CHAPTER 4

THEORY AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the theory and research methodology utilised in the study. Social work practice theory, identified as the body of theory informing the research and the concepts that sensitised the research methodology, will be discussed, together-with the link between social work practice theory and the research methodology. This is explained through a discussion of the reflection in action process from social work practice. Also discussed is the research methodology: its philosophical underpinnings; the rationale for its choice; the research design, which includes the ethical considerations; the profiles of the participants; and a description of the data collection process. Finally, the process by which the data was organised and analysed is discussed towards the end of the chapter.

Social Work Practice Theory

This section outlines how social work practice theory provides the basis for what Patton (1990: 391) calls “sensitising concepts”. According to Patton (1990:391), these concepts provide the researcher with a “general sense of reference and provide directions along which to look”. Sensitising concepts generally come from the literature, the researcher’s theoretical perspective, experience and involvement in the area under study. In this study the sensitising concepts have been applied inductively. In other words, they are applied in the interpretation of the participants’ perspectives and like lenses they bring the subject under study into a sharper or clearer focus. The concepts that will be discussed are the social construction of social work theory, the extensiveness of social work practice theory, and the person(s) and their environment(s) paradigm.

Social Construction of Social Work Practice Theory

It is argued that social work practice theory is socially constructed and that theories of social work practice are products of the social and cultural contexts in which they are developed (Payne, 1997; Rein et al., 1981). It is further argued that theories of social work practice also affect the context from which they have arisen (Payne, 1997; Rein et al., 1981).

The argument that social work practice theory is socially constructed is drawn from the ideas of Berger et al. (1971), who asserted that reality is knowledge which guides our behaviour, and that we all have different perceptions of reality. They further asserted that we arrive at shared perceptions of reality through the sharing and organisation of knowledge. These shared understandings of reality, when held by a social group, form the basis of human objectivity. Essentially, the social construction process is an interactive one in which individuals contribute through institutionalisation and legitimisation to the creation of social meaning within the social structure of societies, and societies (through the participation of individuals in their structures) create conventions by which people behave (Payne, 1997).

The social construction of social work practice theory is based upon the three elements that construct social work; namely, the social worker, client, and context. In essence, social work is constructed by the forces that control and create social work as a profession, the forces that create clients and the social context in which social work is practised (Payne, 1997). In all cases, social work includes distinct patterns of behaviour, a certain range of expectations and specific cultural norms derived from the social context. Social work practice theory develops from within social work from interaction with social work practice. Rein et al.(1981:37) strongly support this view when they state that:

> The knowledge that social work seeks cannot be made in universities by individuals who presumptively seek timeless, contextless truths about human nature, societies, institutions, and policy. The knowledge *must* be developed in living situations that are confronted by the contemporary episodes in the field…it is necessary to enlarge the notion of context to include not only the client's situation but the agency itself and more broadly the institutional setting of practice. This involves the intersecting network of offices, agencies, professionals, government structures and political pressure groups that all act together on the agency.

Rein et al. (1981) also support the argument that social work practice theories are open systems that develop, change, grow and adapt from interaction with both the practice setting and the social context in which practice takes place (Turner, 1996). Moreover,

social work practice theory like social work is considered to be reflexive because it develops in response to demands made by clients upon social workers and the social work profession. It is constantly changing in response to practice constructions by its participants and responds to the current social situation, its interests and concerns as well as the histories of theoretical traditions, profession and service context. By its very nature social work practice theory is not universal, rather it is an agreed perspective that is accepted within a social group as a reasonable representation of the terrain that it covers (Payne, 1997; Turner, 1996).

In terms of being a sensitising concept in this study of professional social service supervision the social construction of social work practice theory provides a frame for considering how professional supervision practice is socially constructed. The importance of this is that professional supervision practice is argued to be a field of practice within social work and is therefore constructed within this framework (Brashears, 1995; Munson, 1993; Kadushin, 1992a).

