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Cooperative Inquiry: An Action Research Practice

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The primary tradition of research in psychology has emphasized the separation of subject and object, observer from what is observed, in a search for objective truth. In this tradition, it is the researcher who makes all the decisions about what to study, how to study it, and what conclusions may be drawn; and the 'subjects' contribute only their responses to the situation in which they are observed, without knowing anything about the ideas that inform the inquiry. However, another inquiry tradition, which we can broadly call action research, has placed a contrasting emphasis on collaboration between 'researcher' and 'subject' to address practical issues of shared concern. In the full flowering of the approach, this distinction between researcher and subject fades away and *all* those involved in the inquiry endeavour act as co-researchers, contributing both to the decisions that inform the research and to the action that is to be studied. Further, the purpose is to reach not for a transcendent or objective truth in the tradition of Cartesian science (Toulmin, 1990), but for what is called 'practical knowing' – being better able to flourish and enable others around you to flourish (Heron, 1996b; Reason and Bradbury, 2001a).

In this chapter we focus on one approach – cooperative inquiry (CI) – which is part of the wider, rich and diverse family of action research approaches. If you are reading this, then you may well be thinking about the possibility of using cooperative inquiry for your dissertation, and during this chapter we will give you examples of how others have done this so that you can develop your own project. But for now, it's useful to get a sense of the breadth of action research. For some, action research is primarily an individual affair through which professionals can address questions of the kind 'How can I improve my practice?' For others, action research is strongly rooted in practices of organization development and improvement of business and public sector organizations. For many in the majority world, action research is primarily a liberationist practice aiming to redress imbalances of power and restore to ordinary people the capacities of self-reliance and ability to manage their own lives – to 'sharpen their minds' as villagers in Bangladesh described it to Peter. For some, the key questions are about how to initiate and develop face-to-face inquiry groups, while for others the primary issues

are about using action research to create change on a large scale and influence policy decisions. And for some, action research is primarily a form of practice in the world, while for others it belongs in the scholarly traditions of knowledge generation. According to Reason and Bradbury (2006: xxii), what these approaches all share is a view of research that does the following:

- responds to practical and often pressing issues in the lives of people in organizations and communities
- engages with people in collaborative relationships, opening new 'communicative spaces' in which dialogue and development can flourish
- draws on many ways of knowing, both in the evidence that is generated and in diverse forms of presentation as we speak to wider audiences
- is strongly value-oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate
- is a living, emergent process which cannot be predetermined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively.

The many dimensions of action research are explored in the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001b, 2006, 2008) and the excellent *Introduction to Action Research* by Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin (1998, 2006). But for now, what a would-be cooperative inquiry psychology student needs to know is that CI involves learning with a small group of other people who are as committed to exploring an issue as you are – only they won't have to write up a dissertation about it afterwards.

HISTORY AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A science of persons

The fundamental argument behind this action research tradition is that it is not possible to have a true science of persons unless the inquiry engages with humans *as* persons. And since persons are manifestly capable of making sense of their behaviour, the distinction between a 'researcher' who does all the thinking, and 'subjects' who do the behaving, is completely inappropriate. From a participatory perspective, the 'subjects' of the traditional form are really objects – curiously the word 'subject' wraps around itself to mean both the autonomous human person and the one who is 'subject to' God, the monarch, or a scientific researcher. In a science of persons, all those engaged in the inquiry process enter the process as persons, bringing with them their intelligence, their intentionality, their ability to reflect on experience and to enter relations with others – and of course also their capacity for self-deception, for consensus collusion, for rationalization, and for refusal to see the obvious, which also characterizes human persons.

A participative world-view

A science of persons also rests on a participative view of the world:

[O]ur world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the 'reality' we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings *who are necessarily acting* – and this draws us to consider how to judge the *quality* of our acting.

A participatory worldview places human persons and communities as part of their world – both human and more-than-human – embodied in their world, co-creating their world. A participatory perspective asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a: 6–7)

A science of persons in this sense is not a science of the Enlightenment. It does not seek a transcendental truth, which Descartes and his fellows would have us pursue. A science of persons embraces a 'postmodern' sentiment in attempting to move us beyond grand narratives towards localized, pragmatic and constructed practical knowings that are based in the experience and action of those engaged in the inquiry project. Toulmin (1990) argues persuasively that this can be seen as a reassertion of Renaissance values of practical philosophy.

