



Department of Psychology  
& Speech Pathology

# Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group

IOD Occasional Papers: Number 1/99

## **Researching Power**

*Saima Alam, Sue Caton, Iain McLean, Christine  
Noble, and Janet Smithson*

# **Researching Power**

**Saima Alam, Sue Caton, Iain McLean, Christine Noble  
and Janet Smithson**

Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group,  
Manchester Metropolitan University

Published by: IOD Research Group

Copyright (c)1999 IOD Research Group

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced by any means, or transmitted, or translated into a machine language without the written permission of the IOD Research Group, unless under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agreement, or for use in Education, or for dissemination within an organisation in which cases the work must be reproduced in its entirety with acknowledgement of the IOD Research Group as its source.

IOD Occasional Papers

Published occasionally by the IOD Research Group

For information contact the publishers at the address below

ISSN 1359-9089

ISBN 1-900139-80-4

Printed by the Manchester Metropolitan University

**IOD Research Group**

**MISSION:**

To undertake research and consultancy which informs policy, enhances the effectiveness of organisations, and enhances the lives of vulnerable people by asking meaningful questions, encouraging the participation of those involved in the research and disseminating the findings to all those with a stake in the research

Interpersonal & Organisational Development Research Group  
Department of Psychology & Speech Pathology  
The Manchester Metropolitan University  
Elizabeth Gaskell Campus  
Hathersage Road  
Manchester  
M13 0JA

Tel: 0161 247 2563/2556/2595  
Fax: 0161 247 6364  
Email: C.Kagan@mmu.ac.uk  
S.Lewis@mmu.ac.uk

# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	3
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	4
<b>The Authors</b> .....	4
<i>Researching issues of power</i> .....	4
<i>The Power of the researcher</i> .....	5
<b>The Transition to Adult Life for Young People with Moderate Learning Difficulties: An Empowering Process?</b>	
<b>SUE CATON</b> .....	6
<i>Introduction</i> .....	6
<i>Empowerment</i> .....	6
<i>Choice and Decision Making</i> .....	7
1. <i>School Environment</i> .....	8
2. <i>Home Environment</i> .....	9
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	11
<i>Reflexive Analysis</i> .....	11
<b>Problems with Power When Practitioners Research</b>	
<b>IAIN McLEAN</b> .....	13
<i>Introduction</i> .....	13
<i>Why have practitioner research?</i> .....	14
<i>Problems with power when practitioners research</i> .....	15
<i>Possible remedies</i> .....	18
<i>Recommended Reading</i> .....	21
<b>Talking about Gender and Ignoring Power</b>	
<b>JANET SMITHSON</b> .....	22
<i>Introduction</i> .....	22
<i>The Research</i> .....	22
<i>Passive disagreement discourse - acknowledging conflict but accepting</i> .....	25
<i>Effects of a "gender neutral" assumption</i> .....	26
<i>Conclusions</i> .....	27
<i>Reflexive Analysis: The researcher's power in interpreting the discourse</i> .....	28

<b>The Phenomenology of Power or Death of a Nursing Home</b>	
<b>CHRISTINE NOBEL</b> .....	29
<i>Introduction</i> .....	29
<i>Modern Wards and Homes: Who is Powerful, Who is Powerless?</i> .....	29
<i>Analysis of Nursing Home Organisation</i> .....	32
<i>Case Study of Malcolm?</i> .....	34
<i>The Research</i> .....	35
<i>Conclusions and Reflections</i> .....	36
<b>Young British Asian Women: Issues of Powerlessness. A Question of Race and Gender?</b>	
<b>SAIMA ALAM</b> .....	39
<i>Introduction</i> .....	39
<i>Focus of the Research</i> .....	39
<i>General Background</i> .....	39
<i>Previous Research: The Experiences of Young British Second-Generation Asians</i> .....	39
<i>The Experience of British Asian Females and Patriarchy</i> .....	40
<i>Qualitative Methodology: Semi-Structured Interviews</i> .....	41
<i>'Woman to Woman' Interviewing and the Influence of 'Race'</i> .....	41
<i>Personal Feelings of the Research Process</i> .....	42
<i>Theme of 'Powerlessness' and 'Lack of Control'</i> .....	42
<i>Evaluation</i> .....	46
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	48

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*With thanks to all those in the Interpersonal and Organisational Development Research Group who have contributed to reading and editing these papers.*

## RESEARCHING POWER

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The authors**

The contributions to this Occasional Paper have been adapted from work in progress by members of the IOD group. All the contributors are carrying out research on community, work and/or family issues using qualitative research methods.