The Extensiveness of Social Work Practice Theory

Social work practice theory is an extensive subject. It consists of two major elements - namely, formal theory and practice theory – with the latter sometimes referred to as practice wisdom (Rein et al., 1981; Munson, 1993). Formal theory is organised and explanatory and is generally found in texts (Munson, 1993). Practice theory, on the other hand, is individualised and begins with descriptions of practice experiences and what is done in the practice setting. From this position connections are then made to formal theoretical concepts (Munson, 1993). The relationship between formal theory and practice theory in this social work setting is best understood through reference to concepts of “espoused theory” and “theory in use” (Argyris et al., 1974). Formal social work practice theories equate with “espoused theory” whilst practice theories or practice wisdom equate with the concept of “theory in use”.

The social work theory literature outlines the formal espoused theory of the profession. This literature reveals an extensive formal theory base with Turner (1996) identifying 27 major systems of social work practice theory whilst Munson (1993:21) argues that there are “now over 130 different theories of practice” competing for use.

Formal social work practice theories have been classified into three primary human activity focus areas, namely: those that focus on the person and their attributes;

the person's use of attributes; and person and society (Turner, 1996). The focus area of the person and their attributes includes theories that view the person as a biological being (e.g., Neurolinguistic Programming theory), as a psychological being (e.g., Functional Psychoanalytic theory), as a learner (e.g., Behavioural theory), and as a thinker (e.g. Cognitive theory). The area of the person's use of their attributes views the person as a contemplator (e.g., Meditation theory), as an experiential being (e.g. Gestalt theory), as a communicator (e.g., Communication theory) and as a doer (e.g., Task Centred theory). Finally, the person and society focus area conceives of the person as an individual (e.g., Ego Psychology), as a communal being (e.g., Transactional Analysis), as a societal being (e.g., Role) and in relation to the universe (e.g., Systems) (Turner, 1996). The range of areas outlined reveals that social work practice theory is inclusive of aspects of biological, psychological and sociological reality, and it explains why in some social work circles reference is made to the bio-psycho-social approach (Austrian, 1995; Turner, 1996).

As a sensitising concept, the extensiveness of formal social work practice theory contributes to the study in three main ways. Firstly, it provides concepts for questioning the complex range of issues and interactions that occur within the entire spectrum of the person's bio-psycho-social reality. When social work practice theory is applied in this study it is on the basis that supervision is a specific field of practice that is informed by social work practice theory (Turner, 1996; Brashears, 1995). Secondly, it accentuates the holistic and interconnected nature of social work practice through the inclusion and linkages of so many different theoretical systems (Turner, 1996; Payne, 1997). Thirdly, it contributes to the espoused theory for this study, which is the researcher's attempt to describe or explain what is done in the practice situation. This "espoused theory" is always related to the "theory in use", that is the theory that the researcher uses whilst actually working in the situation (Munson, 1993; Fook, 1996). For the relationship between the "espoused theory" and the "theory in use" to be effective it is important that they have a good degree of congruence (Munson, 1993; Fook, 1996).

Person(s) and their Environment(s) Paradigm

It is argued that there is a dominant paradigm that links both formal theory and practice theory. It is further argued that this paradigm is shaped by the dual focus of

social work upon persons and their situation or environment (Turner, 1996; Payne, 1997). The persons and their environment paradigm provides a frame of reference for incorporating the multiple interactions that occur within peoples' bio-psycho-social realities (Turner, 1996). In short, the person and their social context are always considered together. This paradigm was recently reinforced by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in their draft definition of social work (NZASW, 1998d: 10), which stated that:

> Social work is a profession which operates at the interface of people and their environments and addresses itself to the multiple transactions that occur at that interface…social work intervention incorporates and balances the dual focus on persons and their situations.

As a sensitising concept, the persons in their environment paradigm contributes to the study by providing a contextual frame of reference that helps organise the discourse between the actual reality of the social work practice situation with the extensive conceptual material of social work practice theory. In short, the paradigm facilitates the discourse between the "espoused theory" and the "theory in use". In this study the person and their environment paradigm provides a frame of reference that organises the discourse between the participants' perspectives and the conceptual theory drawn from the social work supervision literature.

