Abstract. How can one ethically conduct research in a setting where the researcher holds roles and membership in the researched community? Coming from an ethical culture of non-academic professional practice, I see my dual position as researcher and practitioner as less of a challenge than the defense of this duality within an academic setting. In this paper, I outline my position in the research, one that privileges a practitioner role over a researcher role. I argue that this position can minimise the risk of research related power imbalances and conflicts of interests. I discuss the tensions and relationships between my practitioner and researcher roles and include motivations for occupying these roles. Examples of how the roles are enacted in practice are provided. This paper investigates the ethics of intersubjectivity, making the case that a community based social science research perspective is attainable and viable.

Keywords: Ethics. Collaborative. Practitioner Research. Gerontology. Naturalism. Intersubjectivity

This longitudinal naturalistic inquiry follows the development of a shared housing initiative for older women over a period of five years. Ten women aged over 65 share living spaces in two purpose-built houses. I am a Trustee of the Housing Trust that built these houses, a practitioner working voluntarily within these houses, as well as the researcher. My insider position enables access to the research setting, whilst posing ethical and methodological challenges to my role as researcher.

There are ongoing challenges to me conducting research in this setting. Two main areas of risk have been identified. Firstly, risks to the participants from me as researcher holding a position of authority. Secondly, risks to the integrity of the research from my position as a Trustee and my service orientated practitioner role. I cannot claim to be an objective researcher. However, this research would not have occurred were it not for my other roles. With practitioner as my primary role, I view this situation as uncomplicated. The participant’s rights and well-being are paramount. This research is not a social experiment, nor is it a social milieu within which to test social theories and concepts. The research setting is someone’s home. As readers and researchers, we are graciously invited in; however, that does not give us license to look in places the hostesses have closed off from public inspection. I judiciously traverse a tightrope between participants’ right to privacy and the public’s right to know. This research would not exist without the house or households. The women do not need the research for their existence. As a Ph.D. student, a novice researcher, I place myself in a precarious position, as I choose to identify more with the community being researched than the community of researchers I am reporting to. I am consciously staying ‘native’.

Native in this context relates to my non-research roles/selves, particularly my practitioner role which locates me as a significant player in this research setting. ‘Going native’ was a negative term for someone who loses their objectivity and begins to take on the world view of those that are being studied. Disapproval for such ‘unfaithfulness’ towards the academy and colleagues was a prevailing sentiment in the era when ethnographers were predominantly western, heterosexual, male researching ‘other’ and assuming a ‘pretended role’ (Gold, 1957, p. 220) in the field. The diverse groups that researchers identify with, and are members of today, challenge the privileged position of
objectivity, research practices, production of knowledge, worldviews and methodologies emanating from these earlier times (Kanuha, 2000).

It seems to me epistemologically essential that I declare my multiple roles in this project. Underlying my position are my motivations for these roles. In regards to my Trustee and practitioner role, when I heard about the newest housing project of a Trust that I was associated with, I immediately knew I wanted to be involved in this. I am a baby boomer. I do not own my own home. I am curious. I want to know if this could work for me or those I know. I identify with the participants and expect to be in the same situation as they are in the very near future.

My motivation for doing a Ph.D. developed separately from this housing project. This path stemmed from a desire to challenge myself, be an expert at something and improve my status in society. I began my doctorate after years of living and serving in the community as mother, daughter, caregiver, and then working with older adults in the community. I was an outsider to the university. I had no connection with the academics within, and little natural inclination for its elitism, pedantry and theory.

These two divergent pathways, my interest in the housing project and my desire for personal growth and learning, were merged in my quest for a Ph.D. topic. I met with the funder’s representatives who told me they were hoping that this project would be evaluated in some way, and a Ph.D. researcher would be ideal as there was no funding for this. The seed was planted and watered. I enrolled in the Ph.D. a year after volunteering for the practitioner role of Relationship Manager (RM) for the houses. My research interests complimented my involvement in this housing project. My involvement was based on my deep passion for an ethics of equity. I wanted to contribute to a viable housing solution for women over the age of 65 who did not own their own home.

My RM role positioned me not only as ‘an’ insider but also ‘the’ insider in this housing project in the initial stages. As a Trustee, I am part of the governing body. I am also the Trustee with the most suitable skills, experience, and enthusiasm to manage the social aspects of older women living together. The role of RM was established as the social aspects of shared living required management and oversight. The RM role evolved with the different stages of this project:

- Community preparation - Networking in the community, working towards the inclusion of the household in the community.
- Tenancy preparation - Setting up the processes and procedures and recruiting the tenants.
- Household building - Developing relationships with and between the tenants. Facilitating the process of them establishing their households.
- Monitoring and maintenance - dealing with issues that are arising.

It is clear that I have a significant involvement in this housing project, as well as a position of potential authority and influence with my non-research roles. The ethics committee were concerned with these potential conflicts of interest. I was asked if I would relinquish my roles of Trustee and RM. This request separates and privileges the role of researcher from the other roles, with an assumption that these roles are mutually exclusive. The focus of this request was to maintain the integrity of the researcher’s role, responsibilities and outputs in the face of competing forces within the practitioner and Trustee roles. My focus has been to maintain the integrity of the practitioner’s role in the face of competing forces with the researcher’s role.