#### **Researching issues of power**

All the papers describe research into power relations operating between or within different groups within society. A common theme across the various research topics is that of “empowering” groups who are usually portrayed as relatively powerless.

**Sue Caton** discusses processes of empowerment for young people with learning difficulties, and relates empowerment to moves towards autonomy, control and choice.

Sue is an MPhil student in the Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her thesis is entitled ‘The Transition to Adult Life for Young People with Moderate Learning Difficulties’.

**Iain McLean** describes some of the problems with shifting and unequal power relationships when practitioners (in this case within the health services) are also researchers. Now a research assistant in the IOD group, at the time of writing this article Iain worked as a mental health community support worker in Manchester.

**Janet Smithson** investigates the relation between power and gender among young women and men talking about current and future life choices, and the practical effects of ignoring power differentials. Janet is a Research Fellow in the Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology, at Manchester Metropolitan University. Current research includes the reconciliation of future work and family for young people in Europe, the effects of workplace change on individuals and families, and discourses about gender.

**Christine Noble** discusses the power hierarchies and coercive power within mental health services, with an analysis of the dynamics operating in a nursing home. Christine has been a Registered Mental Nurse for twenty years. Due to changes in working practices she feels a need to re-define the relationship between the mentally distressed and those belonging to the social structures which label and treat them as ‘mentally ill’. The tools for such changes come from critical psychology and an Action research methodology.

**Saima Alam** describes feelings of lack of control and powerlessness for second generation British Asian women, and relates this to their gendered and racialised position in society. Saima is a research assistant at Manchester University and is doing PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University. This study was undertaken by myself as part of a PhD entitled : ‘Young British Asians Between Two Cultures: Gender Differences, Identification of Stress, It’s Effects and Coping Mechanisms’.

## **The power of the researcher**

*“Just as power was a topic of the research, so it was also a feature of the process.”* (Banister et al, 1994)

Traditionally, psychology has often ignored the moral, social and political implications of research. The qualitative research approaches used by the authors of these papers include action research, community psychology, practitioner research, and feminist research. All these methodologies explicitly acknowledge the subjectivity of academic research, and specifically the power relationships between researcher and researched, both at the time of carrying out the research, and in representing the participants in the subsequent analysis and reporting of the data. *“Psychologists... are influenced by differing interests and complex power dynamics”* (Fox and Prillitensky, 1997). The power or control of the researcher in relation to the research participants, and towards the research data and analysis, is discussed in these papers.

A related issue concerns the “empowerment” of participants by the researcher. Research is often more gainful for the researcher than for the participants. Is the research described here “on”, “with” or “for” the participants? Action research and practitioner research aim explicitly to empower participants by attempts to form egalitarian relations, with the researcher abandoning “control” and adopting an approach of openness, reciprocity and shared risk. Participants thus make decisions rather than function as passive objects, they are ‘co-researchers’ rather than ‘research subjects’ (Banister et al, 1994). These papers discuss some of the dilemmas and contradictions of this approach.



# **The Transition to Adult Life for Young People with Moderate Learning Difficulties: An Empowering Process?**

**Sue Caton**

## **Introduction**

The transition from childhood to adult life for young people is recognised as a time of great change, new opportunities and an increase in independence and decision making. This stage of life is very complex and the transition takes many years with no definite beginning nor end. However, leaving school is seen as one of the first steps towards adulthood, and increased independence and autonomy. One way to examine this transitional stage is to look at it as an empowering process. When children are very young, it is their parents or carers who control every aspect of life for them. As they grow older and enter adulthood that control is gradually handed over to them, and they become empowered to exert their own independence and make their own decisions.