Social Work Practice Theory and the Research Methodology

The relationship between social work practice theory and the research methodology employed in this study, is based on the reflective or reflection in action approach of social work practice and the inductive research paradigm (Payne, 1997; Fook, 1996; Babbie, 1995; Schon, 1991; Patton, 1990).

The reflection in action approach argues that theory is normally implicit in peoples' actions and that the "theory in use" has a relationship with the theory that is reported (Argyris et al., 1974; Fook, 1996). The effectiveness of this relationship is established through a process of articulating the implicit "theory in use". The reflective approach develops theory inductively upon the basis of specific experiences; in other words, the practitioners' reflection upon the experience leads to explicit connections with theoretical concepts (Fook, 1996; Munson, 1993). This reflection process starts

with the particular experience then seeks to understand or make sense of this through reference to theoretical concepts (Fook, 1996; Babbie, 1995). Schon (1991: 295) encapsulates the essence of reflective practice when he states that it "takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation." Likewise, it is argued that social work practice, particularly professional social work supervision practice, is a reflective conversation between the parties (Schon, 1991).

The most obvious link between this reflective process and the research methodology was in the research interviews themselves, which could be described as reflective conversations. Ellen, a probation officer, provided an example of the reflective nature of the interviews when at the end of her interview she stated:

> You've set off my pattern of thinking…it's really working through it. You see I've not focused on this at all. I knew I didn't want to be a professional supervisor from the ranks, but this process has made me realise why and I just don't see how it can work and I'm not going to buy into that whole thing for the organisation.

Ellen's comments also appear to relate to Pilalis (1986) who asserted that the reflection in action approach is based upon two continua: the first involves the movement from reflex action to purposeful action, whilst the second involves the movement from non-reflective thought to reflective thought. The above comments by Ellen appear to capture that movement which took place on both continua towards reflective thought and purposeful action.

The linkage between the reflection in action approach found in social work practice theory and the inductive research paradigm of qualitative research used in the research methodology of this study is that in both approaches the understanding and the outcomes emerge from the experience within the setting (Patton, 1990).

Research Methodology

In this section the philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative research approach will be discussed together with the reasons for choosing this approach.

Philosophical Underpinnings

The philosophical underpinnings of the research methodology are found within the qualitative inquiry paradigm. This paradigm according to Patton (1990:37) is based

upon phenomenological inquiry, which uses both "qualitative and naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings."

Phenomenological inquiry focuses on the structure and essence of people's experience of a particular phenomenon. The phenomenological perspective also argues that there is no objective reality; rather, there is only what people know their experience is and means and this subjective experience incorporates both objectivity and peoples' reality (Patton, 1990). In relation to research approaches, Patton (1990:70) emphasises that a phenomenological perspective can mean both or either of the following:

> 1) a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon) or (2) a methodological mandate to actually experience the phenomenon being investigated (in which case participant observation would be necessary).

The type of phenomenological approach employed in this study corresponds to that of focussing on what subjects' experience and how they interpret their world, without actually participating in the phenomena oneself. The approach used focused on the subject matter of service managers', and probation officers' perspectives of professional supervision within the specific context of the Community Probation Service.

The phenomenological approach seeks data that is qualitative. This kind of data is detailed and contains direct quotations that capture peoples' perspectives and their experiences. Patton (1990:24) argues that the research task for the qualitative researcher "is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world". The particular challenge that arises from the nature of the data is for the researcher to read the findings out of the data rather than read their preconceptions into the data.

The naturalistic element of qualitative research involves the researcher not attempting to manipulate the natural setting and being open to what ever emerges from the research (Patton, 1990). The inductive element of this kind of inquiry is based in the researcher's attempts to make sense of the situation without the imposition of

predetermined criteria or expectations on the subject under study. In the inductive approach the understanding of the subject under study emerges from the experience of the setting, and theories about what is occurring are grounded in the reality of the situation (Babbie, 1995; Patton, 1990; Glaser et al., 1967). The final element listed in Patton's (1990) description of the qualitative inquiry paradigm is that of a holistic perspective. This perspective understands that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and also demands that consideration is given to the social context of the subject under study.

