PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER
An Integrated Approach to Diaconal Practice

inter*diac*

Contents

Acknowledgements

This publication has grown from the everyday practice experiences of practitioners of Diaconia and Christian social work. They have generously shared their knowledge, ideas and expertise in numerous workshops and seminars throughout the years. An important outcome of their learning is put together and reflected on the pages of this publication. This reflected experience has made the concept and practice of practitioner-researcher both possible and viable.

The idea of conceptualizing practice as a participatory process of 'double-learning', which invites contributions from people in the communities, service users, etc., has been developed by Tony Addy. This publication benefits from his committed work, which is rooted in continuous learning with practitioners, as well as from his careful work of commenting on and proof-reading the text.

I hope that I have also done the justice to the final comments of Dr. Erica Meijers of the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands, who brought to this publication her insights and professional academic feedback.

This publication aims to summarise shared ideas in a way that invites and facilitates further discussions and learning for practitioners as they are journeying together with people through challenges and complexities of everyday life. I also hope that this publication will stimulate students and teachers to use the ideas of practitioner research, join the discussion and share the results of their reflections.

Oksana Prosvirnina

Preface

Practitioners in diaconia and social work are deeply involved in situations that are to be changed because people are in need. They bring professional experience in handling challenging life situations, empowering people, managing paper work and establishing networks of assistance. Their expertise goes beyond mere knowledge of methods since they are in relationships with people and get to know their fears and anxieties as well as their resources and strengths. They have insights into the complexity of hardships and often have an idea how to change things. Thus, it is not surprising that many initiatives for social innovations come from them. This booklet sets out to make use of their competencies in yet another regard, that is in research. It is a result of the reflective journey of diaconia practitioners of Interdiac who have been engaged in education, research, and development processes in an intercultural and ecumenical context for more than five years.

The Interdiac vision is to promote learning, networking, and research and development for diaconia and Christian social practice in countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in a growing number of Central Asian countries. These three pillars are not be seen as separate activities, but rather as being connected in an integrated process and build on a phenomenon-based approach. This publication outlines the heart of the diaconia concept and the pedagogical approach of Interdiac which have been co-created by multidisciplinary international teams. Central to this service model of Christian social practice is the development of an understanding of the context of people and working with the 'stories of people' across differences (diversity) towards building a common narrative through taking action. This is seen as the entry point to explore various approaches in the work of a practitioner researcher. The model implies that the practice of the worker is a form of research making use of the data which are collected in everyday life and work situations. It also invites service users and volunteers to research their own reality as an aspect of empowerment.

The approach reminds Johannes of methods like participatory action research (PAR) which introduced in the 1970s to include people in the research that affects them. The approach of practitioner researcher is slightly different since now the practitioners are to be involved in research. Yet, there are also similarities: Practitioner researchers are to be open to the agenda of the people they serve – "experiential exposure to the reality of 'the other' and their reality" (p. 8). On methodological grounds, both approaches have to deal with the question of objectivity that is central to research: How can a practitioner researcher aim at objectivity when he or she is affected by the research and by the professional work? It will spur discussions about the understanding of professional social work and about the role of researchers.

Thus, "Practitioner Researcher" gives a well-needed impulse for diaconal practice and research. How does the perspective of the practitioners influence the research process and what is its impact on the validity of the findings? Is this approach meant to be better or more adequate than other approaches and if so, why? Questions like these need to be discussed. Diaconal research is challenged by this approach. Practitioner researcher opens up new ways to knowledge in diaconia research and aims at an integrated approach to diaconal practice.

ReDi is happy to support the dissemination of the concept ‚Practitioner Researcher' and hopes for an intense dialogue between academics and practitioners of diaconia. New ways are to be explored in developing innovative training programmes regarding practitioner research which will put the double learning process of both professionals and those they work with at its focus. The aim is that ultimately the situation of poor and marginalized people will benefit.

Janka Adameova, M.A interdiac, Director

Prof. Dr. Johannes Eurich, Heidelberg University, Chairperson of ReDI – The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice

1.   WHY DEVELOP THIS IDEA NOW?

I. Why develop this idea?

On the pages of this publication we would like to invite you to discover the practical and conceptual foundation of research on practice which invites practitioners to explore their every day work with people as active learning together with them towards reciprocity and empowerment. By exploring the development of the 'practitioner-researcher' we aim to articulate a new model for diaconal practice which addresses the challenges of the present situation,

This idea builds on the findings from the reflective learning journeys of diaconal practitioners that they have undertaken together. The journeys connect practitioners' experiences and insights to harvest new ideas and improve the quality of their work in order to maintain a meaningful presence and provide help to those people who are socially excluded. We draw from work of colleagues in Central and Eastern Europe, countries of Western Europe and the UK. They work in various organisational settings that may be broadly referred to as churches or faith-based organisations and embrace diaconal practices, which vary from place to place and thus provide a fruitful ground for learning by difference. The international groups of practitioners usually met online and face-to-face several times a year. The author personally has been engaged in various learning events and short and long-term learning programmes since 2017. These events brought together over two hundred people. The programmes were run by such organisations as the international Academy for Christian and Social Action in Central and Eastern Europe (interdiac), the group for the development of Community Action-Based Learning for Empowerment (CABLE), and then later the CODE Forum, Cardijn Association (Linz, Austria) and Church Action on Poverty (CAP, UK). Over the years of engagement with interdiac as Programme and Research Leader, the author had the opportunity to co-develop and lead various learning programmes that encouraged practitioners to focus on their practice and explore it by the means of peer learning, practice-based learning, personal reflection, learning exchanges, etc. The programmes' goals and processes were determined to empower practitioners to seek the ways to develop own practice and methods with relevance to their contexts, to integrate personal and professional motivation and to find ways to provide opportunities for the proactive action of service users.

It was a personal and professional journey for the author too. Their professional practice as sociologist and educator became a place where their personal story, inquiry and exploration of the ways for peaceful common living came together. The experience of sharing journeying together with other practitioners proved to be invaluable and enriching.

We would like to express gratitude to our colleagues and peer learners who were bravely facing uneasy questions about their practice. Their expertise and experience brought together a wealth of learning from their practice and made this publication possible. We will argue that if practitioners want to work towards empowerment and meaningful social change, they need to bring their personal story, commitment and professional expertise together for critical reflection and in doing so, become a practitioner-researcher. Practice which is not reflected may often be misinformed and cause confusion or even harm with people, whereas research without practice may remain an extractive activity that lacks meaning for those who are researched. Both of them disregard genuine reciprocal engagement and joint empowering learning with vulnerable people. Research can be a form of practice, or form a basis for practice (Stålsett 2019, Addy 2023). Therefore, by developing an integrated approach that suggests the idea of a 'practitioner-researcher' we will aim to overcome this duality and to argue that practitioner is a researcher in their own right. We will also suggest some insights and ideas from practitioners on how opening practice as a space for research can provide them with opportunities to respond to contextual changes by developing meaningful action. Hopefully this will give space for the growth of transformative initiatives for social change with those, who need them most.

II. The different needs for research

In the various learning events, practitioners marked those fields and needs for research that they were acquiring through reflection on their everyday practice.

The first field is context.

The practitioners, who took part in the joint learning usually carry out their work in urban settings. Let us see below what contextual challenges they pointed out which urgently call for a re-evaluation of diaconal practice with a critical lens. These numerous challenges vary on a wide scale from growing social inequality and cuts in social provision to rapidly transforming neighbourhoods. Below we list some of them:

- The decline in social support and provision of social care from many governments and local municipalities leaves more and more people desperate for access to vital services. This situation makes churches step up to fill in the growing gap, but very often demand is so high that they cannot manage to make a big difference, whereas they quickly exhaust own capacities, including their human resources.

- Increasing inequality and divisions between people in society. With the decrease of the welfare state agenda, and cuts in income support, social provision and services, there is a growing gap between the richest and poorest people in European societies. At the same time, more people experience situations of social precarity. Once they got pushed on the edge of poverty by some unfortunate event in their lives, they have less and less chance to make their way out of poverty. Rather the opposite is true, because people tend to get burdened with bureaucratic demands, loans and they may develop chronic health issues, brought about by continuous stress, etc.

- Under the pressure of the mainstream culture of competitive individualism people often share that they feel to be failures and blame themselves for missed opportunities. They lack self-esteem and tend to isolate themselves, more or less becoming invisible.

- The growing ambiguity and complexity of everyday life steadily amplify an overall feeling of precarity among people. It feeds into existential anxiety, which undermines spiritual resources, infuses passivity and leads to withdrawal from social engagement.

- Quickly vanishing public spaces. Most places, such as locally-owned shops, libraries, parks, that served as public spaces for meetings, which sparked and supported 'horizontal' ways of development of civil culture, either disappear due to the lack of state funding or are overtaken by the commercial structures.

- The rapid transformation of the city landscape and neighbourhoods caused by gentrification and expanding urbanisation contribute to a growing diversity of city neighbourhoods. It brings together a flux in populational demographics: people come from various countries and with various backgrounds and have an initial sense of disconnection to each other and long-term residents.

For practitioners, these challenges are transformed into vital questions about the relevance of their contextual work:

- » How well do we understand those ongoing social changes ourselves and how may they affect people?

- » Do we notice new needs and issues that arise in our neighbourhoods?

- » Do we notice new groups of those who are pushed to the edge of social exclusion, such as lone mothers with kids, children with special needs, war veterans, refugees, etc.?

- » Are we reaching out to those who need us most or do they remain invisible to diaconal outreach?

The second field is the actual practice and the practice of the organisation.

The practitioners addressed the following questions with regard to the relevance of the diaconal practices in the face of ongoing changes:

» Do our methods and models of practice offer transformational help to people or just sustain them in their everyday struggles?

» Is our practice rooted in diaconal values which fundamentally aim to restore human dignity and the intrinsic value of people within fulfilling social relations?

» Is diaconia supportive of those people, who have lost their hope to be heard and recognised, as they continuously struggle for equal rights and social justice? How can we accompany these people in their individual struggles that seemingly only solidify their further exclusion from social life?

» How to build a relevant response to the ongoing challenges that seems to threaten the fabric of social ties?

These questions were also resonating with the personal vocational motivation of diaconal practitioners, reaching to the core of their Christian faith and identity. They connected these questions with their personal and professional vocation to service, which, they felt, should not lose a sensitivity to what is wrong, what is diminishing people, what drives a thickening 'veil of ignorance' against struggles of those who are excluded and marginalised and robs them of the hope for the future.

At the same time tensions arose within the professional models of work of organisations. Most commonly the organisational objectives translate diaconal commitment to work towards achieving empowerment with vulnerable people in need and eventually enable them to significantly change their lives towards life in its fullness. However, more often than not, many discussions and reflections revealed that social work and diaconal practitioners, start their professional engagement with preconceived assumptions (interdiac programme participants, 2019, p.7-9).These are brought in and supported with an inner logic or working protocol. Intentionally or not, they shape practitioner's attitudes to people they will be working with. People, who are the service users, are often unassumingly predetermined by this inner logic as passive receivers, which ascribes the problems to 'deficient' or even 'problematic' position. Whereas, according to the same inner logic, the practitioner is expected to be the one, who has sufficient knowledge about the 'condition' of these people, their own expertise and a toolbox of 'ready-made' solutions to address or solve problems in the most efficient way. However, diaconal practice, which is shaped on the premises of such logic, is usually at risk of failing to recognise the actual needs of people in the given context and, consequently, to work with them to achieve a meaningful difference in their lives. Instead, people who are marginalised feel objectified when they experience such 'top-down' practice. They find that they are often treated in a sympathetic but patronising way. They tend to respond to it with a solidifying of their silent compliance. Especially, if they had been sustaining themselves on long-term benefits or social provision, they will be reinforced in the course of their engagement with diaconal practice to develop a culture of dependency and passivity. Thus, contrary to the objectives of diaconal practice, they lose the hope to live their best lives. Negative outcomes eventually undermine diaconal practitioners too. On a regular basis they experience a lot of pressure, when they are being caught between growing organisational requirements and lack of satisfying work with the people who are service users. Continuous tensions result for them in feeling of helplessness, lack of motivation, burn-out, etc. (Eglite, 2023, p. 26).

To sum up, the questions and reflections of practitioners, who from various contexts, organisations and fields of professional practice, suggest that practices are complex and dynamic. Practitioners are constantly engaged in analysing situations, developing an understanding of contextual challenges, modifying working processes and methods in order to keep relevant presence with people. On this basis we have identified practitioner research as an invaluable approach to supporting meaningful engagement and informed evolution of practice.

In this publication, we will argue that practitioners bring their personal stories, expectations and motivation to their practice. They should become aware of their 'service-models' in order to understand the practice which they enact with received ideas of professionalism. We will explore how they can become aware of this and the context in which they work, with the help of a critical of critical habitus and what implications they may discover for their work with people and for their own resourcefulness.

We will finally argue that practice can be enriched and transformed with feedback and involvement of service users and volunteers through processes of reciprocal learning and co-researching.

Structure of this publication

In the publication we will root practice research in a framework of transformative theology, liberative pedagogy and the narrative approach of participative social practice. There are several reasons why these frameworks may be of help to practice research. Firstly, liberative pedagogy provides conceptual foundation as to how research and practice may be integrated. This will be explicated in Chapters II and III. Secondly, the narrative approach of participative social practice invites the practitioner to examine themselves with the aim of recognising personal story and personal resources in their work with people. Under the contextual challenges of growing divisions and weakening of social ties, the personal stories of people gain utmost importance. Through them dividing barriers and borders keep extending. Practitioners should aim not only to see those, but also to think how to approach them for organising practice as embracing a perspective towards sustainable social change together with people. However, without reflective work on one's own story, practitioners highly likely to remain a stranger to people, who will remain strangers to them.

In Chapters IV and VI we will suggest helpful relevant skills, knowledge and ways to support practitioners, who would like to explore premises and ways of participative work with people.

In Chapter V we will provide considerations for ethically informed 'horizontal' work with people. We will further argue that the approaches of liberative pedagogy and participatory dialogical learning may transform practice into continuous collaborative research. It may provide a safe space for dialogue, where the opportunities for crossing divides and building bridges would be implemented with feelings of surprise and shared hope. And simultaneously it would reach out to support personal and collective empowerment by inviting the contribution of local expertise to the initiatives of persons and communities.

In Chapter VI we will suggest how practitioner-researchers may utilise their findings and disseminate them to promote significant shifts to the culture of their working place and create opportunities for innovative diaconal practices, that would energise communities and link diverse people across the visible and invisible borders in action for transformative social change.

The approaches of liberative theology and participatory social practice convey a very concrete understanding of diaconia as Christian social action. This understanding should be brought forward, as indicative of the content and method of practice with people, which will be explored in this publication.