My research is concerning this transition for young people who have attended schools for children with moderate learning disabilities. One of the aims of my study is to assess how these young people make this transition, and to examine any difficulties they may experience. From the past research, it appears that this group of young people may experience more difficulties in transition than their non disabled peers due to attitudes which link disability, dependence and eternal childhood (CERI, 1988). These problems, are, in turn, related to this concept of the transition to adult life being so closely linked to the empowerment, or lack of empowerment, of young people as they grow older.

## **Empowerment**

According to Polloway (1996) the increasing empowerment of people with developmental disabilities is an area that has seen a lot of change over the last century. This has been due to the changing perceptions and treatment of people with developmental disabilities. Empowerment is not a straightforward concept and it “involves a variety of facets including self-efficacy, sense of personal control, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging to a group”. (pp.8). However, possibly one of the most important elements of empowerment is self-determination. Self-determination has been described by Wehmeyer (1992) as referring to “the attitudes and abilities necessary to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to make choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life, free from undue external influence or inference.” Polloway (1996) also stated that self determination is a developmental process that is life long and yet is one that could be more difficult for people with disabilities due to stereotypical views that disabled people are dependent on others. This would imply that for young learning disabled adults, becoming empowered through the development of self-determination is a process that will not necessarily happen smoothly. In an ideal situation the growth of empowerment amongst learning disabled youth would have some positive outcomes. These were summed up by Polloway et al (1996), “Personal empowerment can lead to desirable outcomes. First, the persons with disabilities

become valued members of society, providing a unique perspective of life from which all may benefit. Second, that they can enjoy a quality of life that is characterised by physical and material well-being, competence in dealing with the demands of adulthood, and personal fulfilment.....these outcomes are what all people strive for and what empowerment can provide.” (pp.9-10)

In my research I have interviewed a group of young people who have moderate learning difficulties. At the time of interview they had approximately one to three months left at school before they were due to leave. They were interviewed concerning their experiences regarding preparing to leave school and how they saw their lives in the future. As part of this interview they have all completed the Quality of Student Life Questionnaire (Schalock and Keith, 1995). This questionnaire uses four factors to assess quality of life. These factors are social belonging, general well being, satisfaction, and empowerment/control. The empowerment /control factor asks questions such as, “Who decides how you spend your money?” and “Who chose the decorations in your bedroom?”. It aims to look at the opportunity the participant has to “exert control over one’s life and to make choices” (Keith and Schalock 1994, p.84). This factor is essential to the other three factors used in this questionnaire. Servian (1996) states that, “through having power individuals can at least partly meet their own ‘needs’. If they have been able to follow their own interests, to feel fulfilment or to meet their own material needs, an assumption is that they have displayed their own power in doing so – they are empowered.” (p.7) He goes on to add that, “if needs and empowerment are related, then, from this analysis, ‘empowerment’ may best be seen as ‘moves towards autonomy.’” (p.8)

The pattern of scores for the empowerment / control factor in Schalock and Keith’s Quality of Student Life Questionnaire are expected to increase with age. Keith and Schalock (1994) compared the scores of two groups of non-disabled young people whose average ages were 12.8 years and 15.8 years. They found that the scores were quite similar for both of the age groups in all factors with the exception of the empowerment / control factor, where the scores were higher for the older group. This implies that it is in the area of empowerment / control that young people appear to experience the biggest changes in their transition to adult life. However as these scores were obtained by two groups of non disabled adolescents and it is of some debate whether or not the scores would increase in the same way for learning disabled adolescents.