Hermeneutics underpins the research methodology through informing the interpretist framework used in the study. The hermeneutic approach recognises that researchers construct the reality based on their interpretations of the data with the assistance of the participants who provided the data (Patton, 1990). This approach argues that to place any study in its proper context one must know about the researcher as well as those researched, and that the meaning of the research can only be interpreted from the particular position of its context (Patton, 1990).

Rationale for Choice of Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study on the basis that it was the best approach to identify and examine the perspectives of probation officers and service managers on professional supervision.

Furthermore, the methodology employed parallels that employed by social work supervision practitioners in their supervision practice. It is argued social work supervisors' focus upon the phenomena of the supervisees work whilst not actually participating in the work themselves and they are also interested in supervisees' perspectives and experiences (Kadushin, 1992a). Supervisors are also challenged not to read their preconceptions into the material that emerges and through the reflection in action process they use induction to reason from the particular to the general, abstract and theoretical (Fook, 1996; Shulman, 1993; Munson, 1993; Kadushin, 1992a; Schon, 1991). It is further argued that social work supervisors also interpret the material placed before them by supervisees from within their particular social context and in a very real sense are constructing the reality upon the basis of their interpretations (Payne, 1997; Brown et al., 1996; Shulman, 1993; Munson, 1993). A further reason for choosing this research methodology is that it aligns or interlocks

with the “espoused theory” of this research. This alignment is based upon a reliance on inductive reasoning (Fook, 1996). Finally, a qualitative research methodology was chosen because the previous reported studies found on social work supervision were quantitative studies and predominately survey research (Tsui, 1997a). It has previously been argued in Chapter 2, that “the development of empirical research on social work supervision is still in the embryonic stage”, due to the lack of qualitative research in this field (Tsui, 1997a: 48). With this in mind the researcher has responded to Tsui (1997a) suggestion that qualitative methods should be included in future studies of social work supervision.

Research Design

The research data was primarily collected through in-depth interviews with probation officers and service managers. This section will discuss the ethics, sampling process, the participants selected, and the data collection process.

Ethics

An application was made to the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University (see Appendix A). This application and the subsequent interview with the committee helped to clarify ethical issues, particularly in the areas of access to participants, confidentiality and conflicts of interest and role.

Access to Participants

Access to the participants was achieved via the Central North Island Regional Manager of the Community Probation Service, who provided a list of the probation officers and service managers in the Central North Island Region. This list of names included a letter confirming that she was able to make the list available. In return for access to potential participants, the researcher signed a deed of agreement. In this agreement the researcher undertook to consider the work of the competency and professional supervision projects introduced to the Community Probation Service in November 1997. He further agreed to provide access to the research findings to the Community Probation Service as well as forwarding copies of the findings to the Regional Manager and the professional supervision project team.

The initial approach to all potential participants was made in writing and included the Information Sheet (which explained the nature and purpose of the study

and specified their rights), the Consent Form and the Regional Manager's letter of approval (which assured participants that their identity was known only by the researcher). The potential participants were asked to contact the researcher should they wish to participate in the study. The envelopes were marked personal and confidential. In those cases where no response was received from potential participants after two weeks, the researcher telephoned the participants and asked them whether or not they wished to participate. Where the participants agreed to be interviewed an interview time and venue was arranged and then confirmed in a letter, which also enclosed the interview guide. Each interview was only commenced once the participant had completed the Consent Form.

Confidentiality

The researcher maintained confidentiality by ensuring that all identifying features such as a participant's name and location remained confidential to the researcher and transcript typist, and by writing up the research findings in a manner that ensured that the participants would not be identified. The latter included assigning fictitious names to each of the participants and the omission of details that were likely to lead to their identity being revealed (e.g. length of service and professional affiliation). Confidentiality was also maintained through the secure storage of all research data, and the typist who transcribed the interview tapes signed a deed of confidentiality.

Conflict of Interest or Conflict of Role

The researcher does not believe he had any conflict of interest or conflict of roles in this research. Having stated the above I will be explicit about my context both historically and during the course of the research.

