**Keeping a research journal**

It is extremely valuable for anyone embarking on a research study to begin keeping a research diary or journal ***at the earliest possible opportunity***. One of the distinctive features of practitioner research in counselling/psychotherapy/mental health is that it both makes use of, and contributes to, the developed self-awareness of the practitioner: ***a research diary is a vehicle for promoting creativity and critical reflexivity, and doing research that will be relevant for practice.***

There are many alternative ways of keeping reflective diaries. It is essential that anyone who keeps a diary develops their own style of diary writing. However, apart from general 'rules' of diary writing such as dating entries and writing quickly without self-censorship, it may be useful to think in terms of a series of diary sections:

***Your research ideas.*** Describing and exploring possible areas and topics that interest you, and imaginatively playing with how you might pursue actual research on each of them. Reflections on these possibilities, in terms of pros and cons and practical implications. Action plans around who to consult, and what to ask, regarding the feasibility of each option. Preliminary reading to scope out the types of study that have been already carried out.

***Pre-understandings and expectations***. Before beginning work on a study, it can be useful to write about what you expect to find. Before collecting data, or even before doing any preliminary reading, it can be helpful to take a blank page and write out what results you expect to get. This exercise can be useful in identifying those aspects of the topic that you already understand, and those that require further exploration. It can also put you in a position at the end of the study to tell your readers or audience what you had expected, and how what you discovered differed from these expectations. Writing about pre-understandings can aid communication between co-researchers, or between a researcher and their supervisor. Finally, being explicit about expectations can allow you to check during the process of the research that you are not just engaging in an exercise in self-fulfilling prophecy.

***The experience of doing the research***. This section refers to what sociologists and social anthropologists call 'fieldwork notes', and includes any events or feelings associated with being in a research role. For example, you may find that you are writing about strong feelings of liking or antipathy toward certain research participants. Alternatively, there may be critical incidents that sum up the type of relationship you have with research informants. Moments of emotion are usually significant, in terms of the personal meaning of the research (for you or for your participant). If these are not written down at the time, they are usually lost. Writing them makes it possible, at the end, to reflect more systematically on processes of transference and countertransference, or on the degree of your involvement and investment in the research process. Writing may be helpful in working through personal conflicts, hassles or avoidances that can arise during a study. If you are carrying out interviews, it is always helpful to write down, as soon as possible after the interview has finished, your thoughts, feelings and observations about what took place,

***Personal and professional implications***. What does it mean to you to have chosen a particular research topic? What do you learn about yourself from your involvement in the research process? In what ways does the research generate new ideas or understandings that can be applied in work with clients? Keeping a diary can help to maximise the personal learning that can occur in research. There may also be some audiences that you would wish to write for who will find the research more meaningful if you can place it in a personal and professional context, who will ask 'what difference did it make to you, and to your work?'

***Research memos***. There is another category of research diary-writing that is associated with job of keeping track of the flow of good ideas that accompany all the various tasks of researching - reading, collecting data, analysing data. The conclusions of a research study do not emerge freshly-minted on the morning when you have decided to sit down at your desk and write your conclusions section. The analytic themes around which you will structure your results section do not only occur when you are actually analysing the data. If you are immersed in a research study, then ideas will come to you all the time. It is good to write these down as they happen, even if they seem strange or confused. It is from this stock of images, metaphors and speculations that your findings and conclusions will emerge. These are the understandings that are on the edge of awareness, that represent the direction where your investigation is heading.

***Writing.*** There is nothing worse than being faced with the task of writing a report from scratch, particularly when there is a deadline looming. It is always better to have a stock of words that can be edited, moved about, added to. This is of course much easier when the words have been stored on a wordprocessor. Keeping a diary can be seen as investing in writing through laying down early versions of what will later become part of a formal report, paper or dissertation. It helps to promote a better, friendlier relationship with writing, rather than perceiving writing as a threat to be best avoided.

**Other topics that might be explore in a research journal:**

* The experience of entering the world of research: What is your relationship with research? What is your research background? What are your attitudes to research and where do they come from? In what ways are your relationship with research undergoing a process of change?
* The meaning of your research in relation to themes of social justice, anti-colonialism, equality, etc.
* Your experience of developing skills and accessing, selecting, evaluating and making use of research
* How you use research knowledge (e.g., definitions or measures of key skills and interventions) to deepen your deliberate practice and professional development
* Your experience of talking about research – who do you talk to? what do you get from these conversations?
* Documenting and reflecting on points of contact between research and practice in your own work over the time period of the project
* Building a repertoire of research knowledge. How much time do you spend reading or talking about research? How does this compare with your involvement in other professional development activities, such as supervision, personal therapy, deliberate practice, and reading non-research books and articles?
* Your research competence goals, and the tasks and methods that will help you to achieve these goals
* Ideas for future research that you might undertake
* Details of workshops, conferences etc that you have attended – useful for your CV and job applications