Diaconia, as Christian social action is rooted in the call that comes from the 'other', who is often seen as a neighbour. Therefore, meaningful diaconal presence with people in their localities and living contexts has always been set as a main task for diaconal practitioners. It allowed diaconal practices to be contextually sensitive to the arising needs. However, diaconia cannot be narrowly understood through services of providing help with the daily needs of people. Diaconia is in the heart of Christian faith as witness to the presence of God's work in the world. Diaconal ministry, as it was carried out by Jesus, was always seeking to raise up the prophetic voice and call for transformative social change together with marginalised people, whose experience of social injustice is a day-to-day battle against invisibility. Social injustice does not only affect those who are marginalised, but it reveals the very nature of society, which seems set to dehumanise more and more people, drive mutual hostility and erode genuine care for one another. Therefore, diaconia, as Christian social action, should develop work to eliminate suffering of people, who are excluded and marginalised, by taking a long-term perspective. This work should aim at restoring their humanity and empowering them to collectively challenge and transform perpetual social injustice for the common good of all.

2.   LINKING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH TOGETHER

In this chapter we will link practice and research together. We have already mentioned those fields that practitioners previously defined as those that need to be explored. Below we will, first summarise the various contextual fields where practitioners are routinely engaged and how these can be seen as informing and shaping the actual practices of workers and the practice of the organisation. We will suggest that these should be considered in order to gain a holistic understanding of practice. One of the main arguments for 'practitioner-researcher' in this chapter will be built around a critical evaluation of 'top-down' generic solutions for application to practice, and we will proceed by arguing that in work for sustainable change a practitioner should start with the life-world of people, where practice research can play a vital role in developing relevant knowledge and initiating reciprocal processes of learning for change with people.

I. Different fields and aims of practitioner research.

Fields of practitioner research

Every day, diaconal practitioners find themselves continuously informed by the various constituents of their own practice. Let us look below to some of those constituents and their components:

Organisational internal context, where practitioners are daily present.

- Working environment: other persons that interact with practitioners on a daily basis and who may be their colleagues, volunteers, independent persons, who work alongside in other services,

- Organisational arrangements and regulations which shape a working atmosphere, work strategies, collegial relations and responsibilities,

- The nature of diaconal engagement that is shaped by the church to which the practice is related and by the relevant governmental social policies and which may be translated into tacit knowledge of 'how things work'.

Personal and professional 'service-model' of the practitioner

- In the workshops with practitioners, the relationship between these components sometimes appears as a point of revelation. Indeed, very often practitioners do not recognise, that they bring personal story and motivation to their professional practice. However, no two persons are alike, and they would do the same work differently. What is more, diaconal work may not mean the same thing to these persons. Therefore, we suggest that it is important to recognise and distinguish between practitioner's personal and their professional 'service-model'.

Local community and local context

- The living context and situation of the people, who are the service-users,

- The life of the local community and of the nearby neighbourhoods, that may be interlinked with the people, events or services in the diaconal organisation,

- Locality, the specific place, where the diaconal facility is situated, usually bear layers of history and the impact of recent changes.

Representation and relations within context of partnership

- Whether it is an agency, a community centre or a church, they have their history, their actual presence and their reputation within the neighbourhood and in connection with local 'horizontal' civil agents, such as schools, various communities, civil organisations, etc.,

- Diaconal agency may be active further outside the neighbourhood, including professional, local, national political agencies and authorities.

We may conclude that a practitioner gets a lot of 'data' from those contexts on an everyday basis. However, routinely a lot of this 'data' is not recognised and is eventually lost, or it is taken for granted and never critically questioned. This mainly happens because practitioners are looking at those components through the acquired lens of various protocols or requirements set by the organisation and further conditioned by their professional training or personal attitudes.

However, we would like to argue here that all of these constituents of practice and the data that they reveal may be opened to further inquiry. Moreover, all of them are meaningful and essential to the actual practice of diaconal practitioners. Exploring them contributes to developing a holistic vision for practice and to a deeper understanding of how various aspects can play into it. All of the fields may be opened to research through the lens of practice, for instance with the following aims:

- To root the presence of the church or diaconal organisation with the people in a given neighbourhood or locality through developing relations, planning and carrying out joint activities, supporting local initiatives (it may include opening the organisation or church as a safe space for the meetings of various groups).

- To explore the ways of enriching social connection and networks by inviting communities and supporting diversity.

- To develop relations and networking with interested partners in the field to ensure integrated ways to support various needs of people and address specific issues.

- To revisit strategies and policies that shape church responses and actions to be shaped from the 'bottom-up' and bring out the voices of the people who are marginalised. This may include working for advocacy and lobbying together with the people in a local or wider context.

In the chapter for supporting practitioner-researcher we suggest ways in which practitioners can reach out to peers to support continuous reflection on their practice. We also argue that organisations should create a space for new learning, which would also include time and openness to proceed with critical questioning. Eventually, this allows practitioners to keep a clear sense of what they actually do and why. As Wood (Wood 2015, p. 65) notes, having that sense along with an understanding of other contexts will allow practitioners to pursue the hope to reshape them.

The aims of practitioner research

We have already explained how the rapidly changing contexts tend to overwhelm practitioners and build more barriers undermining their practice than before. It is important to take a special note that these external barriers often get adopted as internal barriers in the work of an organisation. In recent years governmental agencies for social provision and service tend to respond to contextual turmoil by tightening the measures of social control over the lives of people, pushing them further in 'performative' mode to prove that they are worthy. There has been also a growing pressure on the practitioners to 'manage' more people in less time and to quantify their working procedures so as to maximise the alleged efficiency of working processes. These processes are often represented through indicators, that focus on numbers and feasible working outcomes. All these measures are built around managerial 'top-down', 'problem solving' strategies. The inner logic of these strategies has little to do with the living situations of people, but everything to do with assessing their capacities to act in accordance to proposed 'ready-made' solutions. If service users fail to follow up with meeting the requirements, there is a tendency that they will be assessed and categorised as 'problematic' and 'deficient'. This situation is deeply damaging and leads to the reproduction of the repressive system. Moreover, it is not simply narrowed to the sphere of social work and social provision. Recently many societies have reported about worrying social tendencies, such as worsening mental health issues among young people, growing levels of depression and disappointment and the disturbing growth of public support for right-wing parties. The whole social atmosphere is shifting to the normalisation of social polarisation and radicalisation, which provoke intolerance of a difference and intensive conflicts. The Dutch sociologist Schinkel (Schinkel 2017, p.7) in his book 'Imaginative Societies' convincingly argues that even scientific social discourses have inherited such logic and reproduce it through social research. Increasingly, social research findings and theorising is constructed around the implicit understanding that nowadays society is being existentially threatened.

It must be said that diaconia, responding to the call from the 'other', basically does not follow this mainstream social narrative. The parable of the 'Good Samaritan' shows that the good news may come from a social and religious outcast. Moreover, in answering the call from the 'other', diaconia seeks to approach the other person holistically and grant them unconditional recognition of their dignity.

This means that in work with people who are marginalised, a practitioner aims to reaffirm their unconditional dignity and furthermore, the unconditional dignity of the worker themselves is reaffirmed through this mutual sharing of the sense of common humanity. These glimpses of common humanity potentially translate into the vision of how society looks when people care for one another. Sharing common humanity is always a reciprocal act. It is absolutely impossible to achieve it through the 'top-down' approach that 'problematises' people. There is a need for the practitioner and the other person to step out of the standardised interaction and to see each other, as they are. Therefore, the main aim of the research for the practitioner would be to find ways to open their practice and their own engagement and to invite processes of work with people that enhances reciprocal human acts.

To do that, practitioners should refuse to accept not only the working methods or approach, but the 'common sense' reality of the mainstream society. It means that they should take as a starting point for their work the realities of people who are marginalised. It is their realities that workers are relating to and seeking to transform. Working practice needs to grow from the 'bottom-up' within a particular context and from the positive or negative contributions of various actors.

However, it is just as important to notice that practitioners also need to become aware of their own role and their own expectations which should underpin and arise from their engagement with people. Diaconal practitioners usually consider their work with people as a personal vocation. And it means that they bring the imprint of their personal 'story' to their engagement with people through attitudes that they acquired from both their socialisation and professional training. Therefore, even though they may be explicitly critical of the mainstream society narrative, still they may unreflectively remain dominant towards marginalised people. More often than not it happens that workers think that they do what they say, but actions speak louder than words and may tell another story. And this should be taken by the practitioner as another learning. Story matters! We come back to it in the next chapters.

Researching their own practice will take time and commitment from practitioners, including the preparedness to face difficult learning about themselves. Sometimes it may require taking a distance from their own practice. For instance, in the learning programmes of interdiac we invited practitioners to learn from each other through the visiting programmes, which combined job-shadowing and critical questioning. Questioning and learning by difference allowed exploration of the practitioner's context and supported their reflection on their everyday work and motivation. Similar processes can be initiated in communities of practice and in supervision work.

To bring the conceptual explanations of integrated approach for everyday practice research together, practitioners need to consider the following implications for :

- Starting and being close to the life world of people - time and place.
- Being involved in the whole of life - seeking connection and communication.
- Integrating into the daily pattern of life, instead of focusing on and only dealing with problems.
- Being open to the agenda of people – including an experiential exposure to the reality of 'the other' and their reality.
- Bringing the findings from their engagement with people through reflection and learning to their own practice.
- Developing ways to support collaborative research and collective action with people, who want to challenge systemic injustice through transformative action towards social change.

II. How research and practice can be integrated.

Conceptual framework: resolving confusion about the term 'research' and epistemic considerations for practitioner research

We have already argued that practitioners can be researchers in their own right. Now let us look more closely at the conceptual foundations that lay out how research can be integrated with everyday practice. Intentionally, we will start from the confusion which practitioners often show about the term 'research' and then proceed to explain how it may be understood through the lens of orientation on research aims that were outlined in the previous subchapter.

It should be noted that, unfortunately, in the course of professional education many practitioners lose the zest for research. In an academic educational setting, research is often taught as a rigid set of procedures, which aims to extract knowledge and objectify those who are asked to contribute to the research process with their expertise. Little wonder then, that those practitioners, whose primarily motivation is to care, and to address people in a holistic and reciprocal way, stubbornly avoid carrying out research or being researched. What approach can be put forward in opposition to the one which objectifies people and creates extractive knowledge? How do we start with the 'other' as a subject and initiate a process that may support reciprocal interaction towards reaffirming common humanity?

By deepening and contextualising their own practice through constant presence with people in their living world, diaconal practitioners gain an in-depth understanding of their struggles and also of those forces of resilience that people built in response to oppression and injustice. This experiential presence with people in their realities is very important. But how then may it be developed as practice research?

The Brazilian educator and philosopher P. Freire, who developed an approach of transformative liberative pedagogy, in his most prominent book, 'Pedagogy of the oppressed' (first published in 1970), defends the idea that people should be involved in co-researching their own realities as co-creators, who are also experts of their own reality. In the process of intentional dialogical learning, they reflect on their thought-language, namely, on how they perceive their lived realities and what words they use to name it. Their mutual dialogical learning is mediated by joint inquiry about what is understood as their contextual lived limit-situation. Consequently, their collective inquiry strives to conscientise with them concerning those barriers and obstacles that prevent them from achieving living their best lives. Usually these barriers are related to discovering the nature of social injustice and inequality towards those persons or groups.

At this point it should be noted, that for the practitioner, such inquiry further deepens their research about people's context. As Freire comments:

> In order to communicate effectively, educator and politician (and diaconal worker for that matter) must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of people are dialectically framed (Freire 2013, p. 195).

However, what it also brings is a realisation that people develop and change through the liberative evolution of fulfilling relations. In these 'eye-to-eye' relations, the voices of everyone are equally heard and they are given a sense of agency, upon which they may decide to act to challenge those barriers that prevent them from reaching their fullness of life. Heron (Heron 1996, p. 20) argues that essentially through such a research approach, which he calls 'co-operative inquiry', individual and social elements (but also religious or spiritual dimensions) within persons come together, engaging through sharing their experiences with an understanding of the common human condition.

This mutual learning is empowering to persons and urges them to develop action, personal or collective, to overcome those barriers and transform their lives. Freire names this emerging process of action and reflection as praxis:

> Only human beings are praxis – the praxis which, as the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation (Freire 2013, p. 205).

It is through praxis that people are never alienated from the learning or researching on their own lives. Because the knowledge that they come up with is contextualized and they are rightful co-owners of it and may use it to their advantage.

The Freirean orientation of liberative pedagogy points out that coming together through sharing stories and creating a common narrative is a liberating process in itself. Diaconia wants to give people hope and this may be a very obscure word, which does not provide people with much to do if it is just waiting until something good happens in their lives (for example, in case they follow some rules). Freire suggests, that through liberating acts of co-exploring their world, people re-establish connection with it and with each other to find their voice and agency. Such a process is already informed by a common hope and it may invite their transformative action towards full social change for all.

Integration of practice and research: conclusions for practitioner research

This framework of practice research gives answers to our question concerning conceptual preconditions of research with people, who are marginalised as they should be seen as active subjects, who are invited as co-researchers. For doing it, practitioners should change the research perspective from 'neutral' and 'extractive' to 'engaged' and 'participatory'. Those who wish to be engaged in this kind of co-research should see themselves as equal. Consequently, in their engagement with people, practitioners should become learners too. Co-investigation and co-learning contribute to an act of co-creation that is rooted in the perspective of a 'bottom-up' grass-root approach. By changing the research perspective, it is a practitioner, who should be ready to be surprised and learn when they are being 'touched' by people.

In their engagement with people, a practitioner usually gets a wider and more complex understanding about how social injustice undermines people's lives and goes against common humanity. They get shaken out of their habitual framework. People, who were previously seen as problematic by mainstream society, actually see a deep truth about their position and how things are unjust. People on the margins usually see and better understand how damaging social injustice is to human dignity. They appreciate the implications it may have if such injustice becomes normalised and integrated in the social institutions. However, they themselves may be taking this unjust situation for granted, so they also need to change their habitual thoughts and responses.

Therefore, the main 'take away' for practitioner research may be expressed in the following way: practitioners need to create a learning situation, linked to real life and to practice, which creates a pressure to analyse daily habits, prescriptions and expectations within their practice (Addy, 2013). Integration of research in practice, as active learning, provides a general direction which should be followed with various orientational aims. The research methodology should be informed by openness, which basically implies inviting people as active subjects to talk about their lifeworld in a free and open way. This will surely prompt their reflections about their lives as being part of the bigger society and life in general. Bringing various experiences together will result in a very concrete form of experiential knowledge which may be taken further to reflection and action as part of praxis with people.

Implications for work with people

Processes of work with people, which are directed by this vision, will be quite complex, involving various persons and groups of people. It will take time to explore and build ways to connect them and invite open sharing. In this kind of collaborative work the process will be just as important as the outcome! Diaconia is precisely concerned with inviting people to experience engaging relationships which lead to more fulfilment, which people get from being together.

This may be a challenging and demanding task. One diaconal practitioner commented during a workshop:

> *Working in areas with a high degree of poverty and marginalisation always involves the worker and the church making a choice which in the workshop was referred to as taking an 'option for the poor'. In situations which are very negatively affected by government policies and economic decisions, such an option becomes complex to perform. It is important to recognise the complexity in the situation and the ambiguity of actions. As situations evolve it is important to recognise this work will not always go smoothly in one direction. Committed action with and on behalf of marginalised groups can be seen as a struggle which does not lend itself to a 'quick fix'. (Addy, Robbrecht-Roller 2023, p. 20).*

In the relational process of seeking ways to handle differences, people work on building their own agency. At this point a practitioner may find themselves taking on new roles as facilitator, enabler and 'everyday peace builder' (Eversley 2023, p.12).

