

# Professional Practitioner Research

## The problem

In some courses in our institution, undergraduate students undertake placement or similar modules in professional practice contexts. These are especially prevalent in Sport, Business, Events and Tourism, Health, Planning and Surveying- and Education-related programmes. As part of their development of professional practice, such students may well be involved in the gathering of data about and from human subjects. The question that arises for them is the extent to which it is permissible to use material gathered in this context to form part of the data set for their undergraduate major project or dissertation. And although the problem was highlighted specifically in relation to undergraduate students, it is clear that similar issues might arise with Masters level and Doctoral study, especially in the professional doctoral domains.

## A word on Professional Practice

For the purposes of this discussion, professional practice refers to those forms of learning that take place in professional contexts. The phrase *professional practice* is widely used in the creative arts to define creative activity, and while that kind of activity might lead to professional work and can take place in professional contexts (e.g. architecture), for this particular discussion, the making of artistic artefacts (e.g. designs, performances, artworks, creative writing outputs) is out of scope unless they are taking place in a work (placement) environment. The principles outlined below affect creative arts students, but professional practice is focused on the kinds of placement that might be undertaken by an education, health, coaching, business or similar kind of student.

## Principles

There are core principles at stake in the question of whether data gathered from professional practice settings can be used in later research related activity.

1. **The ethical and legal principles.** For both ethical and legal reasons material that is gathered for one purpose (e.g. information about a patient, or about pupils in a School setting, collected in the first instance to support that patient's treatment, in the second for the purpose of School-level reporting) cannot be repurposed without the express consent of the participants. This is an ethical principle because our ethics policy states clearly that participants must be fully informed about the purpose for which information is gathered, and must give their consent to its use for that purpose (and that purpose only). It is a legal principle, because the General Data Protection Regulations also state that information must be held only for the limited purposes for which it was gathered. Extensions into other kinds of information-mining cannot be permitted.
2. **Research Design Principles.** Ethical frameworks should be designed into any research project at whatever level. Material gathered for a professional purpose, usually at the instigation of a third party, does not constitute an ethical design process, and does not constitute 'research'.

3. **Questions of Self-Plagiarism.** Our university regulations state:

**Self-Plagiarism**

Self-plagiarism occurs when a student submits their own work which has already received credit. This may be part of a piece of work or the entire piece of work. Self-plagiarism does not apply in circumstances where students are required to complete reassessment or repeat a module(s). (p. 156 of the Academic Regulations: <https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/-/media/files/our-university/academic-regulations/full-current-academic-regulations/academic-regulations.pdf>)

In the case of a placement module, where work has already been awarded credit, a student reusing material from that module risks an accusation of academic misconduct by means of self-plagiarism.

4. **Methods can be reapplied.** A student can use the methods and processes learned in the professional environment to gather new data for a designed research project. They should acknowledge that the method has been learned from previous study. The data, however, should be new.

**Professional Doctorates**

A grounded theory approach may be based on the researcher using previous experience to direct the process of responding to their research questions – indeed, that experience is likely to be responsible for the emergence of the research questions, and hypotheses emerge from the data and are not developed *a priori*. That said, specific data that relates to human subjects that was gathered for an entirely professional purpose cannot be repurposed without the expressed informed consent of all participants.

The fundamental principle remains: data gathering from human subjects must always take place in the context of the ethical and legal frameworks defined by our own regulations, by appropriate learned bodies and by UK law.

Staff may revisit previous work that was not undertaken as research and re-use it as part of a piece of research. They would bring this to the attention of their school research community.

**Autoethnographic Approaches**

A similar point can be made about autoethnographic approaches. In the words of Hill and Knox:

*Autoethnography* is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. (Hill and Knox, 2015, p. 4)

By its nature, this practice makes use of material that emerges before research questions and ethical approval takes place. As with Grounded Theory, those experiences may actually be the spur towards the questions and approaches that the research focuses on. It values lived experience, demands high degrees of self-reflexivity from the researcher, and can pose significant risks to the researcher because it uses personal experience as part of the generation of data, often based on difficult experience. The individual researcher needs to be alive both to the risks the research poses to themselves, and to the risks that may attach to 'figures in the landscape' (Hoggart, 1957) of their experience. By naming themselves in the research, autoethnographers always risk the identification of other participants in their research. They must always be aware that data gathering from human subjects has to take place in the context of the ethical and legal frameworks defined by our own regulations, by appropriate learned bodies and by UK law. They should also undertake risk assessments which consider both risks to participants and risks to the researcher.

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## References

- Bryant, Antony (2019) *Varieties of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage, Swifts Series.
- Hill, Clara E. and Knox, Sarah (2015) *Essentials of Autoethnography*. New York: American Psychological Association. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/essentials-autoethnography-sample-chapter.pdf>
- Hoggart, Richard (1957). *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Pelican.