practitioners, which Hothersall (2016) relates to a philosophical paradigm of pragmatism, in that practitioners focus on what *works* in practice settings. Social work practice in the UK subscribes to a range of different theoretical paradigms, making the specific identification of these more complex than for areas of practice that have a single, clear paradigm (Deacon and Macdonald, 2017). Social work practitioners can effectively deploy a range of theoretical paradigms in practice but may not necessarily be able to explicitly name them (Deacon and Macdonald, 2017). While this can be problematic if social work is to be seen as something that is theoretically and empirically informed (Hothersall, 2016), it is argued that by engaging with critical thinking and reflection, practitioners have the ability to engage with key principles (Vibeke and Turney, 2017). Therefore, by temporarily putting research terminology aside, it is possible to frame research within an eclectic practice paradigm as part of the learning process, allowing practitioners to learn in a more familiar way, that is, through their own practice examples. The terminology is not removed completely, just put aside to be reintroduced at a later stage.

In keeping with this principle, the programme content is underpinned by taking an eclectic approach. While social work practice shares similar philosophical values, its application in reality is context specific and dependent on the level of state control (Deacon and Macdonald, 2017). In the UK, state social work is influenced by an eclectic range of theoretical paradigms, from psychological, to sociological to ideological (Deacon and Macdonald, 2017). FPR is also eclectic and therefore combines research concepts from social work (PBR), nursing (emancipatory practice development [EPD]) and community work (action and emancipatory participatory research), and presents them in an explicable way to practitioners (Deacon, 2022).

The purpose is to empower practitioners to develop *research-mindedness in action*, rather than just learn specific research skills, and to support them to engage critically.

Through interdisciplinary working in research and practice, the author was introduced to practice development, which emerged in the 1970s and is a term used in nursing to describe ‘a variety of methods for developing healthcare practice’ (Manley et al, 2008: 1). It emphasises the need for an authentic, person-centred approach to service evaluation through challenging the hierarchical structure of service provision and using creative approaches to engage service users and stakeholders in service evaluation (Heyns et al, 2017). EPD takes a critical social science approach, encouraging reflexivity in practitioners to consider how their practice is received by service users (Manley et al, 2008; Deacon, 2022). The practitioner researcher role is taken by practice development facilitators (PDFs), who conduct research in practice to improve practice (Heyns et al, 2017), and this is how the concept of facilitation emerged in the FPR model. Those in these roles are positioned as either *insider* or *outsider* researchers who lead on the development of practice research. The author therefore identifies their role in the process as a facilitator of practitioner research. The advantage of embedding this approach, specifically in the UK, is that it can lead to a shared epistemology between PDFs and practitioner researchers, enabling easier collaboration, so practitioners across different disciplines can share the same language concerning the well-being of members of society. Through the doing of the research project within the programme, it is thus posited that supporting the development of practitioners’ research mindedness within practice settings in this way helps alleviate some of the research anxiety that exists in practitioners about conducting research themselves.

The FPR programme

The programme itself has three parts, taking place over an extended period. Part 1 is the teaching programme, which the facilitator adapts to match the trajectory of the emerging research, and consists of the following elements:

- Research terminology is temporarily put aside and reframed in practice language, so practitioners can engage with key concepts, for example, how practitioners use investigative research skills daily and how these can be reframed towards a research focus.
- Reflexivity is used as a starting point, enabling practitioners to step back from their practice, for example, considering their relationship with research and with how services are received.
- Specifics are adapted by the facilitator and emerge through engaging with practitioners, who identify potential areas of participatory research from their practice; the research project thereby emerges from the actions of the group.
- Practitioners are supported in applying for ethical approval from the facilitator’s HE and the organisation’s processes.
- Part 1 ends when the research project receives ethical approval.

In Part 2, the facilitation takes the form of supervision meetings as the practitioners collect and analyse data. Practitioners are then supported to prepare a practice report, setting out how the research was conducted and what themes were identified. This report is the end point of Part 2, so findings are disseminated speedily into local practice.