In concluding this chapter, we may summarise that these days, co-research on their life worlds and the common search for hope through transformative praxis for social change becomes as important for the practitioners just as it is for the people they work with. Research on a practitioner's own practice will bring together in a holistic way the following components of their practice: a vision, professional methods, personal motivations and expectations. It will foster the sense of connection, allow essential values to be addressed through co-developing working processes with people. In doing so, practitioners will reaffirm all participants in common humanity.

3. SERVICE-MODEL FOR A PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

I. A developmental approach to practice

We have established that diaconal practice with people who are marginalised contradicts many common understandings of services of social provision and care. These understandings usually see marginalised people, or those in need as someone who is lacking personal initiative, who have not much to give back to the society, until they become employed and are able to be self-sustaining. It should be noted that this image points to the prevailing mainstream mindset and the general expectation that people should be personally and socially self-sufficient. The term 'self-sufficiency' as a personal goal is closely connected to the term 'continuous development'. Nowadays, 'development' in this discourse has become a loaded perspective which implies 'growth', 'improvement' and 'efficiency'.

These connotations are linked to a model of economic growth which is seen to be at the heart of societal reproduction. Therefore, people tend to import this model into their relations with their own bodies, their life aspirations, relations with nature and with each other. This mindset is very damaging of the nature of human relations because these days people are constantly assessed and seen in the frame of their 'growth', whether those are quantitative indicators of their professional career, income records, fitness records or overall style of life. At the same time, means of 'soft power' in the society such as popular culture, fashion, mass and social media convey a sense of personalised shame and failure with those people, who are 'unfit', while bolstering the sense of supremacy of those, who are 'fit'. The philosopher and journalist Klein (Klein 2023), who researched social impact of COVID-19 pandemic, points to an alarming tendency of spreading of fascistic worldview of 'purification' dividing those, who were fit, well and healthy from those, who were not:

> The very idea that humans can and should be optimized lends itself to fascistic worldview... If you are optimized, others are, by definition, suboptimal. Defective. Next door to disposable. This is also the context in which some prominent anti-vaxxers have taken to calling themselves 'purebloods', since their blood is supposedly untainted by the jabs, never mind the term's chilling supremacist overtones (Klein 2023, pp. 187-188).

Considering such social tendencies and mainstream narratives, the developmental approach within diaconal practice should have a radically different meaning and significantly different aims. Theologians Swinton and Mowat (Swinton and Mowat 2006) argue that many relations which perceived as normal in the contemporary neoliberal society are, in fact, contradictory to Christian practices. For instance, they suggest having a closer look to how friendships, that are formed today, mainly tend to appear between like-minded people and may be easily terminated, when those relations stop being fulfilling of a person's needs. With the arrival of social media, friendship has become an even more elusive relation, which has lost the depth of genuine connection between people. Whereas Jesus befriended those persons who were radically not like him, who were not in any way popular in the society of his days, who hardly had any social visibility and whom he had no intention to abandon even when they intentionally sought to betray him. From a Christian perspective, practices between people should be understood not as mere techniques that facilitate some efficient processes and outcomes, but as faithful witnessing and inviting of human fulfilment through them in a way that is essential for Christian faith (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p. 21).

Therefore, as a second step towards building understanding of a developmental approach to practice, we should become aware of the present societal context and take ecological view of the person, who is placed in their context. This understanding was suggested by the American psychologist Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner 1979). According to his view, people are formed by the relations that start in the close family circle and expand further to embrace a wider social context up to the societal macro and meso structures which include religion, politics, economy and historical time. The ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner signifies the interconnectedness of people. People become who they are through their relationships and socialisation. Moreover, this approach also reveals that the structures of dominance are developed through this same net of relations.

In their everyday practice with people practitioners learn about their life stories. The stories may be different but, in a nutshell, they tell the story of living together, of what it means to be a neighbour in the society nowadays. These stories often reveal mechanisms of oppression and personal struggles

of people to overcome those. However, when these stories come together, they reveal the systemic nature of oppression. British community development practitioner and sociologist Ledwith describes historical roots of storytelling praxis:

> It was Black women, in analysing their lived experience, who exposed the interlocking, overlaying, intertwining ways that inequalities are connected. In a complex web of oppressions, working together to create a systemic force that maintains the interest of top-down power and privilege… The questioning of their life stories took Black women deeper into intersectionality as a multifaceted critical analysis, extending beyond race and gender to include oppression in the wider sense, a major intellectual contribution to the body of social justice thought (Ledwith and Springett 2023, p. 127).

A diaconal, developmental approach to practice should start with an inquiry of how the stories of people may be changed in reciprocal relations. Practice should become this place, where the stories may come together to invite a critical look at the context and bring transformative change to it. Grass-root change, that does not separate reflection and action, according to Freire, may bring about sustainable social change. If this is not pursued, then there is a space for the mainstream narrative to tell its own story of oppression and social division, where people, who are 'different' will receive the blame for the failures of society and to keep vanishing unnoticed.

II. Critical habitus

Practice towards transformation is inductive and emerges from the local context as participatory and potentially empowering for people and the community. It needs the creative leadership of those, who are ready to embrace an open process of emerging relations and to guide many interactions. We described above how the development of such practices may be challenged by the mainstream narrative and how the tacit logic of this narrative may be mirrored by many aspects of a practitioner's engagement with people, such as organisational culture, legislative and other normative frameworks, professional methods and also including expectations from people who are in a dire need of help. On top of that, for a diaconal practitioner their immersed engagement into the many evolving dynamics may contain other dangers, like losing themselves to a particular singular demanding case or issue. Or sometimes it becomes very difficult for a diaconal practitioner to set clear boundaries between their personal motivational 'engagement' and their professional practice. This comes back to the practitioners with challenges of uncertainty and doubts about themselves and their modus operandi. In the current situation of growing ambiguity and the complexity of social changes these challenges multiply. As Smith and Mark observe:

> However, we must act in situations where there is much that we cannot know; where the tools we employ are necessarily tentative; where communication is stuttering and partial; and where there are always a number of different, and often conflicting, paths we can take. Practice will always be imperfect; it will always be problematic. We will always have something to learn (Smith and Mark 1995, p. 134).

Therefore, to avoid being overwhelmed with often contradictory demands, practitioners should aim to intentionally uncover and build awareness of the roots of their personal identity and motivation. At the same time they should clearly distinguish the influence of the expectations of their practice according to their relationship organisation-employee and by the wider societal context (Addy, 2013). As we pointed out in the Introduction, all these issues may intrinsically play a part in shaping practitioners' attitudes and the 'message' that they inadvertently convey in their practice with the service users. This situation suggests that practitioner research should acquire a special lens, which is not a separate technique, but rather the way of looking and seeing. Something that forms the vision of the practitioner and brings to their attention layers of reality that otherwise will not intentionally appear in their focus. This lens should have a different focus for the various aspects of practice which would be under revision, but it belongs to a single frame. Above we suggested that this lens should be critical towards how practice is being shaped. We bring it together in the term 'critical habitus'.

Term 'habitus' was first suggested by French sociologist Bourdieu in his work 'Outline of a Theory of Practice' in 1977. The term refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that persons develop through their life experiences, which shape their perceptions and actions within various social contexts.

In reciprocal diaconal practice critical habitus is an essential quality that opens practice to research towards the development of reciprocal relations with people, who are usually seen as passive service-users. On the inside it should enable practitioners critically revisit their personal story, their biographical roots and see how those are brought and connected to other various expectations within their practice. On the outside, critical habitus may be applied to recognising the 'architecture of practice', namely, the impact of relational patterns within the organisation, which may be either explicit or tacit, the influence that comes from with the wider context, etc. A critical habitus not only helps practitioners to address current issues in their practice, but to build their understanding of, and holistic vision for developmental diaconal practice with people.

Practitioner's 'service-model'

Addy (Addy 2023) argues that practitioners usually discover a variety of 'service-models'. These models include assumptions about working methods and approaches, expectations that arise from their motivation which are connected to their application to the goal of their practice. Addy suggests that practitioners have a personal 'service-model' that is connected with their vocational in-depth motivation to work. A personal 'service-model' is rooted in the socialisation of the workers and their life story. A professional 'service-model' is formed within the practitioners in the course of their formal training. An organisational 'service-model' is imposed on the practitioners by the employee. Very often practitioners do not realise the demands on them and their practice that arise from these models and that may be very contradictory.

In numerous learning workshops with practitioners they found these models within themselves with a sense of a surprise. Further in the course of learning it was a fascinating discovery to reflect on personal biography and see how it shaped expectations which underly interactions. For instance, if the practitioners lack clarity for themselves, as we mentioned above, they will find it difficult to use their own story as a resource for engagement with people or being open to the stories that come from people. Such a situation may force practitioners to lean more into their professional position, which then comes across to people as a position of upper power, too technical and which undermines genuine compassion. On the other hand, personally projected exceptional compassion may sometimes be perceived with suspicion by people, and that may also quickly drain the resources of practitioners. In both examples, practitioners act uncritically in their engagement with people. They tend to step into the interaction with a predetermined framework of intentions towards them.

In relational work with people, in order to create a situation conducive to mutual learning, practitioners should seek to develop the 'horizontal' communication of equals with them. This requires of practitioners critical awareness of the need to create an 'empty space' between them and people, who are usually seen as marginalised (Addy 2013). This space must be liminal, meaning free of preconceptions, labels and the pressure of any expectations. An empty space invites a person to 'eye-to-eye' interaction of equals. They are invited to show their qualities and recognise the quality of relations that develop out of this encounter. When a person in need is recognised unconditionally as a person with dignity, who is met by another person, not by a representative of a distant institution, which may hold normative, financial or coercive power over them, then the power is shifted and only then the possibility for transformative work with them becomes feasible.

Therefore, a practitioner should be very aware of the different 'service-models' and how various expectations may influence the unfolding relations. Moreover, since the practitioners are placed in an 'in-between' position between the people they work with and the employing organisation, their role is always under suspicion for those people, who have experienced systemic oppression. Utmost transparency, clear communication and unequivocal support of the collective goals of people from practitioners are the key-factors for reciprocal learning and work for change.

To keep this work going, a critical habitus should be called upon to help practitioners to stay focused on the process of double-learning with people. Double-learning will demand from the practitioners to critically revise their own identity and how it should change to include people in relational way, but at the same time keeping their professional values intact:

> In order to work for change, the virtues of trust, respect and openness to change are critical. We are therefore engaged with double learning processes. It is by engaging in work for change we also participate in our own transformation! To build our practice on this model relates professional work to our way of life. We cannot build our work on trust and respect for example, if these are not components of our own deep 'service-model' (Addy 2013, p. 63).

This moment of connection through common humanity may be very demanding on practitioners, requiring attentive presence with people and continuous self-reflection. It may also be confusing at times. It may require practitioners to revisit their own biography, their own 'story' that is shaped by their formative experiences, and question what empowers them to strive for connection with people and what processes should be built for nourishing this relatedness. Eventually, these reflections may change practitioners' personal and professional 'service-model'. Transformation will go in both ways.

Below we would like to quote a critical reflection from a volunteer practitioner on their service of listening with refugees and asylum seekers, who are often indefinitely detained in detention centres. It describes the contradictions between organisational expectations and inner motivation, as they are rooted in a personal commitment to change the situation for these people. It reveals, how clarifying their motivation led them to embracing social activism and advocacy on behalf of those people, who otherwise remain unseen. The commitment is reinforced by a vision for a society where people are recognised, heard and welcomed:

> ...really infuriating. It can kind of wear you down...I think it is something you have to learn to carry. ... And yeah, if you see things or hear things that might be happening in the detention centre, we can't damage the relationship with the centre, so we can't be calling out the staff while we are there. But that's why we do campaigning in other ways...to be raising awareness about the issues (Hacket and Turner 2024, p. 147).

From this example, we can see that recognition of the various elements that are at play in practice may be translated into an inner resource by practitioners.

Under the contextual challenges of growing ambiguity, that we referred to previously, an ecological approach that brings into focus interconnectedness between people and different levels of social systems emphasises the need of seeing persons, as a source of changes, and their interconnectedness, as a way to co-create and co-develop sustainable social change.

Within diaconal practice, an ecological approach should be directed to support, with practitioners' processes of awareness of their service-models, double-learning and critical self-reflection with people who are marginalised. All of these should be integrated into the critical habitus of practitioners. These elements are essential for empowering work with people. In the following chapters we will suggest ideas on how the learning for practitioners should embrace these processes to put more emphasis on them and use them as a resource for the practitioners in their everyday work.

Critical engagement with the 'architecture' of practice

A critical habitus makes the 'familiar' seems 'strange' in order to reveal the assumptions that are implicated in the 'order of things'. So, another lens of critical habitus focuses on patterns, structures of relations and tacit knowledge that are built in the practice and in life of organisations. Those should be critically examined. For instance:

» Awareness of whose vision and whose interests are really pursued in practice.

» Presence of hidden oppression and inequality within practice, whether it is manifested in behaviour or in the language or expectations from people, who have power.

» Sensitivity to the practitioner's working space. Does this place have a low threshold, inviting people to come in and feel welcomed? Or is it more like an office or disciplinary space, where people feel herded from one working operation to another?

» Sensitivity to tacit patterns of habits and beliefs that are implicitly informing the worker's practice and the practice of the organisation. These hidden flows should be brought to light and questioned. For example, one practitioner reflected in a workshop:

Sometimes the dynamic looks like this: there is a building, that building costs money and pastoral workers have the duty to make the house 'pay off'. The house is in the middle, instead of the people! (Addy and Robbrecht-Roller 2023, p. 20).

» The ability to link ongoing problems and situations to deeper patterns. Very often suggested managerial resolutions do not address the deeper underlying issues that remain hidden and tend to increase tensions within working processes and relations.

These various lenses of critical habitus open practice as research that embraces an integrative approach by inviting practitioners to research their own story in interconnectedness with their practice and with the stories of people. The developmental approach to practice, that may be applied under this

framework, would suggest working together with people to develop the stories and, eventually, bring change to the narrative that people share. This new narrative would emerge from the processes of joint research and learning as empowering to embrace their life in its fullness.

III. Criteria for Diaconal or Christian engagement research

We defined diaconia as Christian social practice that starts from a person being moved by the call from the 'other'. The Christian tradition offers guiding values for practitioners in approaching their practice, that starts from the 'other'. It should be noted that the values in this subchapter have been chosen by the practitioners for their core-significance in their everyday work with people. In this subchapter we will aim to describe these values as helpful criteria, that inform a horizon for action and practice with people as practice research. In the following chapters of this publication we will address ethical considerations that should be read in connection with these values. The list is rather concise and may be expanded by practitioners through theological and further critical reflection on their practice.

Unconditional Recognition of Dignity

The core principle of Christian faith is a belief that all people are made in the Image of God and granted their dignity unconditionally. In the Christian tradition, reaffirming relational connection and need in one another links to affirming human dignity and leads to empowerment.

Practice informed by a diaconal vision should be deeply sensitive to the dignity of other persons. These may be the people who are often neglected and forgotten, and whose lives are deeply affected by social attitudes. Therefore, work towards empowerment with them may be a long struggle against low self-esteem and through the lack of positive experience of social relations and trust.