### **Choice and Decision Making**

Wehmeyer (1994) examined locus of control orientations of adolescents. He discovered that students with learning difficulties appeared to have a more external locus of control than would be expected for students without disabilities. This means that in this study young people with learning difficulties were more likely to attribute events in their lives as being the result of luck, chance and /or powerful others, rather than being consequences of their own actions. He states that, “these perceptions of control probably reflect both an over reliance on luck and chance inherent in less mature beliefs and understanding about ability, effort and circumstances and an ability, perhaps in themselves and others. It seems highly likely that this is so because students with mental retardation have not had the opportunities to experience control and choice and have too often only others with disabilities with whom to compare themselves.” (p.19)

The concepts of control, choice and decision making are fundamental aspects of empowerment, developing one's own identity, and therefore of quality of life. According to Jenkinson (1993) issues of choice making, and responses to decisions by people with a mild or moderate learning difficulty have received little attention in research. Research that has been reported indicates that people in this group have greater difficulty with decision making than do non-disabled people. As Jenkinson points out, "this is not surprising in view of both their cognitive limitations and their reduced experience in decision making." (p.372)

During the transition to adult life decision making is very important. As people embark on leaving school they are faced with decisions in various aspects of their lives be it whether to go to college, training or employment, or if employment is their choice, how to handle increased financial independence. Unfortunately, these opportunities for decision making can sometimes be constrained. This constraint is often explained by the element of risk, which prevents caregivers and professionals from encouraging decision making. However, as Wehmeyer (1994) pointed out this can lead to individuals having an increased external locus on control. Without some element of risk, people with learning difficulties will not be able to experience the successes as well as the failures, which result from making their own decisions. As Jenkinson (1993) says, "Few of us, whether or not we have a disability, achieve complete rationality in everyday life decision making. Should we expect people with an intellectual disability to become better decision makers than the rest of us?" (p. 364)

As far as my research is concerned, this restriction, or growth of empowerment and control in the transitional stage experienced by young people is best examined in the two separate environments of school and home.

### **1. School Environment:**

Young people's transition to adult life is clearly going to undergo significant changes when they leave school. Within the school environment it is teachers, careers officers, school secretaries, and indeed any adult who have more power than the pupils. This in many cases is more obvious within special schools as their smaller more sheltered environments (which can have many advantages) are generally intended to provide security rather than independence and empowerment for the students. Indeed in carrying out my research I felt that, despite my best efforts, the pupils at the schools involved in my research appeared to experience a lack of control over what should have been their decision to be interviewed. I explained to the class as a whole where possible, and also to each young person, who I was and that I would appreciate their help with my research. Every pupil, with only one exception, that I approached within the schools agreed to be interviewed. I felt that this was possibly because the interview was conducted in the school, possibly that I was older than them, or possibly because I appeared to be on friendly terms with their teachers. The pupil that refused to be interviewed sent a message to me via another pupil before I had a chance to speak to him personally. On a further visit to the school, the class teacher who was helping to co-ordinate my research asked that pupil to come and speak to me, not knowing that he had already refused. This, it seemed, was enough pressure for him to change his mind and he agreed to speak to me. This example shows very strongly how easily this group could be disempowered and how much influence their teachers have over them.

This phenomenon of a lack of empowerment within the school can create problems when planning for the future of the school leavers. Choices that are made available to the young people are vital to their futures. As pointed out by Jenkinson (1993) it would be all too easy for the professionals involved in transition planning to unduly influence the young people concerned by unwittingly limiting information available to them in accordance with their own preferences and values.

Meetings concerning planning for leaving school, is another situation where disempowerment has been shown to happen. The young person whose future is being discussed at these meetings can become in the situation where he/she is only contributing to the decision making as an equal member of a team, rather than being able, or allowed to take the major role. Indeed, even acting as an equal member could be an optimistic scenario. Tisdall (1996) found that there is commonly a lack of involvement in transition meetings by the young people themselves, despite the fact that they do regularly attend the meetings. She points out that, "It cannot be assumed that physically including young people in inter-disciplinary meetings about their post-school futures will actually involve and empower them." (p.31) However it is an extremely difficult balance to obtain. On the one hand, Tisdall would commend the increased appearance of discussion and involvement, but on the other hand as pointed out by Szymanski (1994) too much intervention and guidance can, "threaten to decrease family and individual student control over the transition process. Professionals can easily and unintentionally disempower students and families through the nature and content of their interventions and interaction" (p.406)