Finally, Part 3 is about supporting the emerging research culture in the organisation through working as a collaborative network to disseminate the findings into journal articles. Research terminology is then reintroduced to highlight what they did and support development into practitioner researchers through writing for publication.

Parts 1 and 2 have specific schedules and time constraints agreed by the facilitator and project team. Part 3 does not, however, and is about further supporting research capacity in the practitioners through nurturing the emerging research culture. In essence, what this model achieves, through a slow and steady process, is the emergence of research capacity and confidence within practitioners (through acknowledging and reducing research anxiety), and a research culture within organisations that focuses on participatory research with service users.

Methodology

The intention of developing FPR was to facilitate change in how practitioners participate and conceptualise their role within practice research. The social justice approach of PAR was taken to engage with the people affected by the issue (practitioners) in order to work collectively on a solution. (McIntyre, 2007). The author collaborated with practitioners in three different organisations to ‘diagnose’ the problem (research anxiety) and to ‘develop’ a solution (FPR) (Clark et al, 2021: 367) through a cycle of research, action and reflection (McIntyre, 2007). Any changes that occurred and whether FPR was appropriate to address the issue of research anxiety were then evaluated (Humphries, 2008).

So far, two focus groups have taken place, one with each organisation, following completion of the teaching programme (the programme is still being implemented with the third organisation). With Organisation 1, to minimise author bias, an individually moderated dialogical focus group was conducted by the two community practitioners (Acocella and Cataldi, 2021). With Organisation 2, funding was received, so the focus group was moderated by a research assistant. Specific mention of research anxiety or capacity were not made. Participants were asked to reflect on their views and experiences of the programme, and were given a short reminder of the sessions taught as a trigger for this discussion.

The aim of gathering the data was to understand practitioners’ experiences of FPR in order to determine how they perceived its intended effectiveness at developing their research capacity. Ethical approval was received from the author’s own university research ethics committee. A qualitative thematic analysis of the data was conducted (Clark et al, 2021), with the emergence of three initial themes: ‘research anxiety’; ‘by any other name’; and ‘building relationships to build capacity’.

Findings

Research anxiety

While the exact term of ‘research anxiety’ was not used, all participants in both organisations made reference to some kind of concern about research:

‘I was a bit apprehensive about the research training.’ (P3)

‘I have never liked research; I find it very dry and annoying because of all of the processes you have to do.’ (P4)

‘You need to have confidence in your own ability to do it, as it can seem massive.’ (P1)

As shown earlier, some of this anxiety related to how they felt about themselves and their abilities, as well as their experiences or views on research. As Epstein (2016) observed, even the idea of conducting research led to a vocalisation of negative perceptions by students before it even began. Despite the FPR programme being conducted with experienced practitioners who had actively invited the facilitator to support their research development, they too met the idea with research anxiety. This appears evident in their perceptions of research as a concept (“very dry and annoying” [P4]), as well as their perceptions regarding their own abilities to conduct it (“I was a bit apprehensive” [P3]). P4 identified research as something not helpful to them, or something that is separate because of the “processes you have to do”, and did not see these as processes that made sense to them for a practice environment. This perception that research is not about them or about practice shares similarities with critiques of EBP (Dodd and Epstein, 2012; Fisher, 2020; Bochicchio et al, 2021) and how research was observed as something separate to practice. For P1 and P3, the acknowledgement of apprehension and needing “confidence in your own ability” relates to how they perceived their abilities in this field, suggesting that research anxiety is habituated in them, not just that they see research as irrelevant (Bourdieu, 1998). These are illustrative of initial barriers experienced by practitioners: understanding the relevance of research and seeing it as something *they can do*. While SWPR (Joubert and Webber, 2020a) has been emerging over the last 20 years to highlight the applicability of practice research, it is not yet embedded in the UK as much as in other countries.