This guiding value of dignity may be applied through the following implications for practice with people:

» Hear and recognise people as they are in their contexts, by listening to their stories and accompanying them in their struggles.

» See persons in a wholistic way and use a relational approach of establishing horizontal trustful relations with them.

» Respect their diversity and difference. Never seek to apply a label or a 'quick-fix' standard solution to work with people without knowing their stories. Start by knowing names of people, their stories and proceed to recognising them as being different and unique and who have something to share as well in relations of equals.

» Shape work with people towards empowerment by inviting them as subjects in relational long-term work.

» Aim practice with people to recognise their strengths, and shape quality relations with them to be affirming of their self-worth.

Colleagues from the Urban Mission in the Netherlands summarise this approach in following words:

Recognition gives pride and strength. Strength to become more a subject, a valuable actor, among other people. It is not just the realization of someone's idea. It is always about a shift in what people think they are capable of, when they discover what they really want, and they ask themselves: just why would it not be possible? Their self-image is opened up, perhaps repositioned (Schlatmann and Van Waarde 2014, p. 101).

It should be noted that recognising the dignity of the 'other' is never a one-way directed intention. Mutual trust between the practitioner and a person who is marginalised, stems from reciprocal recognition which comes from discovering their 'strength-in-vulnerability'. When a practitioner and another person see each other 'as they are', in that 'empty moment', the practitioner benefits from such 'gift' of unconditional recognition just as the other person does.

Agency

In multiple discussions, which are taking place in politics and social services these days, people who are marginalised, are usually talked over. In the views of these discussions people who are marginalised, are predominantly seen as lacking in wisdom, initiative, as not been able to contribute to their lives, let alone to the wider society. British philosopher Fricker (Fricker 2007) defines this situation of denying people abilities to know things and to be right, as 'epistemic injustice'. The decisions about conditions, the organisation of social provision and social services are made without any involvement of the input from their ultimate service users. However, these service users are poor, excluded and marginalised people who possess the utmost expertise in understanding their needs, as well as expertise in navigating complex systems of social provision and all those injustices, which dehumanise them in the process of receiving help. Sociologist and activist Taylor (Taylor 2020) argues, that in a neoliberal society, social structural injustice towards people who are different, such as refugees, poor people, people with disabilities, has acquired a punitive character, which plays into amplifying social inequality. Coupled with ignorant epistemic injustice, excluded and marginalised people are silenced, blamed, stigmatised and subjugated by mainstream society.

Unfortunately, it has recently become a common practice to invite people with lived experiences of poverty and social exclusion to speak in meetings, but the 'tokenism' rarely takes their voices any further than the meeting. The abuse of their stories is just as harmful to them as is ignorance. Diaconia should strive to develop a different narrative of these people as capable and willing to make a transformative difference in their lives.

In a developmental approach to practice, the expertise of the people, who will be the 'receivers' should be invited, and people should be granted a sense of agency. To explain, people should be invited to participate in the co-creation of the services or any other activities which will affect them. They should be given a free reign to decide for themselves, advise and shape services in reaffirming ways. Agency eventually provides those people with the chance to make a choice for themselves, to contribute with their talents and skills, to develop a sense of collaborative work and influence on essential circumstances of their lives.

Connecting this understanding with the Freirean term praxis, as an act of exploring the world through dialogical learning, we may say that people should be given freedom as subjects to seize control over their own lives, be it in a local community or over a wider public issue, in creative artistic forms or politically oriented action. UK based practitioner and leader of the FBO 'Church Action on Poverty' Cooper shares an experience of his organisation in engagement with the people, who experience long-term poverty in UK society of today:

> *In our experience, there is nothing more transformative than enabling a group of people to bond together, through sharing their own experiences and truths about poverty, and to discover that these are not 'personal' problems, but shared experiences – and then to generate ideas and take action at the heart of enabling people to reclaim a sense of agency, not just over their own lives, but to challenge and change the wider decisions, institutions and attitudes which so often constrain or negatively impact on them (Cooper et al. 2020, p.15).*

Social Justice

Participation and Human Rights

Overcoming exclusion and gaining agency to act to achieve wellbeing for their communities, inevitably brings people together and places them amidst social relations. In working together with people contributions from everyone should be invited, no matter how small, and the effort made seek to benefit from the diversity and richness of experience that they bring into the work towards a collective goal. Emerging solidarity should be developed inductively from the framework of social justice and human rights. Practicing it would allow people voice in open discussion over conflicting issues and questions, to explore their agency, experience and shape participatory processes.

Australian social work academic, Jim Ife (Ife 2009) insists that any sustainable community development requires a framework of human rights and social justice. Ife writes:

> *We hold rights not individually, but collectively... If it is only in human community that we can fully define, discover and realise our humanity, it is only in human community that we can achieve human rights.*

In this sense human rights are inherently about community, and community development becomes effectively human rights development. One could therefore argue that it is impossible to have human rights without human community, and hence community development becomes not merely a location for human rights education (as is commonly thought) but a prerequisite for human rights themselves (Ife 2009, p.128).

Addy (Addy 2013) suggests a 'convivial' approach to developmental diaconal practice, that is embracing perspectives of participation, human rights and a relational approach. He argues that seeking common agreement and developing ways to build collective action should not be overlooked. Uncovering how people live out of their personal narratives may become a starting point for practitioners to developing empowering reciprocal relations to social change that would not be forcing a sense of 'common identity' on people. According to Addy (Addy 2023) practitioners should:

» Become aware of their own story and 'service model'.

» Secure a safe space, where people feel free to share and recognise various experiences in their stories.

» Support engaging dialogical learning from each other, opposing 'strategic' communication and inviting inputs from everyone.

» Be aware of conflictual interests and seek to resolve those in transparent way.

» Support work on a common agenda with people, by being a facilitator, who refrains from 'taking over' initiative but is open to support a collective action.

» Ensure that action processes are led by people as a joint learning process where relations are prioritised over goals.

Nurturing the sense of community and belonging

When people work together to build a common sense of community, they foster personal contacts, inform each other on the everyday lives and appreciate a growing sense of emotional connection, compassion and care.

Eventually community brings a sense of belonging. However, this sense should not be misread with ideas of conservative 'organic and natural' cohesion that unites people. Communities these days are dynamic places of power, exercised through the processes of relations and ideas of public and private spaces. They are building new identities which unite and divide people and which often appear in public and political debates. Understood as a 'set of public practices' (Blokland 2017), community may counteract the toxic influence of social media and the divisive argumentation of right-wing politics, which too often use the term 'community' to define 'scapegoats' or outsiders, who do not fit in 'normal' mainstream society. Social activist, Tom Hacket gives an example of such counter work with communities, which is carried out and supported by grass-root organisations:

We know that actually, it is those human connections that challenge those quotes you read in the Daily Mail, that 'there is no space here', 'they're all dangerous', and those things.

But if it's someone within your community that this is happening to, you can really change a person's perspective. And I have seen that even with people that I know agree with the most anti-refugee anti-migration articles, but when someone in their community is facing that, they completely change their mind. Th rhetoric turns into – 'Well, this person's lives here all their life', and it's almost 'We do not mean those refugees' (Hackett and Turner 2024, p. 144).

Nevertheless, community extends further than a set of public practices. A sense of belonging, as it is revealed in Christian tradition, points to the essence of humanity, a wish to be recognised, heard and contribute with however small input to social life. Clara Rushbrook (Cooper et al. 2023, p. 94), a person with a long-term experience of lived poverty expresses it in her poem:

*Because we all long to belong
or at least those of us
who society does not include
long to belong ...
to feel part of a bigger picture
to feel connected with ourselves and one another
to feel we have a purpose and value
to flourish and grow
for this is the infectiousness of hope
the experience of what it is to
be-long.*

4. KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FOR THE PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER

In the previous chapters we explored the conceptual foundation to the practitioner researcher. Now we shift our attention to practice of research that is built around knowledge and skills and the ethical considerations that are needed for the trustworthy practice. In chapters V and VI we will share ideas for supporting practice of research as a field of professional development.

In this chapter we aim to look into the knowledge and skills that a practitioner may use in their everyday work with people. From the beginning, we need to clarify the fact that according to Freire, the approach of liberative pedagogy, which we use as conceptual foundation, cannot be mechanically copied. As he frequently said, it should be reinvented anew within each new context which is deeply rooted in lives of the people (Freire 2013). Moreover, the integrated approach that we are pursuing in this publication implies that the practitioner is the main resource in supporting research for change. The tools can be of help, but primarily it is the practitioner who is supporting the resources and processes of ongoing knowledge formation and relevant action through ensuring participation and the equal contribution of people.

Therefore, this chapter does not aim to give an exhaustive account of the methods and conditions on how to apply each approach. We will draw a generic framework, where the subchapters below explicate what skills and knowledge practitioners may need to open inquiry and shape research as informed by mutual sharing, reflection and action within their everyday practice with people in their contexts.

All of these approaches and relevant procedures were well developed and may be further explored with thematic reading in qualitative social research (Denzin 2002, 2017, Ledwith 2016, Silverman 2016) and practical theology (Swinton and Mowat 2006, de Roest 2020, Moschella and Willhauck 2018).

We would like to start this chapter with reflexivity as a key skill for the practitioner-researcher. Then proceed to see how stories of people and practitioners may be related through approaches of narration and ethnography. A collaborative and evaluative approach will be used to look into participatory research with people towards their empowerment and sustainable social change. Finally, we will summarise with suggestions as to how volunteers and service users may be become co-researchers to actively participate and constructively enrich diaconal practices.

I. Reflexivity

The term 'research' is commonly understood as the process of finding answers to a specific research question. Therefore, research initiatives usually start by shaping some guiding questions to a particular field. In practice these questions are often suggested by a donor or statutory agency and predominantly they define the way the research process should be organised to get 'informative', often quantitative, research findings. Quite the opposite is true if practitioners want to open their practice as a field for inquiry. For example they need to avoid prescriptive questions. Swinton and Mowat (Swinton and Mowat 2006) suggest the following framework:

> The task of qualitative research is to describe reality in ways which enable us to understand the world differently and in understanding differently begin to act differently (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p. 46).

This definition may look vague but for the aim of developing the practitioner-researcher it has key elements to it: describing and understanding the reality and beginning to act on this knowledge. To describe and understand reality, the research may start with getting more 'data' from the experiences of people and their living contexts. For instance, getting close to the life worlds of people and just 'going along' with their everyday activities has been described and used as a relevant and potentially rich research method (see Kusenbach 2021).

Within the framework of researching practice as a way of developing a different relational understanding and acting differently, there is a need for practitioner-researchers to take special care to keep a high level of self-awareness, because they will inevitably be influenced in their engagement with people who act as co-researchers, and the practitioners will influence them in return. Therefore, the reflexivity

of the practitioner-researcher becomes a key-dimension of the research process, from the very beginning to the end. We have already referred to reflexivity when in Chapter 3. we described critical habitus as an essential quality of the everyday practice of a practitioner-researcher with people and this should be consulted in conjunction with 'service-model' of practitioner. Below let us have a closer look at how reflexivity may be applied using a research lens.

Reflexivity is most commonly understood as the critical self-awareness of the researcher, where they keep attention on the way their values, beliefs and identity come into play when they are engaging in practice and research processes. Reflexivity should be constantly exercised by the practitioner-researcher for assessing their professional position regarding their race, gender, age, physical features, their 'service-model' and their position as external intruder in the local context, with the related power dynamic, etc. When learning about the life worlds of the people, the practitioners should continuously reflect on what their stories tell them and how their own story changes to responsively embrace this new relational knowledge. As we argued before, practitioners are involved in building relations with people across various identities and this should be recognised and reflected, because these days, practitioners mainly work in multi-ethnic diverse neighbourhoods (Addy, 2022).

Wigg-Stevenson (Wigg-Stevenson 2018) suggests that the starting point for reflective practice from a Freirean perspective is to sharpen critical reflexivity for the practitioners in work with marginalised people, through the perspective of justice:

- Recognise that our practice cannot be made alone. It belongs to people too. Therefore, it cannot be pursued outside relationships.

- Reflexivity should lead and teach the practitioner how the oppression of people creates and supports the practitioner's privilege, that they are dependent upon, while at the same time this privilege may sustain systems of oppression.

We would suggest that critical work should place relations with people, within the search for a common narrative which is rooted in reciprocity and justice.

With regard to how reflexivity may be taken to the researcher's disposition, Wigg-Stevenson (Wigg-Stevenson 2018) warns that in whatever process they will be aiming for, the practitioner-researchers should keep a 'low profile' in their engagement with people:

> We must participate, observe and, ask questions not to create our own agendas for justice, but rather be co-conspirators in the revolution our partners seek (Wigg-Stevenson 2018, p. 56).

Keeping a 'low profile', that is supported by personal and critical reflexivity, equips the practitioners with objectivity and prevents objectivisation of the 'other' that steps in, when the practitioners tend to deploy 'top-down' expertise and assume that they know better and have a 'ready-made' solution for the situation (May and Perry 2011). Reflexivity throughout the research allows practitioners to keep their enquiry open-ended so as to respond flexibly and be guided by the new knowledge and social dynamics that they witness in their practice with people.

Exercising reflexivity is connected to ongoing learning of the practitioners. Wood (Wood 2015) argues that any professional needs to acquire the profile of a positive life-long learner, where reflection on their own practice can be a key-element in the growth of professionalism. We would add that a practitioner-researcher, who is guided in their practice by their reflexivity, will be engaged in developing an integrated approach to their praxis, which opens practice as a resource of genuine curiosity and feeds the practitioner's intention to engage in transformative learning from and with people.

II. Narrative approach

We have already explained how practitioners are immersed in the world of the stories of people in their regular everyday practice. Let us look more closely how the work on stories should be seen in the framework of research with people.

What is rarely accepted is that these stories hold truth about the situation. In the Western framework of 'positivistic' science, people take an objective truth to be the replicable results of quantitative research. These are usually presented to us as 'hard' facts. They claim to explain the lived reality in a manner that denies any other truths. Lately this position has been thoroughly undermined in the field of social sciences by feminist, indigenous and other alternative ways of knowing

(epistemology). For the dimension of research with people this orientation implies that there is not a single way of knowing and therefore, personal story matters just as much as the 'hard' facts. Personal stories hold their own truth of how reality is perceived and explicated by persons, who share them. Even two people, who have experienced the same event, tell their story differently. This is because they bring to the event the perception shaped by their own socialisation and other influences. However, we would like to point out below that working with stories of people is a part of research and they should be heard in a way that recognises and embraces diversity.

People tend to narrate their experiences into a coherent story. It helps them to make a sense out of it and builds a meaningful storyline of their life. Furthermore, it connects them to their deep beliefs and values that inform their 'agency' and actions in their context. That is why for the practitioners a deeper understanding of the reality of the life worlds of people comes from active listening to the stories. Stories reveal a network of connections that constitute a 'map' of their social life shaped in conjunction with the influence from social institutions and other systemic actors. Through engaging in 'horizontal' conversation about their stories, practitioners may learn how people define and meet the different other and recognise the reasons why a particular dynamic of the encounter was shaped. For instance, such tendencies as nationalism or the denial of equal rights to various groups of people point to the solidifying of fixed identities with people. These tend to become rigid, normative and exclusive of other points of view and are often linked to the feeling people have of being endangered and of competing for resources to make a living. Whereas through changing the ways of understanding reality and acting upon this understanding implies that people should embrace flexible identities that will be open to change in dialogical learning from each other (Moschella 2023). It is very important that the practice of storytelling and sharing takes place in a safe space and that the practitioner guides the communication in a way that is open to the telling of a personal story without strategic intent. People who are often required to 'tell their story' usually learn do so in a way which does not touch them emotionally. They tell their story in a way which the practitioner's organisation will find acceptable and leads to a positive decision about access to resources. Horizontal communication in a trusting and safe space overcomes the frequent practice of strategic story telling.