On a more positive note, there are also some empowering factors encountered in the special school environment which pupils may experience in a more positive way than would their mainstream peers. Armstrong and Davies (1995) found that a higher level of individual support is provided by the specialist careers officer who maintains regular contact with the young person. They also found that special school pupils had a greater accessibility to specialist provision and youth training that is tailored to their special needs. Both of these situations have the potential to empower students as they make expert, suitable assistance available for students to use as they wish.

As already discussed, self determination and decision making skills are vital for empowering individuals as these in turn are related to quality of life. As pointed out by Jenkinson (1993), one likely cause for people with mild or moderate learning difficulties having more difficulty in decision making is lack of experience in doing so. This is a fairly simple concept that perhaps should be increased within our special schools. Ideas for attempting to empower students while at school need to be constantly attempted, and in order to increase the young people's experience, these need to start at as young an age as possible.

## **2. Home Environment:**

The transfer of power from parents or carers to young people within the home environment can potentially start at an earlier stage where parents are likely to gradually give their children more control and power over their own lives. However, despite expectations that parental control should start to reduce during this transition, Thorin et al (1996) found that many parents of disabled children actually felt an increased demand on parental resources. Parent's expectations

that they should be reducing their influence over their children during the transitional phase can produce dilemmas where conflicting choices produce equally problematic outcomes (Thorin 1996). Leaving school is a time when parents are forced to come face to face with issues that affect disabled and non-disabled young people alike and these issues may influence the future of the whole family. However, it has been shown that there are differences between the transition experiences of parents of young people with and without disabilities. According to Whiney-Thomas and Hanley-Maxwell (1996), parents of students with disabilities show greater discomfort, and have less optimistic visions about their son or daughter's future than do parents of young people without disabilities. One third of youth in the general population were living independently less than 2 years after secondary school, compared with 13% of youths with disabilities. (Blackorby and Wagner, 1996) This can lead to the problem of parents of disabled children finding it difficult to know when is an appropriate time to 'let go' and to let their young person increase his or her responsibilities. This appeared to be a difficulty that the mother of one fifteen-year-old girl that I interviewed was experiencing. I asked Kelly where she saw herself living in the future:

"Well me Mum's hoping that I'll be moving house by then, by I'm nineteen or twenty because I'll be hoping that I'll in all round near where me Mum can keep an eye on me, and see that I'm doing everything right she'll pop in, and you know she don't want me to move far because if me not coping she'll think I'm not able to cope on me own, she wants to be there for me all the time."

Morningstar et al (1995) asked students with disabilities about their opinions regarding family involvement in the transition process. They were specifically asked about the opportunities that they had had to make decisions in their own lives. It was evident that families played a large role in the resulting self-determination of the students. As Stanfield in 1973 reported, 94% of parents said their child was capable of caring for themselves and able to protect themselves against injury, yet 56% had reservations about leaving them alone! Zetlin and Turner in 1985 found a similar problem where, 56% of their participants complained of an independence-dependence struggle with their parents and felt they receive too much interference by parents in their daily lives. These results seem to reflect the general feeling reported by the group of school leavers I interviewed, with one sixteen year old girl pointing out that:

"I want to be independent but my parents are so overprotective."

Despite these obvious worries for the future we must be careful not to develop, 'Parentitis' (Madden 1995) and dismiss parental concern as being 'over-protective' and 'over-anxious'. Again, when interviewing Kelly, she indicated that her Mum did seem to be sowing the seeds of empowering her for coping with the future more independently:

"But I won't have me Mum always there for me that's what I always say, I always won't have me Mum there I have to do things on me own. That's why I'm doing it now so when I leave me Mum, then I'd know how to, I can't cook, I can't do anything, but I'll get to learn that"