Participants did, however, refer to concerns being alleviated to some extent by their observations of how the programme was implemented by the facilitators. The facilitators were described as:

‘Very approachable and very knowledgeable, they came across as very passionate. So, that gave us confidence in what we were doing. Also, no question was a silly question, we could ask anything.’ (P5)

‘They kept us moving at a pace that suited us. Without them, we would have got lost in our research.’ (P3)

Table 1: Participant information: P1, P2, P3 (females), P4 and P5 (males)

Organisation	Code	Role	Gender
1	P1	Community practitioner	Female
	P2	Community practitioner	Female
2	P3	Senior coordinator	Female
	P4	Senior coordinator	Male
	P5	Manager	Male

The relationship that formed between the facilitators and practitioners was about trust in a high-challenge, high-support environment (Deacon, 2022) to ensure the environment and process in which the research took place was supportive. This suggested a certain shift in thinking: their anxiety was not removed per se, but it could be argued that some alleviation had begun to occur.

By any other name

The intention of temporarily moving research terminology aside in the initial stages of the programme was to support practitioners in reframing their existing knowledge as research knowledge, both through action and through relating it directly to practice. Participants' observations appear to reinforce this. For example, P1 and P2 in Project 1 identified how they were unfamiliar with certain terms used in the programme. However, on reflection and rereading information about them, they realised that they were already doing what those terms described, they just could not name them: "The ... terms are not naturally there in our heads. It is only on reflecting back now that you realise you have done everything point-by-point right" (P2).

As Deacon and Macdonald (2017) suggest, although specific concepts are not always named by practitioners, this does not mean that the concepts themselves are not acted out in practice. Through reflection, P2 was able to identify that what they had done did fit with the academic discourse (Bourdieu et al, 1994). In Project 2, however, P3 and P4 presented what on the surface appear to be different observations to P5:

'This training looked at the practical way, rather than the theory behind it, so it was tools that we can put on practice. So, that's probably why I enjoyed this training more than the research module that I did.' (P4)

'More like information sessions than intensive hard sessions.' (P3)

Here, P3 and P4 identified the programme as practical, where they could clearly see the links to their practice, so it made sense to them. However, P5 (in the same organisation and programme as P3 and P4) observed the high concepts within the programme: "We started off quite broad and then looked at the philosophy of research and then it narrowed down to different types of research." P3's and P4's observations that the content was not theory driven, but practical appear in contrast to P5's perspective that the teaching appeared to be successful in maintaining the integrity of research philosophy, while making it accessible. The teaching was underpinned by research philosophy (ontology, epistemology and methodology) through examples, but these were not explicitly named.

Table 2: Practitioner terms for research

Practitioner term	Research term
Community walkabout	Ethnography
Day sheets	Field notes
Group chat	Focus group
Note taking	Data collection
Readthrough to see what they are talking about	Thematic analysis

It also became evident that, throughout the projects, participants used their own contextual terminology to name the processes that took place. Yet, [Table 2](#) shows how these can easily be mapped to research terms.

As Bourdieu and Passeron (1994: 8) suggested, it is not educationally helpful to ‘cling to the traditional language of ideas because it is accepted without opposition’. This does not suggest that research terminology must not be used, but rather that moving it temporarily aside allowed practitioners to use their own terms, which enabled them to understand what they were doing and why. They were observed to be able to articulate what they were doing with a degree of confidence. This is not to suggest that these alternative terms be adopted, but rather that through the relationship between the facilitators and practitioners, it was possible for the facilitator to interrogate the meaning behind the terms used by discussing the practitioners’ actions.