Practitioner-researchers must keep an awareness of this dimension of relational identity building and should aim to create a safe space for dialogical learning between people, where persons would feel safe to personally and collectively be 'themselves' and express their identity. They will learn how who they believe themselves to be, is perceived by others, discover commonalities in their stories and how those are shaped by the social structures. Guiding such a participatory dynamic process requires a sensitivity from the practitioner-researcher. These processes should be designed so that all can begin to see the particularity of their perspective as rooted in their diverse life experiences. Thus, diversity is recognised and may be used as a collective strength (Addy 2022). As we argued above, from that point people may seek to take their 'place in the world' under their own control and develop a sense of personal and collective agency. At best, stories may be joined in a new 'common narrative' and a horizon of possibilities created.

III. Ethnographic approach

We have already referred to and explained the need for a practitioner researcher to accompany people in their life worlds. Long-term presence with them supplies practitioners with first-hand experience and information about their everyday environment, public places and practices and the ways the interactions are played out.

'Going out' and just being in the life worlds of people is a fascinating experience that invites the practitioner to use all their senses for getting the 'feeling' of the space and flow of the time. It points to many ways of 'knowing', where the senses are just as valid as rational reasoning.

An ethnographic approach argues against the 'bird's eye view' of the locality, where a practitioner would look at it from the top, in the way any stranger would do. Arguably, such a top-down view would supply the practitioner with a generic one-dimensional impression which lacks the everyday dynamics of life as it happens 'on the ground'. 'Going out' to thoroughly explore neighbourhood or locality sets the practitioner-researchers on the level of the everyday lived context of people, where they become, in a sense, one of the inhabitants. The absence of a generic picture inevitably opens space in totally new ways that reveal tacit knowledge and unexpected angles for learning. For instance, a practitioner-researcher may want to visit the same place at different times of the day. The dynamics there may vary considerably and will reveal how people of different ages or social status make use of the same place

in various ways, blending geography and culture. These 'snapshots' (Moschella 2023) or 'exposure' (IJzerman 2013), (which we will explain below), will never be exhaustive, and every new visit will reveal new sides to it.

People are co-creators of those spaces, and, for instance, they may express their experiences and emotional 'well-being' through street art, organising of community spots with green places or installing a board with notices which will tell practitioners more about the community lives, etc. Reflections on personal story may add another layer of meaningful exploration for the practitioners. They may want to know the story of the neighbourhood or a particular community in the past, hear the stories of residents, learn how the neighbourhood changed, how it expresses personal identity and what possible points of common interest may be brought forward.

Being in the liminal position of an insider-outsider allows practitioner-researchers to recognise and respect the differences that people tend to take for granted, as an immanently present part of their lives. Ethnography calls practitioner-researchers to appreciate the differences of apparently similar things and respect those places where brokenness may reveal resisting strength against neglect from the system world (Meijers 2023). They describe the multidimensional knowledge that one gets through ethnography as a 'thick' description. This term implies that first-hand knowledge may be very full and should not be filtered with objectifying methods. Instead, the research 'focus' should be continuously expanded to grasp the complexities of connections and relations that form a 'meaning-making framework' for people.

People bring this context into their stories in various ways that condition their feelings and actions and are applied to interpret their experiences and the experiences of other people. Therefore, researching through an ethnographical approach is not about explaining, but about understanding (Swinton and Mowat 2006). This orientation allows the practitioner-researchers to verify and expand their knowledge with people, who should be able to recognise their experiences in the materials which the practitioner and other co-researchers may produce as an outcome of their ethnographic experience.

At the same time, a practitioner-researcher should recognise that whatever knowledge they get though ethnography is not something readily given and available at once. This knowledge will be emerging and dialogical. It will evolve under shifting circumstances, co-created and enriched with perspectives from newly acquainted people. Every voice should be respected and the building of relations should be prioritised as a research gain. Meijers (Meijers 2023) draws on the works of the French priest and philosopher De Certeau who emphasises the nuanced epistemological stance that practitioner-researchers should embrace, when they are 'exposed' to the vibes of the locality:

> According to De Certeau, who can be regarded as one of the founding fathers of this type of urban mission, exposure is a work of longing, not of taking possession. The moment one opens up to another space or another person, a journey begins. Without it, there is no way forward (Meijers 2023).

It may be said that an ethnographic approach prompts the practitioner-researcher to deal with and accommodate the constant changes that reshape contexts today. The only way to approach this is to learn how people 'on the ground' experience the context. The practitioner-researcher should accept that there will be no truth shared by everyone, but this should not stop them from exploring how their spirituality is manifested through and within relations of people to shape their meaning-making framework. This does not mean that spirituality cannot be researched through personal faith-reflections together with people, those may be shared and jointly held. This may be legitimate research. However, there is the possibility to take it further, towards creating a common view and the commitment to act upon it. We will come to this approach in the next subchapter.

IV. Collaborative approach

A collaborative approach aims to engage people as co-researchers. There is a research history and body of literature that convincingly demonstrates the transformative potential of such approaches including the works of Reason (2013), Beresford (2021), and Foote Whyte (1991). It embraces several concrete methods that creatively engage people to apply their expertise in reflection and action for transformative social change. We referred to the transformative potential of a collaborative approach in the conceptual part of this paper. This approach eventually may be expressed through various forms, including visual art, theatre, critical community development, community organising, participatory action research, etc.

All these are rooted in the main principle which demands that the power over the whole research process must belong with people as co-researchers as they use the common research potential to work on their issues. Based on this principle, in the initial stage of any collaborative activity the following leading criteria for collaborative work must be set out and agreed upon with the participants and secured to their advantage:

- » whose expertise is used in the research,

- » whose voices and stories are going to be heard in the end,

- » who is participating in the research processes,

- » who will own the research outcomes and how they may be used for their benefit,

- » how the initial narrative of community may be changed by the whole process of the research.

The approach of liberative pedagogy also sets a certain framework to the process of collaborative research together with people:

- » The collaborative research must start with people in their living contexts. It implies that the research goals should be defined by people themselves. This first step aims to invite people, who usually deal with the experience of being excluded. Through participation in collaborative research they may start to believe in themselves, to recognise that they have knowledge and skills needed to initiate a meaningful impact on their life situations and lives of their communities.

- » A research process should be built round the strengths of people and work with grass-root processes towards the participatory development of initiatives from 'bottom-up'.

- » The stages of collaborative research should include going through the participatory social analysis, embedded in dialogical peer learning to conscientise and eventually define the issues that people would want to address in collective action. The action plan and consequent action should then be undertaken.

- » Research processes should include ongoing participatory evaluation at each stage.

- » After evaluation and the celebration of achieved results, they should be put into practice or relevant collective action.

The empowerment that is expected as an outcome of collaborative research may influence the practice of a diaconal or service organisation, or a community organisation or lead to a change in the context. It may embrace the elements of civic action including innovation, advocacy, launching or joining with social movements, campaigning, seeking ways to speak truth to power, etc.

Some authors (Heron 1996, Hall 2001) argue that this process of working together on issues is natural for communities and that practitioners should not have the feeling of possessing an upper-expertise or to have a sense of being in control in the whole process. However, from the experience of practicing a collaborative approach the practitioner-researchers should take into consideration the following factors concerning their own role and responsibilities:

- » Any initiative for collaborative work is demanding and may only be built after developing relations of trust and forming bonds between the future participants.

- » The importance of a safe space where people may meet and share in a welcoming atmosphere of attentive listening is crucial.

- » Practitioner-researchers should be ready to facilitate peer learning by leading sessions or supporting participatory research including when there may be a need to consult external expertise or an exposition of theory in understandable terms.

- » There should be high awareness of oppressive power relations at play in the research process. Such a relationship may be manifested within the community when the voices of the weakest are not heard, or oppression may come as external pressure from social institutions. The emancipatory nature of collaborative research should challenge oppressive behaviour and power structures.

- » An ecological approach should be relied on to bring sustainable social change.

Challenges of collaborative approach

Here we would like to list the challenges to a collaborative approach, which have been expressed by practitioners who have been part of the process of developing the concept of practitioner-researcher:

» There is a tendency to mistrust officials and power holders. Therefore, to enable people to start such research and action may be a challenge.

» It will take time and a lot of work to find the right angle, where people will feel both the power and interest to be engaged.

» Group work entails group dynamics which should be considered from the beginning.

» Co-research will inevitably touch on traumatised experiences of people, who may therefore be vulnerable. Providing emotional support when listening to people's stories is essential.

» There is a need to be sensitive to the struggles of people, who may drop out from participatory processes due to their long-term lived experience of poverty and exclusion or will not be able to stand against present stresses.

» Practitioners should aim to work across diversities and barriers and be an 'everyday peacemaker'.

» The practitioner-researchers' work takes time and often suffers under short-term project culture, quantitative time bound evaluation and lack of funding.

» The practitioner-researcher should be prepared to be surprised, as well as disappointed, bearing in mind that collaborative research is a journey with an open end.

Despite the challenges, hardly anything feels as rewarding as enabling people to learn how to use and exercise their power to change their lives. This comes through defining and challenging social injustice with their own expertise and resources to achieve the change that they wanted to bring to their lives. Shared common learning plays a vital role between people and may bring innovative ideas that will root social relations in just social structures.

V. Participation of 'service users' and 'volunteers' in research

Research can be a form of practice, or form a basis for practice (Stålsett 2019, Addy 2023). This paper argues for the concept of practice embedded research. Such practitioner research may aim to critically challenge organisational culture, shaping inclusive processes to enhance the development of a 'learning organisation' (Schön 1991). One way to make a change is to question the division of labour within the organisation and the actual model of working. The contributions from those who are seen through narrow roles as 'service users' and 'volunteers' can be transformed by including them as co-researchers, not only of the context but also of particular practices, and and by opening practices to their critical feedback.

Volunteers are an essential pillar of diaconal organisations. They are relied on whenever help is needed. However, despite a considerable variety of volunteer cultures in different contexts, their engagement is often seen merely through contribution of their time and their particular skills. They are not recognised as the 'professionals' of diaconal work and therefore, usually given an assisting role. Their efforts are often routinised and taken for granted. There is no sharp line between volunteers and service users, as volunteers see their contribution as finding their way to make a meaningful impact and find the rhythm of their lives, which would otherwise leave them isolated. The same narrow operational logic is applied to those, who are 'service users'. They are regularly perceived as passive receivers within the inherently oppressive-relational framework of 'giver-receiver'. Normally their expertise and contributions are not requested or even recognised! The relevant processes of mutual aid and self-help are rarely developed between them (Addy 2012).

Inviting people to be co-researchers in mutual learning about the context, for instance, may open a way to sharing experiences that go far beyond those of the practitioner. We have already indicated that people with lived experiences of exclusion possess first-hand expertise, but then these also may be local people, who grew up in the neighbourhood and can reveal some lived stories of their place, or they may be newcomers, who have a lot to share from engagement in similar work in their previous place of residence. All of them can provide invaluable insights to their contexts and ideas on how

practice may respond in an empowering way to the contextual issues. Then the experiences and talents of people may be organised to co-shape the practice as equal contributors or give their open feedback and ideas for practice development. Or they may come up with ideas of practice of their own, which will be organised and led by volunteers and service users. Here is a reflection from practitioners on the possibilities of collaborative research to form the basis for practice and thus potentially change the role of the church organisations in locality:

> As we saw in our workshop, churches and urban church organisations may be rooted in their locality. It can be a very important task to work in a locality to promote informal 'caring for each other' or to support those community systems which people themselves have developed. This is a critical long-term task which also may prevent the development of further problems or give an early warning of others. To be embedded in a neighbourhood and to reflect the everyday life in a way that builds a culture of care without trying to fit it to care systems can be one important task of faith-based organisations (Addy 2012, p. 24).

Challenging the professional culture of diaconal organisation by giving space to volunteers and service users as co-researchers, to bring their contributions and feedback, may become another important step. It may challenge the declared values of diaconal practice directly at the point of their implementation, as some practitioners ask: 'when we talk about bottom up do we practice what we preach? Do we recognise those people who work alongside us as equal contributors? Do we give people space to bring their talents and improve quality of the service?' In this framework the whole logic of 'giving-receiving' is turned upside-down. Diaconal practice may use this learning for implementing ideas of an 'organisational learning culture' and launching innovative participatory processes. At the same time, in the experience of practitioners, such an open engagement of volunteers and service users empowers them to feel that they can make a valid contribution to society by making a difference to their local community and wider society.

Of course, such practitioner research processes must be supported by the organisation and would require special training for practitioners to recognise the needs and possibilities for research and action by volunteers and service users. The skills to support and enable volunteers and service users to be co-researchers and work for empowerment and community development are not a usual part of learning programmes. Establishing such a culture change implies that organisations should recognise the space and support needed for this work to proceed. However, it will equally open practice as a space of innovative action and support new approaches that foster social activism, that would be beneficial for the organisation as well.

VI. Evaluation research

In this final subchapter we would like to elaborate how the cycle of research and practice can be linked to ensure the integration of generated knowledge back into practice through mutual learning.

The term 'evaluation' most often comes up with a certain implicit 'agenda' attached to it. Firstly, it connects to the 'project evaluation' pattern. Within this framework, evaluation often starts when a specific project ends. At that point, evaluation invites the review of the whole process, clarifying whether the initial project aims were met, identifying the strengths and weaknesses, deducing relevant learning from the mistakes, etc. Evaluation is then used as a multi-purpose tool for communicating the project results in terms of outputs and outcomes to the stakeholders. It would normally aim to share feedback to the donors to invite further funding and to the community and partners to better highlight the impact of the initiative undertaken. Evaluation may also recognise, with participants, whether the aims of the collaborative activity were achieved and present sufficient evidence for showing it. The results of the project and of participatory evaluation may be further utilised as a celebration of success and to invite new ideas for the future.

Secondly, as a rule, the term 'evaluation' connects with the expectation of obtaining measurable and feasible outputs and outcomes. It may also be that evaluation research adds new thematised knowledge, which contributes to existing generalised theory, and which may find new solutions to identified problems. Organisational expectations and expectations that come from donor agencies and governmental bodies often require such 'project-framed' thinking in their evaluations.

Therefore, as helpful as such evaluation may be for some goals, we suggest that a practitioner-researcher should develop a continuing awareness of the impact of these imposed frameworks on their praxis with people. Critical reflection should be applied to the donor's conditions and expectations

that are often used to justify social practice with marginalised people. These conditions shape working processes and it is important to recognise both the explicit and tacit limitations on contextually rooted people-led open processes. The approach of liberative pedagogy directly demands that the systems that condition people by pushing an external project logic over their thinking and action should be revealed and opposed.