In reality, these roles are not necessarily in competition. They can complement each other. I looked at this housing project as a whole with all the roles as part of this experience i.e. the development of this model, my involvement within the households and the research. I prepared for my practitioner role by reading literature about building, empowering, developing and nurturing community, and used a participatory/collaborative research orientation as a guide to this project. This research orientation also associated with emancipatory, indigenous and feminist research philosophies of doing research with and for the community (Holstein, 2011; Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005; Oliver, 1992; Smith,
1999) aligns with my personal experiences and values of contributing to the community and esteeming the knowledge and wisdom of others. Thus academic supervision, particularly around the ethics of the research, provided guidance and mentorship for my practitioner role as well as my researcher role. My professional practice (unrelated to this housing project) as a health professional working with older people has been client centred and service focused. As I write my thesis, I record with an awareness that the person I write about can access my writing if they so choose. The health-care discipline of regularly recording and writing detailed accessible notes complements my researcher role, as does my embedded professional ethical approach to working with people. I view the research discipline as providing me with a structure to do this research with and for the community I belong to.

My professional practice is saturated with ethical guidelines and principles. My day job which is a person-centred practice inherently requires that I address issues such as power imbalances and prioritise the well-being of others. As a practitioner, I ride on the shoulders of the many scholars who have challenged and debated the power dynamics not only in research relationships e.g. the scholars on collaborative, relational research cited above, but also in professional relationships such as client/person-centred practices (Rogers, 2012) that underpin the professional practices and philosophies in health and social work today (Rowe, 2017). I bring this culture of ethical practice to the research relationship and view my practitioner role as a protective factor that minimises any risk of harm, coercion or unethical behaviour more so than what a theoretical understanding of researcher/researched, insider/outsider or interviewer/interviewee relationship could do. Nevertheless, I cannot escape tensions between the researcher/practitioner roles. My ethical professional praxis as practitioner is to serve, empower and protect the privacy and confidentiality of those residing in this publically known housing project. The safety and well-being of our tenants are paramount in my role of Trustee. As researcher I have a responsibility to analyse what is happening in the house, to make known what is unknown, so that the original contribution of my work acts to benefit future housing schemes.

This paper offers a pathway to reconsidering the research approach within the delicate terrain where multiple roles cause fault lines between practice and research. I manage these tensions by allowing my practice as RM to take the foreground, with my researcher self as a background player in this project. I record what is happening rather than pursuing a line of inquiry or experimentation, i.e. naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I use theory to make sense of the experiences, i.e. theorising after being in the field. This is opposed to going into the field with the intention of fitting the experiences into an existing theory. I work within multiple disciplines and practices, choosing methods for the task, rather than the tasks for the method. I see the prioritising of the practitioner role as the only way for me to ethically conduct research in such a setting, with the involvement that I have.

My stance is not grounded in the theoretical debates on ethics, rights or ownership of information, rather it comes from the respectful relationships and professional ethics that underpin my practice. Likewise, collaboration and consent is not as much a prescribed, documented process, as it is a relational approach. Maintaining relationships, being accessible, ensuring the information is accessible are more difficult to evidence than a signed form, yet are crucial for this relational approach. I respect that information about someone belongs to them. Consent within this practitioner realm goes beyond the single informed consent form associated with ethical academic practice. Consent is an ongoing process. This is especially applicable to the research setting whereby the participants know each other well enough to identify anonymised detail in the research writing. There is a call for researchers to be responsible to those they study instead of being held responsible by the institutions and disciplines that are removed from the research settings (Denzin & Giardina, 2007).

The practice that I have established can be replicated by others. I purposefully create a collaborative environment. I use emails to share my writing with those concerned before disseminating it to others.
in the household. Some choose a lower level of input than others, and some are not interested in reading large amounts of material. I meet often with individuals or a group of them to discuss the research progress. In fact the research progress is often a part of informal conversations. My participants are first and foremost people to me, rather than sources I can milk for data. I actively intend to respect the person, their information and our relationship, rather than follow a set of research methods rules. The narratives reflect this also. I developed my writing skills and carefully craft these representations with sensitivity and an awareness of household dynamics. I decide what I include and constantly try to balance the content to accommodate the needs of the research, while at the same time upholding privacy, accuracy, ownership and accessibility for the contributors.

A strength of keeping my participants to the foreground of my thinking is that, in writing for them, I produce writing that is simple and clear to read. Scholars promoting a simpler style of writing up research emphasise that good scientific representation does not have to be conveyed in complex terminology (Gilgun, 2005; Lather, 1996; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Sword, 2009). Tedlock (2005) strongly advocates for the sharing of knowledge with non-academic audiences.