Building relationships to build capacity

According to participants in both projects, the key to building their research capacity was in being able to have and share the experiences with another who they felt listened to them in an equal partnership. P3 encapsulated this as having an equal partnership with the facilitator(s): “I also felt like we were at a similar level, so we could ask something, and the tutors would never say ‘I already told you how to do it.’” P3, P4 and P5 all remarked on the accessibility of the facilitator(s) (high support) ([Deacon, 2022](#)) and how having this gave them more confidence in what they were doing. This was also remarked on by P1 and P2, who appreciated how the facilitator could cast a “critical eye” (P1) over the presentation of findings before sharing. This was not seen as something challenging for them, but rather as something that was helpful in their development. In Project 1, P1 recalled reading through all the comments made by people in the community and pulling together what they were mainly “talking about”, but in subsequent documentation, they were able to identify this as “thematic analysis” and, going forward, used that term in practice reports. Therefore, as their confidence increased, so did their research capacity, and they were better prepared when research terminology was slowly reintroduced by the facilitator. This demonstrates participants actively seeking terminology, rather than seeing it as a barrier. Their reason for doing so was practical, as they realised other stakeholders would not “value it because it’s not their words, or in the language they would use, so ... we need a find a balance between that” (P1). That balance they found was in the reintroduction of the research terminology, so they actively sought guidance on this from the facilitator.

Future development of testing

This piece of action research is continuing: the author is still consulting with Organisation 1; Organisation 2 is in the data-collection phase; and the programme is about to enter a further testing phase with Organisations 3 and 4 (two local authority teams). Based on the findings presented, the methods of data analysis for this PAR project and how the efficacy of FPR is evaluated will be adapted further. An entrance-and-exit survey will be designed and implemented with practitioners in Organisations 3 and 4 to give a baseline for practitioners’ research anxiety at the

start and end of the programme. The focus group will still be implemented to give practitioners the opportunity to expand on their views.

Discussion and conclusion

This article, utilising Bourdieu's (1998) framework, presents an argument based on both theory and early empirical research to open a dialogue about challenging the symbolic power of academic social work research – not to delegitimise it, but to consider a specific way of thinking about how social workers in practice can also be researchers. It is argued that practitioners already have the necessary knowledge and skills to be researchers and to be the guardians of SWPR. In essence, practitioners can become practitioner researchers through doing (and not theorising about) practice research. This article suggests that a cultural shift is needed to legitimise social work research that is conducted by practitioners for practice, not by identifying it as something *different*, but instead by reframing the capital in social work practitioners – that they *can* do research and that they *are* researchers. Thus, through this model, practitioners' capital is reframed through re-conceptualising the field of social work research that takes place in practice with practitioners. In doing so, authentic and equal partnerships can be formed between academic-based social work researchers and practice-based social work practitioner researchers.

Returning to the question raised through this piece of PAR, 'How can we bridge the gap between social work research and social work practice?', this article acts as a 'call to reflexivity', that is, for all those involved in social work research, especially in the UK, to consider what universities and academic social work researchers can do to address this imbalance. As Bourdieu (1998: 80) suggested, it is about having a 'feel for the game' between agents and cultural fields, understanding both the written and unwritten rules. We naturalise and embody the field, which means it *speaks us*. Therefore, while there is practical knowledge of the game, there is also reflexive knowledge of the unwritten rules. Reflexivity is about breaking with the practical knowledge and values of the field in which it operates – 'radical doubt' (Webb et al, 2002: 52). In all aspects, this should be applied to consider whether or not the approaches being used are worthy and thus whether they are benefitting the researcher or wider society. Therefore, this call to reflexivity is to ask us all to consider whether social work research is beneficial not only to service users, but also to the practice on which it is based and practitioners. It is also a call for practitioners to reframe their perceptions of social work research as something they *can* do and something that *is* relevant to their practice. In this way, we can effectively connect these perceptions from an empowering position that reframes the practitioners' research knowledge and skills, rather than positioning their knowledge and skills as separate. Therefore, to borrow from Heyns et al (2017), EPD is not a *quick fix*, as they suggest, so FPR is also not a *quick fix*, but about the facilitation of a culture change in social work research.

Notes

¹ The term 'social work' is used to refer not only to the profession of social work, but also to the shared work and value base of community development (Forde and Lynch, 2015) and social care.

² See: www.ref.ac.uk/

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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