Consequently, evaluation should not be seen as a part of the project activities that benefits knowledge hierarchies, but as an opportunity to join with people in carrying out co-created processes for transformative change and creating a new future (Gergen and Gergen, 2008). To achieve it, evaluation should be included within the all stages of 'action-reflection-learning' cycle to become a continuous participatory process of knowledge co-construction. It should become a regular activity, a co-produced part of the continuous learning. Such a standpoint shifts the focus for the role of co-constructed knowledge from static to dynamic, from cumulative to practical, from individual to collaborative, from neutral to political, from a singular project truth to many experiential truths, from fact-checking to inclusive dialogue.

Cycle of research and practice

Let us have a closer look to the 'action-reflection' learning cycle and how it can integrate cycle of research and practice as mutual learning of practitioners and participants.

We have explained that within the approach of liberative pedagogy that it is necessary to start with co-creating first-hand knowledge, which is based on and in the life context of the people, who are marginalised and acting as co-researchers. Observations, analysis and sharing about participants lived experiences form an important 'reflective part' of the learning cycle. The cycle of 'action-reflection' holds the possibility of creating a common knowledge, a shared vision and of learning by doing when working collectively to achieve it. The new knowledge that emerges during the process of action, needs to be integrated with the previous experiences of participants as their experiential learning develops. This learning may start the whole cycle of 'action-reflection' again.

For practitioners this cycle belongs with 'research and practice', when co-learning with participants, constant reflection and evaluation supports their research and eventually brings relevant changes to their practice.

Below we would like to develop some ideas for participatory evaluation research built within the cycle of 'action-reflection' which will allow the practitioner to embrace the developmental approach of practice research. To complement and develop our suggestion for evaluation research, we will draw some ideas from the approach of 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The process starts with the active engagement of a practitioner-researcher with people in their life contexts and aims to show how evaluation research may be helpful for securing continuous learning in action and reflection.

The appreciative inquiry approach when applied through constant evaluation research enriches the 'action-reflection' cycle by embedding it both in the action process and in the lives of people. The emerging language, created through continuous common learning and action will demonstrate how 'words create the worlds' (Savage and Boyd-Macmillan 2007, p. 231). The process will help people to co-develop this process, to strengthen the collective agency and power of the group to consistently work towards transformative change in their lives and context.

Steps of the 'research and practice' cycle	Practitioner-researcher contribution	Synthesis of the two columns
Active engagement of practitioner-researcher with people in their context: exposure	Learning about the contexts of people. Seeking to take the initiative from the 'bottom up'	
Analysis and defining of the issues that negatively affect the lives of people	This step should be complemented by sharing and analysing the everyday lived experiences of people, including their positive experiences	Positive experiences can be seen as strengths that people have, they may appreciate 'what is strong'. These strengths can be used to challenge negative aspects Sharing holistic lived experiences allows people to build the horizon of a future vision and build on their strengths instead of keeping the focus on 'what is wrong'
Action planning with concrete steps to be followed	Continuous reflection on the process should be developed as a part of the action	Secures joint 'learning in action' through allowing time and space for conscious knowledge co-construction It creates a timely space to notice conflicts, recognise various perspectives and work on creating a climate which would be inviting work for change through appreciation of joint work and effort
Action implementation	Continuous reflections on what is going well and what is negative. The process should be framed as 'owned' by participants and therefore, their agency and power should be included in the focus	Evaluative work should be carried out regularly through the whole process of action implementation. The frequency may be scheduled according to decisions by the group. Evaluation may apply creative methods to connect actions to the vision and invite creative ideas
Reflection on accomplished action	Requires the integration of the new experiences as they are owned by people in their lives and context	At this stage it is important to come back to the 'common vision' for the future and redevelop it in the light of the new experiences and new learning

The appreciative inquiry approach suggests some other relevant points for the cycle of research and practice:

Emphasise on a relational angle. During activities the practitioner-researchers should consciously apply a 'relational lens' to underpin the value of relations. This will help to discover the actual value of the group solidarity and draw attention to the communal dimension of experiences, as Gergen and Gergen suggest:

> For example, rather than viewing thought, memory, attitudes, or repression as processes 'in the head' of the single individual, they are reconstituted as relational phenomena. Theory and research have come to articulate reason as a form of rhetoric, memory as communal, attitudes as positions within an argument, and emotion as performance within relationship (Gergen and Gergen 2008, p. 162).

Focus on values. Reflective conversations will highlight those values which resonated with people and which were seen as essential for the joint work and fulfilling relationships. The identified values may be formulated and followed with a collective agreement by the group. They may be embedded in the vision, but it is better to explicitly write them down and then, at a later evaluation examine how they are followed and what new learning can be drawn from them.

Holistic integration of lived experiences with persons. Dialogical appreciative learning helps people to connect various parts of their present experiences to their memories. This contributes to developing a greater awareness of themselves. It may be a significant help to reducing the fear of change

and developing active personal 'agency' (Savage and Boyd-Macmillan 2007). Work on biographies may be a useful tool for supporting these important reflections.

Fostering creativity. The process of open inquiry invites participants to apply creative methods, that may also be prompted by their talents and to foster intuitive and creative knowledge. Such knowledge may stubbornly avoid any systematisation and objectivisation, instead, it may bring innovative ideas for social activism and strengthen a sense of belonging.

Evaluation research, which is rooted in liberative pedagogy and appreciative inquiry, should not necessarily start and finish with some specific project action. In the previous sub-chapter, we wrote how diaconal practice, and organisational culture may be challenged through transforming the roles of 'service users' and 'volunteers'. The practitioner-researchers may use continuous practice research in order to systematise the experiences of various actors, who work alongside them. Appreciative inquiry could support sharing the stories and meaningful experiences of people, reinforcing a note of mutual respect and recognition. Later, various experiences may be turned into anticipation of meaningful change for practice and for the shifting roles in the organisation. In this way, the disruption of the normal course of work will create the potential to handle power imbalances and deal with ignorance from some persons. By these means, a constant evaluation process may be implemented to keep an open inquiry and invite ideas on how working processes may be changed from 'bottom up' and followed through those transitions with a common learning and contributions.

5. ETHICAL QUESTIONS AROUND PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH

I. Considerations for value-based practice

In the conceptual chapter we outlined the values for Christian social action, that should guide diaconal practice and research with people, who are marginalised. They draw a wider picture of the holistic approach to people as relational human beings who flourish through life-affirming relations with each other. Then we pointed out that diaconia meets people in their vulnerability not from the position of their weakness, but as equals, who have strengths and valuable expertise. We proceeded to demonstrate how a practitioner-researchers may strive, together with people, to co-develop processes of mutual learning through researching their practice. From these premises, ethical considerations arise because the perspective of equality blurs traditional roles between practitioner-researchers and people, who are collaborating in the research as subjects (Heron 1996). Therefore, special attention must be paid to preserving balance of power throughout the research process. Furthermore, when researching practice contributes to the development of relations within communities, which tend not to rely on the 'independent sense of 'self'', ethical considerations also provide orientation to the vision of the kind of society participants want to build together. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In the field of academic debate these issues have been addressed through ongoing resistance against narrow ethical principles that are exported to relational work with people from traditional ethical research regulations, which were developed for quantitative and positivistic research paradigms (Banks 2019, Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Manzo and Brightbill 2007). These authors argue that the commitment to do no harm, which is a core principle of research ethics, is not sufficient. In their approach, the research participants, who are engaged with the full range of their experience, should be reaffirmed as the co-owners of knowledge. Heron (Heron 1996) develops this argument, clarifying that co-created knowledge belongs to the intersubjective reality, which by linguistic means and shared agreement transforms lived experiences of people into secondary conceptualised meaning. It may be said that people participate in co-research also epistemically, to formulate knowledge about them and politically, this should be included in discussing research which aims to gain knowledge about them.

> To generate knowledge about persons without their full participation in deciding how to generate it, is to misrepresent their personhood and to abuse by neglect their capacity for autonomous intentionality. It is fundamentally unethical (Heron 1996, pp. 21-22).

These considerations firmly place practice with people in a value-based dimension and through ethical principles translate into practice those visions for society, which the research participants together with the practitioner-researchers strive to achieve in a joint venture.

That is why, firstly, researching practice and carrying out co-research with people should embrace a wider set of basic principles of social ethics. These include such values as human rights, social justice, democratic participation, inclusion, mutual respect and work towards empowerment and solidarity (Banks 2019). Secondly, ethical principles that express this wide orientation should be recognised as an essential part of practitioner research with people. These principles should not be understood as being integrated into ethical codes of conduct, but recognised as a place where ethical existence, as such, occurs before any research begins. The 'other', who is the touchstone of moral existence, is not a conceptual anchorage but a living force (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Wyschogrod 1974).

Manzo and Brightbill (Manzo and Brightbill 2007, p.40) suggest that a researcher who roots their practice in a coherent values orientation, a mature critical point of view and disposition to act in a principled way can enable ethics of participation. This ethical approach is by nature contextual, relational and dynamic. It answers the need to open relations by inviting trust, compassion, empowerment and all the values that are declared to be constitutive of human relations. Then for the practitioner-researchers their practice research would be unfolding, developing through reflexivity, which would include continuous reflection on the nature of human relations and communality.

It should be taken for granted that such relational ethics will bring along confusion and ethical dilemmas (Banks 2016). Practitioner-researchers should be aware that research stirs different dynamics that may equally jeopardise relations just as it may enrich them. For instance, it may be difficult for the practitioners to engage in research with those people for whom they care deeply and there may also be an interplay between research goals and professional interests or the requirements

of the donor, if there are any. All these complications imply that the ethical standards and principles should be embedded in the research practice and continuously tested by the practitioner-researchers through the integrity of their conduct, transparency and accountability.

Below we will aim to give a brief description of ethical procedures that follow the perspective of developing research with persons as subjects. We assume that practitioner-researchers want to make an inquiry on their own practice or the practice of their organisation, of which the practitioners are 'insiders', who have developed trustful relations with people. However, it should be noted that the framework below is generic and should be elaborated in accordance with the concrete research type and process. Heron (Heron 1996) writes in depth on this issue, whereas 'Ethical Guides for Collaborative or Community-based Research' may give more concrete information (CSJCA & NCCPE 2022).

II. Starting practice research

Any practice research should start with the principle of 'informed consent', which, basically, means that people should be asked for permission to be involved in the activities. Agreement to participate should be given by them voluntarily, meaning they should have a free choice, whether to agree or opt out of becoming participants. It should be noted that sometimes an agreement may be needed by the whole community group, and not only single persons. Ethical conduct at this stage prompts the practitioner-researcher to accept and respect participants' choice, even if it effectively stops their research plans. The relational approach urges practitioner-researchers to prioritise relationships and preserve mutual trust. Therefore, practitioner-researchers should refrain from any form of manipulation of people in order to overcome their flat refusal.

The refusal of people to participate may force practitioners to critically revisit own expectations and ideas for the research. Instead of abandoning the research altogether, a critical second reflection and attentive sensitivity to the context may bring helpful insights for the next steps: either reshape the research framework or gain a deeper understanding as to why people feel reluctant to engage and to follow this up with ideas for future planning.

The next step would vary considerably. In a nutshell, it should involve explaining in more detail with the participants about the aims, intended participants, and creating a plan for the activities including reporting of any known risks and benefits for the participants. If any information needs to be collected, then the introduction should include details on how the 'data' will be collected, by whom, for what purposes, how it will be stored and what control the participants will have over it during the research process and eventually over some 'final' account or other product.

However, the framework of collaborative approach suggests that, in the best case, all the research goals and relevant processes should be co-developed and clarified with research participants in a joint consultative process, which may include preliminary stages of social analysis of their situation, in-depth consultations and the clarification of various expectations. Where possible, control over the research initiative should be given to the participants. Accordingly, issues of power and responsibilities should be discussed, and any related concerns should be put on the table for discussion. Special attention should be paid to situations where the processes of communication need be adjusted to include voices of people with special needs or other groups of vulnerable people. At the same time the practitioner-researchers should develop a common understanding with people about the open character of the research process, clarifying that there may be alterations and changes to it, which should be suggested in an ongoing participatory evaluation and that later may require new negotiations about the research design and processes (CSJCA & NCCPE 2022, p. 013).

III. Confidentiality and anonymity

The questions of confidentiality and anonymity may be handled very differently depending on the type of research. Sometimes they may be not required at all. For example, a practitioner-researcher who intends to learn from their practice in order to change it, may not need many of these regulations. However, if other persons are engaged as co-researchers, then the issues of confidentiality and anonymity should be handled with sensitivity and full attention to avoid any harm during the various stages of research. Gaining mutual trust with the research participants is a rare gift that needs to be taken care of with the utmost respect.

During the stage of the research planning, ethical conduct should be discussed and agreed with the participants as well. The respectful 'rules' of joint work should be designed and agreed. Rules for a group work should consider measures for keeping a safe place for sharing and paying equal respect to every participant. The rules for handling aggression or other unacceptable behaviour should also be included.

These rules should consider how confidentiality will be handled in order to avoid harm and embarrassment to people. People should feel safe to share their experiences and life stories and free not to share if they feel unable to do so for any reason. Therefore, many researchers suggest using an agreement on confidentiality and producing it in a written form. Of course, it is impossible to suggest full confidentiality as some information will be shared anyway, but two things should be clarified with people in detail: what aspects of their stories may be shared and ensuring that people will have control over the presentation of their story. Usually, people may clarify or even may be asked to share only what they want to share with others, or they may mention it during the conversation. They may agree that their names will be kept anonymous. Information from the processes of group work should be generalised and all names will normally be anonymised except by agreement. Practitioner-researchers should carefully consider that confidentiality may be hard to preserve, for instance, in the community centres, where 'everyone knows everyone'. In this case, some additional measures should be applied.

At the same time, it is recommended that practitioner-researchers should be very clear in their actions, whenever it is possible. If there is a danger that people may be confused whether the practitioners are doing their work or conducting research, some strategy of clear signals should be developed and used for keeping transparency.

It is difficult to generalise the rules for treating people with dignity and respect in every case. The best way, as colleagues from the Netherlands frame it, is to work with those participants who give legitimation to professionals to go beyond the 'work routine' by ensuring trust in them (Schlatmann and Van Waarde 2014, p.122). Therefore, the general rule is to prioritise relationships over any research outcome, seeking reciprocity and treading carefully with caution, avoiding causing harm to people. Integrity of conduct and awareness of one's personal role can be another helpful means for ethically informed practice of practitioner-researchers.

Moschella (2023) points out that research may be a turning point in the relationship. It is an open question though, for better or worse. Moschella adds that every time practitioner-researchers feel moved by the research or the relationship, such experience should be considered not as problematic, but as worth careful attention and reflection (Moschella 2023). Many practitioners recommend such tools as reflective journaling and supervision if matters get complex. At the same time, Schlatmann and van Waarde (Schlatmann and van Waarde 2014, p.123) argue that dealing with the vulnerability that arises with these processes is part of a professional attitude. From their view, it brings relaxation and allows the practice of solidarity.

IV. Data protection

Safeguarding of personal data is a priority issue. Any personal data should be safely stored away and locked, any names on research materials should not be disclosed. Only the practitioner-researchers should have physical access to the stored data.