The following field note when showing a prospective tenant through the house exemplifies my position, my practice, my research focus and how I negotiate the different roles in this instance:

I realise that I have another hat apart from researcher and RM, it’s the one of friend. This may seem risky to some, but quite in line with participatory [I later used the term collaborative] research and respectful enduring relationships. These role priorities were tested today. Alice took the new person under her wing to talk to her about the house. I wanted to know how Wendy was doing after her operation (friend), at the same time I also wanted to listen to the conversations of Alice and the other person, as this was data (researcher). I also wanted to ensure the prospective tenant received all the information and start establishing rapport with her (RM). I have to admit, I don’t feel as though I had given her enough personal attention, however the current tenants are quite happy to talk to others and promote the house, and they are the experts now (I may, therefore, be relinquishing some of my RM role, but this is still good data [e.g. to what extent are they taking on this responsibility and how]). Whilst Alice was talking to this person, Wendy was talking to me, telling me about her week, so I concentrated on what she was saying and missed out on the other conversation, choosing friend over RM and researcher. I also wanted to ensure the prospective tenant received all the information and start establishing rapport with her (RM). I have to admit, I don’t feel as though I had given her enough personal attention, however the current tenants are quite happy to talk to others and promote the house, and they are the experts now (I may, therefore, be relinquishing some of my RM role, but this is still good data [e.g. to what extent are they taking on this responsibility and how]). Whilst Alice was talking to this person, Wendy was talking to me, telling me about her week, so I concentrated on what she was saying and missed out on the other conversation, choosing friend over RM and researcher. I also took Wendy out for a coffee afterwards, this of course took the time I had set aside for networking and delivering the flyers (RM/Trustee), but again choosing the role of friend first. Nonetheless, I was rewarded with some good data [which I subsequently used in a conference presentation 2 years on]. Wendy said that when she went into hospital, the others offered to drive her, but she declined this offer as it was early morning, peak traffic, so she caught a taxi. Wendy said it felt like family when they saw her out the door to her taxi. When she came home from hospital, the door was again opened for her with someone welcoming her home, she said it felt like coming back to family. (July 23, 2014).

I have outlined above how I have positioned myself in the research addressing the risks to the participants from me as researcher holding a position of authority. The other concern within academia is in regards to the objectivity of the research given my position in it. After studying postmodern philosophers, Ellis & Bochner (2000) argue that “All truths were contingent on the describing activities of human beings” (p. 223), challenging the notion of objectivity being a superior scientific construct. They advocate the need to be more reflexive, and to write from experience. This research falls under the rubrics of participant observation, case study, and narrative inquiry. In these methodological approaches, ‘objectivity’ is subordinate to the recognition that the researcher’s subjectivity is inescapable, but needs to be disciplined procedurally. The focus is on the respondent’s subjectivity and the methodological aim is to be aware of, but to contain, the researcher’s subjectivity. Using
techniques of reflexivity (such as submitting my accounts to the critical judgment of the house tenants; making the research process transparent and discussed; being open about my values) it has been possible to achieve intersubjectivity – i.e. agreement on what is plausible and reasonable to all. Where consensus cannot be reached with participants, it is the researcher who must yield. Whether or not objectivity is achievable is less important to participant observation of this kind than the researcher’s impartiality and respect, and her acceptance that the research role is to properly represent the subjectivities of, in this case, the participants.

Indeed, there is a risk that, in this particular context, if the researcher were to try to assert something that was ‘objectively true’ this might be equivalent to wielding authority (of interpretation) over the participants. The core focus on seeing participants as people, as equals who need to be respected as such, provides the ethical stability of this project. Settling for intersubjectivity allows the participants leverage over whatever interpretations I may have.

Integrity and trustworthiness are not necessarily produced by simply following a procedure. As mentioned above, I have a personal vested interest in this research. I want to know if I could live in a shared house similar to the one I am researching. Differences between the ideals of those providing a service and those receiving this are not new and have influenced emancipatory/collaborative research paradigms. The virtual realities of academic knowledge that influence housing programs and policies can be removed from the actual realities of the people who are affected by these discourses (Luken & Vaughan, 2003). Although I have a foot in both camps of influence i.e. service provider and academic researcher, in both these roles I want to pursue truth. It is in my best interest to do so. My future is at stake. I also want to disseminate this knowledge to those in a position of influence over where I might be residing in my later years.

I have neglected the other participants so far. The women agreed to participate as they are aware this model is a new way of living that is of interest to others. They want to actively share their experiences and contribute to the research. There have been incidences whereby I have been denied permission to include part of a narrative and these have all been in regard to the possibility of offense to friends or family. Personal data has been withdrawn, but not data that would sway interpretation of the overall experiences. In fact, the withdrawal of information is data in itself. I find I have more than enough narratives providing an array of lived experiences to (re)present.

I may have chosen to ‘go native’, but that does not mean that I as researcher cannot also collaborate with my community to produce quality research. I am arguing here that for this research project, ‘being native’ and making ethical judgements based on that perspective is crucial to enabling the research to happen at all. There are compromises that are made. Yet compromises are carefully negotiated.

I continue to have a vested interest in this housing project. I will soon be faced with the prospect of sharing with others and sincerely hope that I will have choices in my future. I am still involved with the Trust and networks that are looking towards shared housing as a way of addressing accommodation needs in our communities. I can leave these spaces at any time; however, I cannot easily escape my prospects as an older renter. My Ph.D. journey will end soon.

References

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