An 'extended' epistemology and the primacy of the practical

As researchers, our epistemology frames the way we make sense of the knowledge we produce. An epistemology is the standpoint we take towards the nature of knowledge: for example, whether we think our research is producing facts about the world or understandings about how people interpret the world. The epistemological standpoint of cooperative inquiry, located as it is as a participative form of inquiry, is what is called an 'extended epistemology' – extended beyond the positivist concern for the rational and the empirical to include diverse ways of knowing as persons encounter and act in their world, particularly forms of knowing which are experiential and practical.

As Eikeland (2001) points out, this notion goes right back to Aristotle; and in modern times Polanyi (1962) clearly described his concept of tacit knowledge, a type of embodied know-how that is the foundation of all cognitive action. Writing more recently, Shotter argues that in addition to Gilbert Ryle's distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', there is a 'kind of knowledge one has *only from within a social situation*, a group, or an institution, and thus takes into account ... the *others* in the social situation' (Shotter, 1993: 7, emphasis in original). It is significant that Shotter usually uses the verbal form '*knowing*

of the third kind' to describe this, rather than the noun *knowledge*, emphasizing that such knowing is not a thing, to be discovered or created and stored up in journals, but rather arises in the process of living and in the voices of ordinary people in conversation.

Many writers have articulated different ways of framing an extended epistemology from pragmatic, constructionist, critical, feminist and developmental perspectives. While these descriptions differ in detail, they all go beyond orthodox empirical and rational Western views of knowing, and embrace a multiplicity of ways of knowing that start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition. They assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a).

The methodology of cooperative inquiry draws on a fourfold extended epistemology: *experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with a person, place or thing (it is knowing through empathy and resonance, the kind of in-depth knowing which is almost impossible to put into words); *presentational knowing* grows out of experiential knowing, and provides the first form of expression through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance, drawing on aesthetic imagery; *propositional knowing* draws on concepts and ideas; and *practical knowing* consummates the other forms of knowing in action in the world (Heron, 1996a; Heron and Reason, 2008). In some ways the practical has primacy since:

most of our knowledge, and all our primary knowledge, arises as an aspect of activities that have practical, not theoretical objectives; and it is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. (MacMurray, 1957: 12)

A liberationist spirit

As well as being an expression of an extended epistemology within a participative world-view, a science of persons has a political dimension. The relationship between power and knowledge is well argued by Habermas, Foucault, Lukes and others (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001). Participative forms of inquiry start with concerns for power and powerlessness, and aim to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies world-wide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge:

This political form of participation affirms peoples' right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a: 9)

So participatory research has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people – through research, through adult education, and through socio-political action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper

level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: they 'see through' the ways in which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members. This is the meaning of consciousness-raising or *conscientização*, a term popularized by Paulo Freire (1970) for a 'process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection' (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991: 16). As Daniel Selener (1997: 12) emphasizes, while a major goal of participatory research is to solve practical problems in a community, '[a]nother goal is the creation of shifts in the balance of power in favour of poor and marginalized groups in society'. Greenwood and Levin (1998: 3) also emphasize how action research contributes actively to processes of democratic social change. Participative research is at its best a process that explicitly aims to educate those involved to develop their capacity for inquiry both individually and collectively.

These dimensions of a science of persons – an orientation to the practical, treating persons as persons, a participative world-view, an extended epistemology and a liberationist spirit – can be seen as the basis of contemporary action research. Action research itself is currently undergoing an exciting resurgence of interest and creativity, and there are many forms of inquiry practice within this tradition. In one attempt to provide some order to this diversity, we have elsewhere described three broad pathways to this practice. First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern. Third-person research/practice aims to extend these relatively small-scale projects to create a wider community of inquiry involving a whole organization or community (Reason and Bradbury, 2006: xxv).

Cooperative inquiry is one articulation of action research. The original initiatives into experiential inquiry were taken around 1970 by John Heron (Heron, 1971). This developed into a practice of cooperative inquiry as a methodology for a science of persons (Heron, 1996a) which places an emphasis on first-person research/practice in the context of supportive and critical second-person relationships, while having the potential to reach out towards third-person practice.