I worked for what is now the Community Probation Service for almost six years in the roles of probation officer in Taranaki, and unit manager/service manager in Palmerston North. I resigned from the Probation Service in March 1997 to take up a position at MidCentral Health. During the period of my employment with the then Community Corrections Service, I undertook study that was sponsored by the Service towards the postgraduate Diploma in Social Science (Social Policy and Social Work). My final fieldwork placement for this diploma was undertaken within the then Community Corrections Service with the focus being the professional supervision of probation officers. At the end of this placement I produced a handbook for the

supervisors of probation officers (O'Donoghue, 1995). The handbook was an attempt to contribute to the recognition of “the professional nature of probation work” and for the assistance of staff who consider “professional supervision of probation officers to be vital” (O’Donoghue, 1995:3).

Upon completing the diploma I maintained a keen personal interest in professional social work supervision. This interest is manifest in my current position with MidCentral Health Limited where I am involved in the professional supervision of social workers both within the Mental Health Service and in the Social Work Unit. It is also present in my involvement with the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) Education and Training Standing Committee. As a member of this committee I have been involved in the drafting of the Association’s policy statement on supervision and standards on supervision courses (NZASW, 1998b; 1998c). During the course of this research, a monograph I wrote prior to commencing the thesis entitled *Supervising Social Workers: A Practical Handbook* (O’Donoghue, 1998a) was published by the School of Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University.

On the basis of the above, it may be said that the particular bias that I bring to the research is one derived from a professional interest, study and passion for social work practice and social work supervision, rather than roles undertaken currently or historically.

The Sample

The sample of ten probation officers and five service managers was purposefully selected. The aim in purposefully selecting the participants was to obtain information rich cases and a cross-section in terms of their experience and professional background. From the 15 respondents initially invited, one probation officer and two service managers declined. A third service manager initially agreed to participate but was subsequently unable to be contacted and was therefore replaced.

Table 4.1 Participant Characteristics

Probation Officers	**Gender**	**Cultural Identity**	**Age**	**Qualifications**	**Supervision Training**
Angela	Female	New Zealand Pakeha	40-49	None	None
Kiri	Female	Maori	40-49	DipSW	None
Ellen	Female	New Zealand Pakeha	50-59	BSW	Department Course
David	Male	First generation New Zealander	40-49	BA	One off sessions
Jack	Male	European	50-59	RN	None
Grace	Female	Australian with Irish and English background	30-39	MA	CIT course
Mary-Jane	Female	Pakeha	20-29	BSW	None
Joseph	Male	New Zealand Pakeha. Scottish, Irish	50-59	None	None
Ernest	Male	New Zealand Pakeha	40-49	BA, DipSW	Short Course Private Provider
Tania	Female	European	50-59	BA and three Certs.	Short Course Community Probation
Service Managers	**Gender**	**Cultural Identity**	**Age**	**Qualifications**	**Supervision Training**
Nicholas	Male	European	50-59	DipCrim	Short Course Private Provider
Sofia	Female	New Zealand Pakeha	40-49	Dip BusStud	Short Course Private Provider
Neil	Male	New Zealander	40-49	None	None
Joan	Female	New Zealand European	40-49	None	None
Susan	Female	New Zealander, Irish and Scottish	40-49	BA	Short Courses CIT Course

With each refusal, replacements were sought. From the replacements a further service manager declined to participate. The total response rate was 75 per cent (90 per cent for probation officers and 66 per cent for service managers).

The demographic details of the participants' are outlined in Table 4.1. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a fictional name and extraneous personal details were omitted. Also omitted from Table 4.1, to protect the identity of participants, is their length of service, which ranged from 3 to 26 years. Among the probation officers there were 3 with less than10 years service, 4 with 10 to 14 years service, 1 with 15 to 20 years and 2 with more than 20 years service. Two of the service managers had less than 10 years service, 1 had 10-14 years and the other 2 had more than 20 years service experience. Individual details such as membership of professional associations were also omitted from Table 4.1 on the grounds that they might lead to the participants being identified. It may be noted, however, that one probation officer was a member of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers and that another was a member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. One service manager was an associate of the New Zealand Institute of Management.