It is recommended that any personal data, such as materials of interviews, should only be recorded and saved on those devices that have no access to the Internet. Since the research may often involve people who, presumably, know each other, may be neighbours or relatives, all possible precautions should be taken to code and keep the data from any access (CSJCA & NCCPE 2022, p. 015).

Finally, it must be noted that a particular attention should be paid to the use of social media (Banks et al. 2012). Nowadays social media is one of the main threats to preserving confidentiality. The rules for social media should be clarified with the research participants during the very early stages, and they should be strictly followed.

V. Power

Throughout the text of this chapter, we addressed the issues of power. Practitioner-researchers will inevitably face the issues that constitute personal convictions of people about such things as good

or bad, the meaning of life, whether they are in charge of their own life or not. These issues often reveal an understanding of 'how the things are' and 'who has the power'. Denzin and Lincoln argue that the perspective of a feminist ethics of social care and participation may help the practitioner-researchers become more sensitive to hidden oppression and power imbalances, which are a big part of repressive social relations in society (Denzin and Lincoln 2006). Raising awareness about these issues is an essential part of the development of the personal and professional integrity of practitioner-researchers and of communities. Below we itemise some points that should be taken as important for balancing power in the research relationship.

Firstly, as we pointed out at the start of this book, it is important for the research process that power should be shared or given over to marginalised people. As we mentioned elsewhere, a research perspective should not start with the researcher's views and position. Instead, the following questions should be at the heart of the research activities (Stålsett 2019):

- Whose interests are at stake in the research? Whose life situation will be improved?

- Whose voice will be heard?

- Whose story will be told? From whose perspective? Who was excluded?

Secondly, practitioner-researchers should preserve the awareness that research is a part of a liberative process of conscientisation of the lived experiences, it brings into focus shared knowledge of social formation and structural injustices. This knowledge belongs with people who have been silenced by an unjust social order. Therefore, the research should create conditions for them to develop a critical attitude and to gain their voice and agency. To support this process, people should have power over research design, data analysis and final production.

Finally, it could be that the results of the practitioner-research are not only beneficial for the practitioner themselves, but for the organisation, to inform social action or for the wider public. Furthermore, it may be that the research should be published as a pamphlet, an advocacy paper, a book chapter or an article. If the product of the research is meant to have such a wider impact, it is important that the outcomes are not 'extracted' from the co-researchers or the context. The practitioner-researchers should ensure that the results bring the benefits to those, who contributed with their wisdom, expertise, efforts and enthusiasm. The benefits may include enriched relationships, expression of a call for social justice, or for the development of new ideas for collective action or innovative practice. In this way the research may become a part of transformative social change.

The ethical clarity which underpins the work of practitioner-researchers should be seen as imperative on all stages of research. These should not be seen simply as prescriptive measures for conduct. Researching practice starts the process of relational transformation, so ethical reasoning here can be seen as invitation to reflect on relational issues in a long-term perspective. Eventually, secured trust, transparency and accountability help to plant practice research on solid ground of reciprocal co-work with people.

6.   SUPPORTING PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHERS

The purpose of this chapter is to look closely into what elements would be supportive to practitioner-researchers endeavours to view their context and practice as a space for the research. Three main elements, namely: organisational legitimation, training and mentoring, continuous support and mutual learning with colleagues are put into focus in terms of how they may strengthen the profile of practitioner-research and connect single voices of practitioner-researchers in beneficial peer learning for development of their practices.

I. Organisational legitimation (learning organisation culture)

Diaconal work may be carried out in various settings and in various types of organisation, which may range in their size, structure and the ways they organise their working processes, etc. One thing that we have argued for in this publication is that the practice of these organisations should not be overtaken by an imposed culture of service-provision, which may be drastically different from the nurturing, caring and transformative nature of diaconal presence with people. Diaconal organisations should be open to hear and answer the call, coming from the 'other' in a particular context. Therefore, practitioner-researchers who explore their own practice together with people in their context should be given space and recognition. Their work will then be a helpful resource for sustaining values of Diaconia and Christian social action firmly rooted in everyday practice of organisation.

Schön (1973) argued that organisations should aim to create a 'learning organisation culture' as their response to rapid changes of the context. His reasoning was that the organisations cannot survive in a 'stable' position anymore. They must evolve in developing their response to growing pressure. They should create the organisational capacity for continuous contextual learning and process this learning for their advantage and, hopefully, to the advantage of society. The emphasis should be not initially be put on the organisational structures, but on how the workers construct their cognitive image of the organisation, what they choose to bring to it from their perspectives and how they see themselves in the organisational framework. In the continuously changing context nowadays, the need for organisations to work with people and benefit from their expertise is amplified. Even if the learning is called for by tightening financial measures, creating space for learning and exploring the new learning can be a key-element for organisational endurance and resilience. But organisational legitimation means more than having declared aims. It needs the development of the processes of communication, feedback and other ways to ensure the participation of people.

Diaconal organisations may give people a learning space to build their interaction by encouraging their voluntary contributions and initiatives. That does not necessarily need any organised structure or particular guidance, although, surely, there should be some policies and organisational norms, that would create a safe space for mutual learning and informed action. These interactions may grow organically into a complex system, which may expand. For instance, they may become a platform for other initiatives or grow through the engagement and training of new participants. It is essential to facilitate mutual learning and support development of research in and on practice. In such an organisational environment practitioner-researchers can play a vital role by fostering horizontal communication, navigating different interests and steering processes (see Addy 2022).

We suggest that supporting practitioner-research is an essential part of developing a 'learning organisational culture'. Providing legitimation for learning through practice research, diaconal organisations may fulfil their role of empowering persons and communities, while at the same time fostering processes of 'double-learning' for transforming their own practice. Consequently, these processes may open the way to sustainable social change from 'below'.

II. Learning for Practitioner-Researchers

Developing a 'service-habitus'

The main distinction in learning for the 'practitioner-researcher' from the professional approach in traditional 'social' or 'diaconal work' is situated in switching from a 'client-centred' working model to developing a co-researching habitus. Learning for practitioner-researchers should place practitioners on horizontal level of communication with people and initiate the processes of their double-learning. This is often in itself a challenge.

Below we will draw ideas for the special training for this 'service-habitus' from the wealth of learning experiences and reflections that have been undertaken and gained by practitioners from urban mission and community development work in the UK, the Netherlands, Finland, Austria and other countries over the years. This mutual learning has been initially framed within such methods as the 'Pastoral Cycle', the pedagogy of Josef Cardijn or 'Community Action Based Learning for Empowerment (CABLE), and related 'exposure processes'. It has been continuously enriched by practitioners over the years.

Practitioners agree that learning for researching practice is embedded in a particular perspective, through which practitioners choose to strengthen their search for inclusive practices and work towards it together with communities through reshaping or fine-tuning their own practice in a life-long learning orientation (Valve in Porkka et al. 2013, p. 169). Therefore, the leading concepts for these methods are developed in multidisciplinary fields of phenomenology, contextual theology, liberative pedagogy and theology and the methods of participatory research.

Here we suggest a process, based on the pedagogical ideas mentioned above, to develop learning for 'service-habitus' of practitioner-researchers that includes the following integral elements, which are partly or fully implemented in succession through these methods:

-   Working critically with personal biography within an 'ecological approach', so that every practitioner learns to recognise the importance and value of their own story, their successive environments, and how their own roots shape their vision, the interplay of their relations with others and how they serve as a source for their deep personal service-model (Addy, 2012). This work reveals the importance of the stories of other people and provides invaluable insights as to how personal stories and stories of a community are shaped and may be changed through liberative and transformative engagement with other people in solidarity.

-   The 'exposure' approach means opening to urban reality, through which a practitioner is receiving not sending or 'speaking' (Meijers 2023). Being physically present in the neighbourhood as a receiver with no real 'agenda', by inviting practitioners (and participants) to explore the reality with their own senses and with non-judgemental curiosity. This approach opens a way to new findings that practitioner-researchers may use to recognise new connections and relations that may inform new ideas and steps for the further work with people.

    Talking to people, being in the midst of their everyday lives, exploring the micro elements of their genuine interactions precedes any meaningful community development (Dhakal in Porkka 2013, p.156). Connection to people stems from these interactions and informs the vision of practitioners in their work when they are focusing on strengths and assets of communities to address their needs and issues, rather than vice versa.

-   Social analysis. Being in the neighbourhood and observing it also brings a lot of invaluable information that may influence the next steps in practice. However, it is essential first to go through analysis with a reflective eye on the practitioner's own biography. It can be done in creative way, such as drawing. In this way, personal life story links to social analysis and action and the whole process yields new knowledge (Valve in Porkka et al. 2013, p. 185). Then the social analysis can be deepened with guiding questions which help the practitioners to see a 'bigger picture' of how the lives of people are shaped by social relations, political decisions, culture, etc. This analysis then may be consulted with the residents of the neighbourhood or the service users. This step is called 'mirroring' and it allows the practitioners to hear and learn if their analysis is perceived as accurate or how it may be deepened with other people. At the same time, this dialogue invites people to become researchers of their own reality too! Therefore, it has a much stronger chance of leading to action strategies which produce durable change (Addy in Porkka 2013, p. 77-78).

- 'Being in the shoes of the 'other' can embrace a range of methods, such as 'theatre of oppressed', role plays, adjusted ethnographic 'walks along'. There are people who are marginalised share their lived contexts and experiences which provide the practitioner with first-hand understanding of what it means to face hostile realities on everyday basis. This learning often comes across as essential because many practitioners and volunteers often belong to the so-called 'middle' class, and so their experiences of life are in stark contrast with those, whom they mean to help.

- Exploring learning as the experience of constructive knowledge development through such inclusive participatory methods as dialogues, group discussions, peer learning, learning by difference and other collective activities can be a good practice for a group of practitioners to follow how common knowledge may be developed, how to deal with different viewpoints, how to build group consensus etc.

- Second reflection on practice. When practitioners organise their learning from perspective of their own biography, exposure, and group sharing, they must revisit their practice with a question: how does this new knowledge inform my practice? This question may have many answers, some of them may even be shaped as a future people-led project, while some will be discovered later in practice through encountering 'critical cases'. Nevertheless, in terms of pedagogy, this means that the experiential and conceptual new knowledge that the practitioners gain through these methods gets integrated in their practice. Consequently, they are critically challenged to analyse the essence of their activities and keep a continuous research perspective on their own practice.

The CABLE approach, among the other methods, provides a sufficient training model, which has been tested in many international groups with a good success. It can be flexibly adjusted to the training goals and used on continuous basis for supporting continuous contextual learning of the practitioners.

Developing skills and knowledge for practice research

In the previous chapters we referred to the skills and knowledge that are needed by the practitioners in order to open their practice as a space for research. All of them involve work with the story of the practitioner-researcher and stories of other people. These methods belong to the qualitative research paradigm, which requires careful exploration, critical reflexivity and a humble attitude from the practitioner. They are rooted in phenomenology and constructivism, which strengthen the importance of understanding of mundane things. Learning and researching with qualitative methods sets preconditions for understanding the nature of social change and may act as a base to co-create informed action. Learning to work with these methods involves encountering many situations, where a practitioner may need support and guidance. Below we will refer to those means of support which the practitioners may turn to for developing their expertise.

The author is not aware of any formal institutional learning programme for diaconal practitioner-researchers, although constructive elements of this approach may be found in learning programmes for 'community development and diaconia' and pastoral practice across various countries. In our publication we have built a foundation that clearly indicates the need of developing specialised learning for practitioner-researchers. There is also a need for the development of working methods that would shape diaconal practice with marginalised people as empowering for them and the practitioners.

III. Support and Development for Practitioner-Research

There are various other ways that practitioners may explore as supportive means to develop their practice with research. They may be explored personally or together with colleagues. They may respond to various needs of practitioners, such as combating isolation, seeking meaningful discussions to explore their own practice, discussion of ethical dilemmas, inviting peer feedback, evaluating their performance, gaining new skills and knowledge, seeking to expand professional networking, etc. These may be individual or group explorations. Below we give short introduction to some suggested approaches.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice invite participants to a peer learning process, which could be personal or online meetings or forums. Groups may be built around some specific area, with formal or informal talks that shape professional sharing and collaboration.

Membership in Communities of Practice is usually open, and people join according to their motivation and wish to contribute to the development of knowledge or to learn from each other. This knowledge may not yet be framed by any means of academic conceptualisation. Therefore, group discussions may be very open, invite personal reflections, feedback on working situations or critical views. Communities of practice help to foster a sense of belonging and create a platform for professional cooperation. Such professional networks within a region or country, work to improve collective expertise over time.

Thematic Support Groups

These groups are built around specific themes and embed in their work support to group members. The themes may be very wide and focus on exploration of contexts and conditions that shape practices of persons and organisations. Thematic Support Groups aim to:

- o   share experience and knowledge,

- o   gain support and new knowledge,

- o   improve practice or develop new approaches to practice, and

- o   reflect on practice theologically and identifying spiritual resources.

The group members are invited to bring their experiences, reflect on them through the lens of their biography and socialisation, learn by difference and explore chosen issues in-depth with the aim of shaping holistic learning for the group members. These groups have limited membership and are closed in order to foster a supportive and compassionate work together.

Intervision Groups

In contrast to Communities of Practice these groups usually have fewer participants, and they usually choose to form a closed group. Group participants work together over a certain time period and bring to the group discussion those challenges and issues that the group members face in their individual work. The focus of the regular group meetings may be on problem-solving aspects, reflections on particular 'cases' and professional development of the group members. These groups are usually more structured in their work. Their agenda includes listening to a 'case', a facilitated in-depth discussion around it and feedback. Such groups may grow from joint learning, be formed on a geographical basis, or come together for a limited time as members of one organisation, etc.

Mentoring and Coaching

Mentoring and coaching belong to methods of personal work with a skilled professional, they may focus on the particular issues faced by the practitioner researchers.

Mentoring is usually oriented on the long-term accompaniment of the practitioner. This is broadly oriented work which helps the practitioner to evolve organically in all areas of work. A mentor often belongs to the same professional field but possesses more experience and expertise. They may be a trusted adviser, who poses critical questions, provides guidance, and offers support, which is rooted in their skills and wisdom. The practitioner may seek mentoring for holistic personal and professional development, to overcome complex challenges, and plan the future career growth.

Coaching is usually a short-term focused work that aims to facilitate the practitioner to achieve the concrete goals of professional or personal improvement. A coach may not belong to the same field of expertise, but they use special techniques, that motivate and support the practitioners through personal self-reflection to define barriers, recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, plan actions and track progress, etc.

Learning Hub

A Learning Hub is a resource platform that may be a physical and/or online space. It may provide resources, resources for formal and informal education and learning programmes. Such hubs may be a city wide or regional learning resource centres which invite practitioners to meet for building up their expertise and develop relations. The hub can become a link to a local university for enhancing mutual learning and cooperation between academics, students and practitioners. Learning hubs can be flexible and offer many resources and ideas for engagement as well as inviting the participants to take their own initiative. The hub can grow to an important centre of social action.