Transition is not always seen by the professionals involved as being an empowering stage of life. All the people involved including the professionals, carers and the young people themselves all

have their own goals and ambitions. To overcome this it could be helpful for schools to get involved with local self advocacy movements, who could help pupils to empower themselves. According to Miller and Keys (1996), "A major goal of the self advocacy movement is to help persons with developmental disabilities become aware of their own strengths and demonstrate that they are people with capabilities and limitations, just like any other member of society." (p.315) This would appear not only to be a major goal of the self-advocacy movement but also a major goal of all involved in transition. Transition is a time of life where young people should be empowered to control their own lives. However as Szymanski (1994) points out transition is also about societal empowerment. She says that, "Our communities and our society will be enriched and empowered when all citizens, including those with disabilities, are valued and seen as contributing members." (p.407) Despite looking at the two environments separately here, home and school environments need to blend together, transition should be considered a "rallying point for empowerment of students, families, and communities, with the goal of self determination and autonomy." (Szymanski, 1994, p.407)

## **Conclusion**

It can be seen therefore that the transition to adult life for young people can and should be an empowering process. Unfortunately young people with moderate learning difficulties not only have the difficulties that all young people face during this transition but they also face the additional difficulties associated with their impairments.

Self determination, choice and decision making skills are all factors which can enable young people, both disabled and non disabled alike to become empowered. It has been shown that an individual's level of empowerment and control in their lives is a factor affecting their quality of life. Therefore these factors should be treated within schools and by parents or carers as vital to developing empowerment.

## **Reflexive Analysis**

By carrying out research which investigates the experiences of young people with learning difficulties, I have also come across issues concerning power and empowerment in the research process itself. The people at the centre of my research have both the disadvantages of their age and of their impairments. Problems associated with this have come across in different ways.

Firstly, as already mentioned, the issue of their involvement. Despite my attempts to assure that participation in my research was voluntary I feel some unease that some of my participants may have felt that it was part of their schoolwork that they had no choice but to participate. Or, if they were aware that they did have a choice it would have been difficult for them to refuse given the situation where their fellow students were all participating. The example given previously of the school leaver who initially did not want to participate is an example of this. On his agreeing to participate, I repeated assurances that it was voluntary and he could still refuse if he wanted to, but at this stage he had decided, for whatever reasons that he would participate.

Secondly in representing their views accurately in the reporting of data. This has two

interrelated problems. Firstly when I interviewed the school leavers, some participants seemed to enjoy the experience and had a lot of information that they wanted me to know. However more commonly, many of my participants did not voice strong opinions on the subjects I asked them about and they gave fairly brief answers. The second problem is that there is established and respected literature in the area of transition (particularly in relation to young people who have severe learning disabilities) that shows that young people with learning disabilities experience problems in a variety of areas throughout their transition. Looking at these two problems together I feel that it could be an abuse of my power in this situation to misrepresent the participants view in order for them to reflect the established conclusions drawn by past research.

# Problems With Power When Practitioners Research

Iain McLean

## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the inequalities of power that are peculiar to practitioner research (PR) in professions concerned with people and their behaviour. Those who conduct PR have been defined as 'practitioners who are involved in doing research into areas of their practice' (Reed and Procter 1995). This definition is straightforward almost to the point of tautology; yet whilst an unimposing description of the label may be made, the explication of the substance is far more convoluted. Academic culture of this century has included a monopoly on research, with findings and theories flowing (or filtering) out of the universities and into the workplace.

The promotion of 'evidence based practice' within the British National Health Service (NHS) represents how that tide (or trickle) may be turning, with increasing interest amongst service providers in evaluating their services themselves. At the time of writing, I am employed as a support worker for the South Manchester University Hospitals NHS Trust's mental health community support team. The evaluation of this project's outreach service is the thesis for the psychology MPhil I am taking at the Manchester Metropolitan University. This paper, then, is written from the perspective of a practitioner researcher and so reflects the blend of knowledge and experience that characterizes PR. As well as seeing other, diverse, examples of PR in my work environment, I have the experience of conducting a particular exercise in PR. Some of the synthesis of that experience with the extant literature on PR and the constraints of methodology is arranged and developed here.