Individual Interviews

The ten probation officers were interviewed first, followed by the five service managers. The interviews were conducted in June 1998, using a semi-structured interview guide developed with knowledge gleaned from the literature and the researcher's own experience as a provider and recipient of professional supervision. The interview guide was structured around four main areas: the participants' background details; philosophy of professional supervision; their recent professional supervision experiences; and their aspirations and expectations of professional supervision. Two pre-test interviews were conducted, one with a probation officer and the other with a service manager. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview settings were generally away from the person's work, apart from three probation officers and a service manager, who requested that they be interviewed in their office. All fifteen interviews were audio-taped and 277 pages of single-spaced transcript were produced for analysis. The participants were sent the transcript of their interview, to review and correct any errors or alter any comments.

Generally, the fieldwork went to plan. Only one significant problem was encountered, namely, the need to replace the tape-recorder after the third interview when it was discovered shortly after the interview that the speed of the recording

varied from very fast to very slow. Fortunately after a lot of pain-staking patience from the transcription typist about ninety-five percent of this interview was transcribed.

Data Analysis

Issues in Analysing Qualitative Data

Qualitative research methods generate voluminous amounts of data for the researcher to analyse, interpret, and finally to synthesise into a coherent report. In wading through the large amount of data the issue for the researcher includes minimising his/her selective perception, personal bias and theoretical preferences, each of which could inappropriately influence the analysis and interpretation of the data (Patton, 1990: 472-477).

In regard to this issue there are two arguments that can be made. The first is that it is not possible to be totally neutral and impartial and that all researchers bring preconceptions and interpretations to the subjects they study, irrespective of the particular method employed (Denzin, 1989a: 23; Patton, 1990: 472-477). Because research is not value-free it requires the researcher to be explicit about his/her prior assumptions and involvement with the phenomenon under study (Denzin, 1989a: 23). The second argument follows on from the first and asserts that once it is accepted that every researcher brings preconceptions and particular interpretative perspectives to the subject, then the issue becomes one of the researcher's credibility and competence rather than the researcher's subjectivity. Essentially, the concern in regard to credibility is about the extent to which the researcher can be trusted, whereas the concern in regards to competence is demonstrated through the use of verification and validation procedures that ensure the quality of the analysis (Patton, 1990: 460-494). In this study, some of the procedures used were: data triangulation, in which direct observations, interview data and written documents were considered; testing out rival explanations; looking for cases which did not fit the patterns or themes that were emerging; discussing the analysis with my thesis supervisors through the submission of drafts of the work in progress; and reporting on the strengths and weaknesses of the research process.

Organising the Data

The organisation of the data essentially involved reducing the volume of information, identifying themes and patterns, and developing a reporting framework for communicating the findings (Patton, 1990).

In preparation for the analysis a data analysis folder was created with four files - namely (a) background, (b) philosophy, (c) recent experience and (d) aspirations. These four files corresponded with the four areas of the interview guide. The analysis of the 15 interviews began with a cross-case analysis (i.e., the grouping together of answers from different people to common questions or analysing different perspectives on key issues). In this case, the answers from the participants' transcripts were cut and pasted into the four above-named files under the sub-areas of the interview guide (Patton, 1990: 376). From there the key points in each participants answer were highlighted and bullets points were made. Further files containing the bullet points were then created and analysed for each of the two groups (probation officers and service managers), and themes, patterns and exceptions were identified. More files containing the themes, patterns and exceptions were then created. These theme files formed the basis of the reporting schema for each of the three empirical chapters (see Chapters 5,6 and 7). Having established the reporting schema, quotations that illustrated the points made were then identified.

The writing up of the data involved a further process of interpretation with each of the three empirical chapters presenting the participants' perspectives. Patton (1990:423) describes the interpretation process well when he states that:

> Interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order, and dealing with rival explanations, disconfirming cases, and data irregularities as part of testing the viability of an interpretation.

In this case the interpretation involved the structuring of the chapters, the explanations, inferences and connections made in the presentation of the participants' perspectives. Also, the commentary sections were wholly interpretative and designed to connect the participants' perspectives to the supervision literature. Each chapter whilst standing on

its own was also intended to build on those previous and lead towards the conclusions of Chapter 8.