The understanding of participants as co-researchers and the focus on solving problems, and thus enabling social change, make cooperative inquiry an exciting method for researchers in psychology. There is a range of concerns for researchers who tend to employ qualitative methods in psychology. For some, these issues are about doing radically different psychology that is not co-opted back into the 'mainstream'; for others the project is less political, and concern is on developing the discipline to include a broader, more humanist outlook (Stainton Rogers et al., 1995). Cooperative inquiry offers something to both 'types' of researcher. For those who are less critical of the psychology project, cooperative inquiry offers an additional method that produces new ways of knowing through a systematic yet flexible method. In drawing on multiple levels of knowing and focusing on applying knowledge at a local level, cooperative inquiry can therefore be used to broaden the remit of psychology, without challenging that remit.

Cooperative inquiry also opens up the possibilities for a more radical psychology that celebrates multiple ways of knowing. This multiplicity shifts the understanding that both

researchers and participants are people from a 'methodological horror' to a 'methodological virtue' (Parker, 1994b, 1999). A more radical aspect is also incorporated through championing the use of research for political ends. Critical and feminist psychologists, for example, may find cooperative inquiry a useful approach in engendering social change.

Regardless of whether a more humanist or more radical approach is taken, cooperative inquiry has the potential to re-energize research in psychology (Box 8.1 offers an account of the experience of one psychology teacher). Cooperative inquiry has been used in educational, health and organizational psychology, but is also particularly relevant for social psychologists looking for ways to develop their sub-discipline and discursive, critical and feminist psychologists who seek ways of using their work to address oppressive practices and facilitate inquiry into issues of concern (Riley and Scharff, 2013; see also Willig, 1999). And with its emphasis on producing knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, cooperative inquiry offers a unique approach to engaging with the impact agenda that characterizes contemporary research within the UK and elsewhere.

In the rest of this chapter we first set out the logics of the cooperative inquiry method, and then endeavour to show how this takes place within the learning community that is a cooperative inquiry group.

BOX 8.1 A COMMENT FROM A PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER

One of our colleagues wrote to tell us of her experience of teaching cooperative inquiry to a psychology class (Jennifer Mullett, personal communication):

I just wanted to tell you that I have just finished teaching a fourth year class in Community Psychology and Action Research (based on Nelson and Prilleltensky's, 2005, value-driven *Community Psychology* and your work). Your work not only allows Psychology students to discover a human psychology (after learning the experimental method and statistics for four years) but also that they can make a difference in the world through inspiring and engaging research. The comments made to me at the end of the class indicated that, for some, their thinking had been transformed and they were rethinking their careers in light of the possibilities opened by Action Research. Others found an approach that resonated with their values. I gently moved them from the experimental method using the four ways of knowing as a guide: starting with propositional knowing, introducing them to major theorists in the field of Psychology to situate action research in their own field; then experiential knowing by giving them case studies from my practice to work on, problem solve and critique; next,

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presentational knowing by trying out Freire's triggers in the form of 'life statues' or tableaux, in which half the students used their bodies to create a 'still life' example of a situation where there was an unequal balance of power, the other half of the class 'decoded' the example and described what they saw; and finally, practical knowing by presenting community issues and looking at particular methods to investigate them. If I had started with the methods some of them might have thought action research was 'flaky' and not real science (a few did have trouble with the presentational knowledge). I also used the four ways of knowing heuristic to review and reflect on what we were learning as I felt it might appear as chaos to those who are used to following a text chapter by chapter. Their other classes in Psychology had taken this more traditional approach. It was also reassuring to me to hear that they were appreciating the significance of the participatory orientation of this approach. I didn't have to 'sell it' too vigorously.

I anticipated more resistance (e.g., this isn't science) than I experienced. From the first day they embraced the ideas and in fact appeared hungry for a 'human psychology'. I was very careful not to begin with a critique of the experimental paradigm, as I felt I would be telling them that all they had studied and worked hard to master for four years was trivial or irrelevant, but instead to present an alternative approach as just that and to win them over with my enthusiasm and case studies. Also I tried to indicate in what ways the experimental method was useful while at the same time generating excitement for the type of knowledge and change possible with action research. One thing surprised them: they were not aware that the field of action research has a long history going back to Lewin; nor of the extensive use of action research around the world. In their four years of university classes in psychology action research had not been discussed.

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DESIGNING A STUDY

The logics of cooperative inquiry

Cooperative inquiry can be seen as cycling through four phases of reflection and action. In phase one, a group of co-researchers come together to explore an agreed area of human activity. They may be professionals who wish to develop their understanding and skill in a

particular area of practice or members of a minority group who wish to articulate an aspect of their experience which has been muted by the dominant culture; they may wish to explore in depth their experience of certain states of consciousness, to assess the impact on their well-being of particular healing practices, and so on. In this first phase they agree on the focus of their inquiry, and together develop tentative questions or propositions they wish to explore. They agree to undertake some action, some practice, which will contribute to this exploration, and agree to a set of procedures by which they will observe and record their own and each other's experience.