Of course, it can be argued that practitioners are fully occupied and hardly have any time for developing their own practice. Therefore, above we suggested that the support for the practitioner-researchers should be legitimated by the organisation and embedded into organisational working processes and organisational culture. Relevant learning may be sought by the practitioners themselves through various means or forms, inside or outside of the organisation. In the future, strengthening professional collaboration and networking can contribute to the formal recognition of the practitioner-researcher profile and lay a foundation for strategic developments and collaboration with partners locally, regionally, and on wider levels as well as for civic action.

7. UTILISING AND DISSEMINATING THE RESULTS OF PRACTITIONER-RESEARCH.

In the final chapter, we want to bring into focus the fields of where research may be utilised and disseminated. The summaries below draw from the ideas which are discussed extensively on the pages of this publication. We would like to suggest that practitioner-research can be utilised for the benefits of practitioner's direct practice, for the development of their organisation or to support civil action. Furthermore, we believe that it is necessary to bring together the lived experiences of the practitioners across various contexts for development of the 'field' through sharing insights and wisdom of being engaged with people 'on the ground'. As well as pursuing the learning about best practice and discussing new dynamic contextual changes, such mutual active engagement is essential for deepening theological reflection about 'faith in action' as reciprocal care about the 'other'.

I. Practice development

The need for the practice development usually comes to the fore when practitioners feel that some things are not working well or as well as they should. Practice development should be a continuous feature of diaconal work. However, instead of either relying on external expert consultation or adopting 'ready-made' solutions, there is another way: to research the questions behind the question and seek the solution together with people on the spot (IJzerman 2013, p. 85).

Researching practice with critical questions opens a new door to practice development. In this approach answers would come from 'below', from engagement with the lifeworld's of people and finding out if the diaconal practice corresponds with their everyday questions and experiences. Connecting single experiences and stories together, identifying challenges as well as people's strengths transforms the practice into a space of reciprocity and mutual learning.

People who were used to being seen as passive service users, will be recognised as experts. Mutual learning can strengthen their sense of self-worth and lead to empowerment. The practice may be further developed to support people-led processes such as mutual aid and community development initiatives.

We argued above that the volunteers and service users should not be framed by conventionally limited roles. They may become co-investigators together with the practitioners, co-developers of the working processes and leaders of their own initiatives.

The challenges of practice development may be met by the practitioner-researchers with curiosity and motivation. Practice development brings a hope of sustainable and transforming change to the lives of people by supporting their collective agency and giving them a power to act.

II. Project or organisational development

Researching practice should be applied to the evaluation of project-framed processes. Such approaches as 'evaluative research' can be embedded into the project delivery from the start and used for continuous clarification and reflection on the collective expectations, dynamics of the joint working processes and the actual experience of the project participants.

In the process of delivery, projects usually gain a life of their own, by bringing together various interpretations and understanding from project participants, providing a space for relations to grow and sometimes provoking unexpected conflicts and alliances. At the same time, changes between plans and real action happen because participants discover new things. These can be around the issue they are working on, the context they are working in and the people they are working with. Furthermore, people bring their own values and attitudes to their actions, and in any case 'reality' is always changing (ActionAid 2006). For the final evaluation, changes, which are due to the new knowledge that is obtained during practice, need to be explicitly formulated as research findings, shared and taken into the learning for new projects and processes.

Project evaluation should bring together lived experiences and stories of all participants including service users and volunteers, and local community members, if they were engaged, to share their experiences,

write a common story and celebrate their achievements. This evaluation should reflect on what worked and what needs attention and review the project outcomes in the light of the values of diaconal work and the desired social change.

Appreciative work with people is a way to breathe life into organisational goals and processes. The quality of an organisation's services depends on people as much as depends on material resources. Projects may be converted into process-based ongoing learning of those who identify themselves with the organisation, including volunteers and service users. The expertise and imagination of the participants may be involved in building up the voluntary culture and of initiatives for civic action. This will inform the vision and ideas for the next steps of organisational development so that new adaptations will not undermine an organisations self-understanding and the commitment to diaconal values (Addy 2012).

III. Development of the field

Around the globe, diaconal practitioners have been actively changing their approaches and working methods to accommodate and respond to the new challenges that vary on a scale from local to global, such as climate change, war or refugee crises. Practitioners are among those who gain first-hand knowledge together with the local people of how these challenges affect them and with what consequences for persons and communities. They learn by doing and gain invaluable knowledge from their work. Therefore, supporting them to be practitioner-researchers and then to share their research findings can contribute immensely to the development of Christian social action in the relevant fields of practice.

Moreover, over the years there have been ongoing arguments that the experience of diaconal practitioners should be taken further and that they should be engaged in the development of relevant learning programmes. A learning programme which is rooted in the experience of practitioner-researchers, would strengthen educational support for others to research their practice. The voices of practitioners, together with the voices of those who are often invisible and forgotten, should be taken into the life of churches and diaconal organisations. This would support reflection on their presence with people in their contexts as they grapple with present-day challenges.

IV. Networking

Contextual challenges are rarely isolated from the related local issues: therefore, they should be approached holistically, with local action linked to wider groups. Developing networking with various partners on local and wider levels, such as members of local communities, other organisations, professionals and representatives of public bodies, is an essential aspect of practitioners' engagement with the working context. The networking can benefit from sharing findings from the practitioner research. Within the networks the practitioner research findings may be utilised to inform others about best practice and build awareness of the common issues. Networks can share or build common resources, develop the ideas about improving the quality of the practice and find ways to synergise the mutual efforts.

The findings from practitioner-researcher may also be used for supporting advocacy or campaigning for social change with people on local, regional or wider levels.

V. Publication

With the agreement of the research participants and in accordance with ethical requirements, the research findings and reflections may be made accessible to a wider public in the form of a publication. According to the ethical guidance, the ideas for the text and final text itself should be co-shared with the participants and made public after their comments and with their approval.

Publications can be a means of sharing the research findings in a condensed way with those people and communities, who may be interested in them, as a part of the collective learning about their locality, practice or a particular issue. The research findings may be expressed with drawings, pictures or diagrams that would communicate the findings in an explicit way. They may be printed as leaflets that can be easily shared.

Academic texts that integrate research findings into the framework of theoretical discourse may be developed for the specialised journals. Overall, the publications from the 'field' contribute to dialogical learning by bringing together international examples. These may draw from the experiences of new voices as well as the established writers. Such practice-based publications will enliven the discourses around particular themes and resources and promote critical thinking in the light of the new challenges. Published practitioner research is also an invaluable learning resource for a wider public, including students, educators, church workers, everyone who is provoked by the need to form their understanding and to enable their own practice.

Bibliography

Addy, Tony (ed.), 2014. *Seeking Conviviality. Re-forming Community Diakonia in Europe.*

Addy, Tony, and Robbrecht-Roller, Stefan. 2023. *Working with people for change. Christian engagement for a just society. Report on international seminar.* Linz, Josef Cardijn Association for the Development of Workers' Education.

Addy, Tony. 2012. *New directions in voluntary action and community engagement.* Cesky Těšín, interdiac.

Addy, Tony. 2013. Reflections on the CABLE approach to community-based work, social service and Diaconia. In *Community of the Future - Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Work and Diaconia.* Eds. Porkka, Jouko et al. Helsinki: Diaconia University of Applied Sciences.

Addy, Tony. 2022. 'Seeking Conviviality' as a Core Concept for Community Development. In *Developing Just and Inclusive Communities.* Eds. Morten Haugen Hans et al. Regnum Books.

Banks, Sarah. 2021. *Ethics and values in social work.* (5th edition) Macmillan International, Red Globe press.

Beresford, Peter. 2021. *Participatory Ideology: From Exclusion to Involvement.* Policy Press.

Blokland, Talja. 2017. *Community as urban practice.* Polity Press.

Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1979. *The ecology of human development.* MA: Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Centre for Social Justice and Community Action & National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. 2022. *Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice.* (2nd edition) CSJCA & NCCPE, Durham and Bristol.

Christians, Clifford. 2005. Ethics and Politics in Qualitative research. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research: Third Edition.* Eds. Denzin, Norman and Lincoln Yvonne. Sage. pp. 139-164.

Cooper, Niall, et al. 2023. *Dignity, Agency, Power. Stories, prayers and reflections from 40 years of Church Action on Poverty.* Wild Goose Publications.

Cooperrider, David, and Whitney, Diana. 2005, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

de Roest, Henk. 2020. *Collaborative Practical Theology. Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices.* Brill Leiden and Boston.

Denzin, Norman, and Lincoln, Yvonne. 2002. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research.* (2nd edition) SAGE Publications.

Denzin, Norman, and Lincoln, Yvonne. 2017. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research.* (5th edition) SAGE Publications.

Dhakal, Prakash. 2013. Community development learning: the DSS experience as orientation to social service. In *Community of the Future - Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Work and Diaconia.* Eds. Porkka, Jouko et al. Helsinki: Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. pp. 151-158.

Eglite, Rita. The story of my learning in the programme. 2023. In *Stories from the learning journey: Make Change yourselves.* Cesky Těšín. interdiac.

Ethics, equity and community development. 2019. Eds. Banks, Sarah et al. Policy Press.

Eversley, John, et al. 2023. Introduction. In Peacebuilding, Conflict and Community Development. Ed. Eversley et al. Bristol University Press.

Freire, Paulo. 2013. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Bloomsbury Academic.

Fricker, Miranda. 2007. E*pistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing.* Oxford University Press.

Geneva, Lutheran World Federation.

Gergen, Kennet, J., and Gergen, Mary, M. 2013. Social construction and research as action. In *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice.* Eds. Reason, Peter, and Bradbury, Hilary. SAGE. pp. 159-172.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Beacon Press, Boston, Mass.

Hackett, Tom and Turner, Victoria. 2024. Witnessing as mission. Powerless as prophetic. In *Living mission in 21th century Britain, Ecumenical and postcolonial perspective.* Eds. Aldous, Benjamin et al. SCM press.

Hargreaves, Samantha. 2006. *Resource pack on systematization of experiences.* ActionAid. The Netherlands.

Heron, John. 1996. *Co-operative inquiry. Research into the human condition.* SAGE, London.

IJzerman, Herman. 2013. We are everywhere. In *Community of the Future - Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Work and Diaconia.* Eds. Porkka, Jouko et al. Helsinki: Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. pp. 83-89.

Interdiac programme participant. 2019. In *New directions for diaconia. Developing innovative practice for diverse communities.* Cesky Těšín, interdiac.

Kemmis, Stephen, McTaggart, Robin, and Nixon, Rhonda. 2014. *The Action Research Planner. Doing Critical Participatory action research.* Springer.

Klein, Naomi. 2023. *Doppelganger.* Penguin Random House UK.

Kusenbach, Margarethe. 2021. The go-along method. In *Sensing the City A Companion to Urban Anthropology.* Ed. Anja Schwanhäußer. Birkhäuser, pp. 154-158.

Ledwith, Margaret, and Springett, Jane. 2022. *Participatory Practice. Community-based Action for Transformative Change.* (2nd edition) Bristol University Press.

Ledwith, Margaret. 2016. *Community Development in Action: Putting Freire into Practice.* Policy Press.

Leigh, Patel. 2016. *Decolonising education. From ownership to answerability.* Taylor & Francis.

Manzo, Lynne, and Brightbill, Nathan. 2007. Toward a participatory Ethics. In *Participatory action research. Approaches and Methods. Connecting people, participation and place.* Ed. Kindon, Sara, et al. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

May, Tim, and Perry, Beth. 2011. *Social research and Reflexivity. Content consequence and context.* SAGE, London.

Meijers, Erika, Walking in the City: Christian Spirituality in Amsterdam through the Eyes of Michel de Certeau. *Religions* 14: 968. https:// doi.org/10.3390/rel14080968

Moschella, Mary Clark, and Willhauck, Susan. 2018. *Qualitative Research in Theological Education: Pedagogy in Practice.* SCM Press.

Savage, Sarah, and Boyd-Macmillan, Eolene. 2007. *The Human Face of Church: A Social Psychology and Pastoral Theology Resource for Pioneer and Traditional Ministry.* Norwich, Canterbury Press.

Schinkel, Willem. 2017. *Imagined societies. A critique of immigrant integration in Western Europe.* Cambridge University Press.

Schlatmann Titus, and van Waarde, Rob. 2014. *That's the name of the game. On empowerment and community – An account of practical research.* Van der Ros Communicatie, Tubbergen, the Netherlands.

Schön, Donald. 1973. *Beyond the Stable State. Public and private learning in a changing society.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Schön, Donald. 1991. *The Reflective Turn: Case Studies in and On Educational Practice,* New York: Teachers Press, Columbia University.

Silverman, David. 2016. *Qualitative Research.* SAGE publications.

Smith, M. K. (2003, 2009). 'Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger and communities of practice', *The encyclopaedia of pedagogy and informal education.* [https://infed.org/mobi/jean-lave-etienne-wenger-and-communities-of-practice/. Retrieved: 30 November 2024].

Smith, Mark K. 1995. Developing critical communities of practice, *Groupwork* pp. 134-151, Available in the informal education archives: https://infed.org/mobi/developing-critical-conversations-about-practice/ [Retrieved: 12 November 2024]

Stålsett, Sturla J., Arnhild Taksdal, Per Kristian Hilden. Research as Diaconia: Commitment, Action and Participation. *Diaconia* 9: pp. 165–180.

Swinton, John and Mowat, Harriet. 2006. *Practical Theology and Qualitative research.* SCM press.

Tyler, Imogen. 2020. *Stigma. The machinery of inequality.* Zed Books Ltd.

Valve, Katri. 2013. A perspective on Exposure approach to Pedagogy in community work. In *Community of the Future - Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Work and Diaconia.* Eds. Porkka, Jouko et al. Helsinki: Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. pp. 168-191.

Whyte, William. Foote. 1991. *Participatory Action Research.* SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

Wigg-Stevenson, Natalie. 2018. Just don't call it 'ethnography'. A critical Ethnographic pedagogy for transformative theological education. In *Qualitative research in theological education.* Eds. Moschella, Mary Clark et al. SCM press, UK. pp. 273-285.

Wood, Jason et al. 2015. *Youth work. Preparation for practice.* Routledge. New York.

Wyschogrod, Edith. 1974. *Emmanuel Levinas: The problem of ethical metaphysics.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER
An Integrated Approach to Diaconal Practice

The idea of 'practitioner-researcher' opens new ways to knowledge in diaconia research by aiming at an integrated approach to diaconal practice.

Practitioners in diaconia and social work are deeply involved in situations that are to be changed. They bring professional experience in handling challenging life situations, empowering people, and establishing networks. Their expertise goes beyond mere knowledge of methods since they are in relationships with people. They get to know their fears and anxieties as well as their resources and strengths. They have insights into the complexity of injustice and hardships and often have the aim to change things.

PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER sets out to highlight the need to focus on practitioners' competence in research. It is a result of the reflective journey of practitioners who have engaged in education, research, and development processes in the intercultural and ecumenical context of interdiac and related organisations.

PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER is produced by interdiac, in co-operation with ReDi, The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice. The publication links practice and research, practice which is open to the agenda of the people they serve through "experiential exposure to the reality of 'the other' and their reality", and it develops the idea of practitioner-researcher.

interdiac and ReDi hope that this publication will give a well needed impulse for diaconal practice and research and will spur discussions about the understanding of professional diaconal and social work and about the role of researchers.

inter*diac*

ReDi
The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice