

Commentary: Reflections on Co-operative Inquiry in this Historic Moment

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My reading of the six accounts of co-operative inquiry in this volume comes during a historic moment for action research in which the tensions of celebration and caution pull in opposite directions. On the one hand, the recent successes of legitimizing action research as an approach to knowledge creation gives those of us committed to participatory, experiential, action-oriented research much to celebrate. We have pried open the former strangle hold of positivist research, never to turn back. Action research is used in settings ranging from social justice organizations to multinational corporations, from formal schools to community-based literacy efforts, from human services to for-profit businesses, from international development agencies to social services, and from hospitals to prisons. On the other hand, the question nags, is action research being co-opted into a depoliticized tool for "improving practice" devoid of critical understanding of power relations and structures. Improving our practice for whose purposes, whose benefit? The danger of delinking action research from its transformational potential and emancipatory intentions is worrisome. Gaventa and Cornwall (2001, p. 77) analyze the dangers as large-scale international development organizations "scale-up" field-based participatory approaches, while the development organizations themselves are hierarchical, nonparticipatory, and inflexible. Greenwood and Levin raise similar concerns about the teaching of and promotion of action research in institutions of higher education, which are undemocratic, hierarchical, and rigid (1998).

KEY WORDS: Co-operative inquiry; knowledge creation.

1. CREATE SAFE, SUPPORTIVE SPACES FOR THE LONG HAUL WORK

Given this historic moment, I read these accounts with an eye for lessons of how to sustain the political nature our work and resist co-optation. One such lesson reveals itself by taking the work as a collection. Peter Reason notes in his introduction that the majority of contributors have close associations with the

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Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath. Many contributors note that their critical inquiry project was part of their doctoral thesis. It is the long-term commitment of action research advocates, such as Peter Reason and his University of Bath colleagues, that carves out university-based space to support the participatory, democratic processes of action research. This volume shines the light on work of the Centre for Action Research. Other such university-based initiatives include the Cornell Participatory Action Research Network, Deakin University, Southern Cross University, City University of New York, and Queensland University. All owe a debt to the long-term work of committed action researchers.

This highlights a critical lesson. Promoting transformational action research takes a personal and collaborative commitment to “dig where we stand” (Maguire, 2000). Digging in long enough to grapple with the messy work of changing our own institutions is part of the long-haul struggle for creating a more just, loving world. This is particularly difficult work whether in the academy or the private sector. To paraphrase Geoff Mead in this volume, many of our institutions are good at “activating their immune responses” to the values and practice of action research. As you step back to consider the entire volume, I urge you to recommit yourself to collaborating with others in the risky business of action research as political work confronting powerful entrenched forces. Find ways to support colleagues, community members, students, and others attempting this work. Find ways to develop critical mass, and to create the relationships and spaces that nurture this work and its workers. While this publication and dozens of others over the past 30 years reflect the legitimacy of action research, recent tenure battles such as Alice McIntyre’s (1997, 2000) remind us that engaging in action research is not without personal and professional risks. The assassination of Elsa Alvarado and Marios Calderon, members of the Columbian People’s Education and Research Center, prior to the 1997 Cartagena World Congress on Participatory Action Research, sadly reminds us that, in some contexts, the risks can be deadly (De Roux, 1998).

2. CONSIDER CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY AS A TOOL FOR MODIFYING THE NEAR ENVIRONMENT,—WHERE YOU STAND IN THE SHORT HAUL

Another lesson is revealed through individual contributors’ accounts. Jill Morawski contends that one of the greatest challenges for feminist scholars is “modifying the near environment in which researchers conduct their science, learn, teach, and judge the efforts of other scientists” (1997, p. 677). Each of these co-operative inquiry accounts offers detailed, contextually rich stories and analysis of how a co-operative inquiry project might actually go about changing a specific

workplace, i.e., the “near environment.” This is useful to both action researchers and feminist activist-scholars ready to tackle their own near environments to make them either more supportive of or receptive to co-operative inquiry.

These accounts provide rich examples of using co-operative inquiry as a tool to understand and modify our near environments, whether universities, government agencies, for-profit corporations, or nonprofit agencies. They provide sorely needed nitty gritty details as well as the encouragement to embark upon efforts to change the places in which we teach, train, celebrate, consume, and create various forms of human knowledge for social change.

In the case of Carlis Douglas’ work, her co-operative inquiry project with Black women professionals aimed to learn how to effectively impact on institutional discrimination across organizations, across near environments. Marian Charles and Sara Glennie give an account of a co-operative inquiry in social service environments destabilized by repeated central government-promoted modification and cobbled by inadequate resources and support. Their project worked across agencies that had to co-operate in the implementation of a government initiative to shift from child protection to services for needy children and families.

Kate McArdle’s co-operative inquiry project did not initially focus on changing the corporate culture of XYZ. Instead, she found an earlier entry point by focusing on helping young women managers within the organization understand their experiences of it. The details of her hopes and experiences with the “beginnings” of establishing a co-operative inquiry group in a multinational organization offers insightful comparisons between the culture of co-operative inquiry group and that of the surrounding corporation. The corporation valued quantification of time, task, and clear outcomes and benefits, values at odds with more flexible, ambiguous, process-oriented co-operative inquiry. The detail and insight illuminate the importance of processes, which help people first understand the “near environment” within which they work as part of modifying it.

Geoff Mead’s project alerts us to the need to meet those in the “near environment” where they are. While his first intention is to create a project which grapples with men and masculinity, after listening to trusted insiders, he takes a different tact. By inviting men and women into a space that is communal, collaborative, and less hierarchical than the larger organization, Mead hopes to “challenge the deep-seated notions of hegemonic masculinity.” Mark Baldwin discusses choices made by an inquiry group which are probably influenced by what they feel safe doing. He discusses how far to go in challenging their “comfort zone.” In these cases, rather than co-optation of co-operative inquiry, Saul Alinsky’s Rules for Radicals (1972) are at work. To change the near environment, each starts from “where the world is” not where they wish it to be. In the tradition of action research praxis, these co-operative inquiry projects show the interwoven nature of changing the environment through studying it.

3. SHARING LESSONS WITH FEMINIST-INFORMED ACTION RESEARCH

I have long asserted that action research cannot possibly fulfill its transformational potential without attention to diverse feminist thought and practices (Maguire, 1987, 1996, 2001). Although not all accounts of the practice of co-operative inquiry in this issue overtly claim feminist influences or purposes, I nonetheless read them all through my particular feminist action researcher lens. I noticed many similarities with the principles of feminist-informed action research. These principles, sometimes articulated and sometimes not, are reflected in many of the choices and challenges faced by the authors in their critical inquiry groups. In this final section, I focus on the lessons that these co-operative inquiries share with feminist research concerned with developing practical knowledge for worthwhile human purposes. These are lessons to keep in mind as we collaboratively create safe, supportive spaces for co-operative inquiry and modify our near environments.

4. KNOWING TAKES PLACE IN-RELATIONSHIP

Feminist psychologist Jean Baker Miller (1986) asserts that humans develop “in-relationship” rather than as autonomous, independent beings. Likewise, human knowledge is created in-relationship. These relationships cannot be hot-housed or fast tracked (Maguire, 1996). Each author describes how their co-operative inquiry project calls upon and builds on prior personal relationships, friendships, professional networks, and organizational ties between and among the co-researchers. Mark Baldwin emphasizes that by engaging with people over time, co-operative inquiry enables them to develop the skills and interactions to reflect, learn, and act. Clearly, human relationships are central to the knowledge creation endeavor.

As described, these relationships are in contrast to what Jill Morawski calls the gendered objectivity of science. Objectivity is gendered because it reflects “... masculine ideals in its privileging of detachment, control, manipulation of nature, and the emotions of disinterestedness”. (1997, p. 672). These authors describe how subjective personal relationships influence such factors as who they ask to be in the co-operative inquiry group (Douglas); who they hope drops out (McArdle); responsibilities they feel toward other coinquirers (Douglas); friendships that develop out of the inquiry process (Barrett); decisions to close an inquiry group (Baldwin); cofacilitation dynamics (Charles and Glennie); and drawing on long-term organizational relationships to help shape the inquiry topic (Mead). Sharing personal stories and disclosing personal feelings during various phases of the inquiries contributes to building and nurturing the relationships essential to deeply reflective inquiry. Personal sharing contributes to the capacity of coinquirers to build safe, trusting, environments. The authors describe a spiral of engagement in which sharing promotes safety, then individual’s subsequent sense of group

safety promotes more sharing of personal feelings, experiences, observations, and analyses.

Several authors acknowledge the importance of sharing food to building relationships. The providing and sharing of food within the critical inquiry projects is not devalued as a traditionally feminine task, but rather celebrated. In the words of Penny Barrett, food is a “lubricant” for talk in these communities of inquiry. Knowing takes place in relationships which are figuratively and literally nourished.

5. START WITH EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE—EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE IS GENDERED

Just as action research starts with everyday experience (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 2), so too does feminist scholarship prioritize women’s everyday experiences and feelings as a source of legitimate knowledge (Hartsock, 1974). Each of these critical inquiry accounts begins with coinquirers’ everyday experience of the particular research site. For example, in Geoff Mead’s project with police managers, they do not try to improve the quality of their leadership by studying theories of leadership, but rather by inquiring into their daily practices of leading.

Feminist-informed action research shines a light on the gendered dimensions of these everyday experiences. For example, Kate McArdle’s co-operative inquiry project focuses on helping young women managers understand their experiences of the XYZ corporation as women. Despite Geoff Mead’s interest in men and masculinity, and his insider credibility as a senior police manager, he found resistance to utilizing co-operative inquiry to explore men’s gendered experience as police managers. His candid description of this resistance confirms that recognizing men as gendered beings is still hotly contested ground in action research (Maguire, 2001).

6. THE EVERYDAY IS EXPERIENCED THROUGH MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND THE WEB OF OPPRESSIONS

Black feminist thought and the scholarship of difference recognize the complex, interdependent, and simultaneous effects of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation on human inequities and privileges (Collins, 1991; Dill and Baca Zinn, 1997). While some of the particular costs of and barriers to women’s equitable participation in action research projects has been outlined (Maguire, 1996), race remains more invisible than gender in action research discourse (Bell, 2001). Carlis Douglas’ identifies the additional costs of and barriers to engaging in participatory inquiry for people from oppressed groups. She explains how the web of oppression of race and gender works to make it harder for Black women to participate. Black women have additional responsibilities to the larger Black community, to other Black professionals for mentoring, to families and churches, and even to

White-dominated organizations, which expect them to take the lead in helping these organizations learn about their racist practices and policies. Who has the time for participatory, action-oriented inquiry? Douglas notes that it is particularly difficult to carve out precious personal time for reflection and inquiry when a project is not organizationally subsidized. When initiating co-operative projects, inquirers need to be attentive to the range of barriers and trade-offs that may make it difficult for participants from oppressed groups to join.

7. PAY ATTENTION TO ISSUES OF VOICE—SPACE, BENEFITS, AND COSTS

Participatory, experiential, action research creates meaningful opportunities for those long marginalized and silenced to raise their voices in the knowledge creation process. Mark Baldwin points out the importance of working within democratic groups in organizations in order for the usually silenced voices to be heard when developing policy and procedures. McArdle takes us through the many facilitation choice points of keeping the co-operative inquiry space open for the women's voices. Barrett describes the need for gentle facilitation which empowers rather than overpowers participants. Marian Charles and Sara Glennie address the need to develop a co-operative inquiry group that includes voices from a range of geographical location, while balancing gender, ethnicity, and professional backgrounds. In Baldwin's case, the co-operative inquiry groups he initiated worked with people marginalized for many reasons, including age, disability, mental health, racism, or sexism.

While there are benefits to creating and keeping open spaces for diverse voices, there are costs to bear in mind. Raise one's voice is not always a joyous, immediately empowering activity. It may be painful, with personal risks and costs. For example, in Douglas' project, she wants to deconstruct the mechanics of organizational discrimination by asking her coinquirers to "... come to know how we collude in our oppression" through retrospective reflection and sense-making. It is a difficult task given the masks and armor of personal detachment needed to survive in oppressive, dehumanizing systems. Even the initiating inquirers can be challenged. McArdle describes her struggles as a young woman inquirer to maintain her voice, to be heard, and to resist the mechanisms of silencing. McArdle bravely lays out her nonnegotiable positions to the corporation. She is likewise determined that her voice not be drowned by the male voice of her university supervisor.

Yet sometimes discussion of the benefits of "voice" have to be packaged in a way that can be heard by the sponsor. Barrett points out that midwives' "talk time" with new mother's is not easily quantifiable. Hence, it is invisible to the biomedical positivist and economic rationalist perspectives that dominate contemporary health care funding decisions. Perspective participants in McArdle's group question the quantifiable benefits of participating in the group. McArdle's

finds herself caught between promoting the inquiry benefits in terms that upper management gatekeepers and ambitious young managers can hear and the more ambiguous outcomes of collaborative research.

Just as “talk time” may have invisible benefits not readily quantified, it has costs. Many of the accounts point out that paid work release for co-operative “talk time,” as well as travel and expenses, were subsidized by the employing organizations (Charles and Glennie; McArdle; Barrett, and Mead). While financial support for the co-operative inquiry makes it possible, it adds pressures and expectations for identifiable benefits or worthwhile results. This creates a challenge for the coinquirers, which Charles and Glennie articulate as “. . . staying true to the central principles of inquiry.” Barrett describes the near impossibility of keeping the MARG inquiry group together once participants no longer get paid work-release time. Part of modifying the near environment is educating organizations about the harder to quantify benefits of co-operative inquiry.

8. POWER

Finally, each of these projects, although quite differently situated, reaffirms the potential of critical inquiry for shifting and challenging power structures and relationships through democratic, participatory, and experiential processes.

Each of these authors candidly and generously opens up their experiences to our scrutiny for lesson making. Along with the authors, Peter Reason and I have shared our learnings. Now, move forward to risk a co-operative inquiry endeavor and discover your personal lessons from first-hand experience. We look forward to your stories.

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