Even such a brief outline of one view of PR as that offered by Reed and Procter presents many problems, each including a difficulty around the issue of power. Academic researchers hold the expertise and define what is considered true science. The arguments for the strictures of experimental design may be many and good, but this privileged position of disinterested professional confers greater power than that of well-meaning amateur. The drive for 'evidence based practice' in the NHS could be borne out of an economic rather than a progressive ideology, and so nurses may be persuaded into devoting more of their scant time to auditing their own cost effectiveness. Armstrong and Grace (1994), for example, contend that audit, as such activity is generally known within the new management-heavy NHS, aims to homogenize care provision with the lowest cost with the highest benefit treatment as the norm. PR can empower and disempower all those it touches in different ways at the same time.

Much of the extant literature concerning the growing area of PR deals with the power imbalance between academic and workplace researchers, dispelling the mystique of research and presenting the methodological tools of the trade. An admirable pursuit, and necessary to bring more practitioners to research. Unfortunately the least powerful party involved, the research subjects, have largely been left out of the literature explaining and encouraging PR, even though their existence defines the topic. This omission is made worse when one considers that in PR this group is generally a disadvantaged or vulnerable section of society (Glaser,



1988). Researching where randomized controls and the trappings of good experimental science are hard to come by alters the means by which the research is conducted and limits what may be achieved.

### **Why Have Practitioner Research?**

Historically, the main barrier to PR has been the threat to validity of experimenter expectancy, the danger of the researcher's prior knowledge biasing the experiment. This is a very real problem and should be addressed honestly when the experimental, or more commonly in PR, the quasi-experimental, design is decided upon. However, 'straight' researchers are not mechanical data gatherers, they are humans capable of the same prejudices. Practical ignorance could be argued to be as dangerous as knowledge in adversely affecting the research's design. Herbert (1990) claims that 'true' experimental methods are often unethical "in the 'real world' of social and health service provision" (p.22) suggesting that quasi-experimental methodology has an innate concern for the individual's rights, even if only by default. There will be pitfalls with every approach to every activity, but if there are also unique and valuable benefits then it is worth the effort to tackle those pitfalls.

Fuller and Petch (1995), talking about PR in social work, see these benefits:

1) 'a research agenda rooted in knowledge of practice' (p.10). The practitioner's closeness to the subject will suggest areas of research; perhaps patterns worthy of investigation may be noticed only over months or years work with a particular client group. Better research should inform better practice, and this may occur in many direct and indirect ways; for example, evaluation of services and research into new methods, when conducted by practitioners in their workplace, may promote a culture of self-awareness and improvement amongst colleagues.

2) 'complementary problem analysis and disaggregation skills' (p.10). Social workers, but also most workers involved in any work broadly definable as caring, are well-honed problem-solvers. Indeed, problem-solving, or teaching problem-solving skills, may be the shared defining aspect of such occupations. Reed and Procter (1995) comment that problem-solving is 'The primary aim of nursing research' (p.30) as opposed to making a descriptive contribution to scientific knowledge. Similarly important is the ability to find the essence of something, whether reading between the lines when talking to a client, or looking for the meaning behind legal or medical jargon. The practitioner's habituation to 'working things out' in an environment of bureaucracy and misinformation is good preparation for the realistic implementation of a research project.

3) 'interviewing and recording skills' (Fuller and Petch, 1995, p.10). Here perhaps is the clearest example of practitioners having the upper hand over academic researchers, and perhaps more so in the view of those whose preferences lean toward the qualitative. Interview techniques may vary depending upon the purpose, but, suggest Fuller and Petch, that variance 'can be exaggerated' (p.10). Those who work with vulnerable people should have a good 'bedside manner', for want of a less patronizing term. Such workers must be able to gain respect and trust, and so hopefully the truth, from the people with whom they work. This is required and so practiced daily; similarly, accurate transcription of the fruits of that skill in the copious records most such workers are required to make.