Phase one is primarily in the mode of propositional knowing, although it will also contain important elements of presentational knowing as group members use their imagination in story, fantasy and graphics to help them articulate their interests and to focus on their purpose in the inquiry (see section on examples of cooperative inquiry at the end of this chapter for examples of activities that help participants represent their propositional knowledge). Once they have clarified sufficiently what they want to inquire about, group members conclude phase one with planning a method for exploring this in action, and with devising ways of gathering and recording evidence from this experience.

In phase two, the co-researchers engage in the actions agreed. They observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other's experience. In particular, they are careful to hold lightly the propositional frame from which they started, to notice how practice both does and does not conform to their original ideas and also notice the subtleties of experience. This phase involves primarily practical knowledge: knowing how (and how not) to engage in appropriate action, to bracket off the starting idea, and to exercise relevant discrimination.

Phase three is in some ways the touchstone of the inquiry method as the co-researchers become fully immersed in and engaged with their experience. They may develop a degree of openness to what is going on, so relatively free of preconceptions that they see it in a new way. They may go deeper into the experience so that superficial understandings are elaborated and developed. Or they may be led away from the original ideas and proposals into new fields, unpredicted action and creative insights. It is also possible that they may get so involved in what they are doing that they lose the awareness that they are part of an inquiry group: there may be a practical crisis, they may become enthralled, they may simply forget. Phase three involves mainly experiential knowing, although it will be richer if new experience is expressed, when recorded, in creative presentational form through graphics, colour, sound, movement, drama, story or poetry.

In phase four, after an agreed period engaged in phases two and three, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original propositions and questions in the light of their experience. As a result, they may modify, develop or reframe them, or reject them and pose new questions. They may choose, for the next cycle of action, to focus on the same or on different aspects of the overall inquiry. The group may also choose to amend or develop its inquiry procedures – forms of action, ways of gathering data – in the light of experience. Phase four again emphasizes propositional knowing, although presentational forms of knowing will form an important bridge with the experiential and practical phases.

In a full inquiry the cycle will be repeated several times. Ideas and discoveries tentatively reached in early phases can be checked and developed; investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration of other parts; new skills can be acquired and monitored, experiential competencies realized. The group itself may become more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work and in the practices of inquiry. Ideally, the inquiry is finished when the initial questions are fully answered in practice, when there is a new congruence between the four kinds of knowing. It is, of course, rare for a group to complete an inquiry so fully. It should be noted that actual inquiry practice is not as straightforward as the model suggests: there are usually mini-cycles within major cycles; some cycles will emphasize one phase more than others (some practitioners have advocated a more emergent process of inquiry which is less structured into phases). Nevertheless, the discipline of the research cycle is fundamental.

The cycling can really start at any point. It is usual for groups to get together formally at the propositional stage often as the result of an invitation from an initiating facilitator. However, such a proposal is usually birthed in experiential knowing, at the moment that curiosity is aroused or incongruity in practice noticed. And the proposal to form an inquiry group, if it is to take flight, needs to be presented in such a way as to appeal to the experience of potential co-researchers.

THE HUMAN PROCESS OF COOPERATIVE INQUIRY

In a science of persons, the quality of inquiry practice lies far less in impersonal methodology, and far more in the emergence of a self-aware, critical community of inquiry nested within a community of practice. So, while cooperative inquiry as method is based on cycles of action and reflection engaging four dimensions of an extended epistemology, as described above, cooperative inquiry as human process depends on the development of healthy human interaction in a face-to-face group. Would-be initiators of a cooperative inquiry must be willing to engage with the complexities of these human processes as well as with the logic of inquiry. This requires us to recollect our understanding of group processes.

Many theories of group development trace a series of phases of development in the life of a group. Early concerns are for inclusion and membership. When and if these needs are adequately satisfied, the group focuses on concerns for power and influence. And if these are successfully negotiated, they give way to concerns for intimacy and diversity in which flexible and tolerant relationships enable individuals to realize their own identity and allow the group to be effective in relation to its task (see, for example, Srivastva, Obert and Neilson, 1977). This phase progression model of group behaviour – in which the group's primary concern moves from issues of inclusion to control to intimacy, or from forming to norming to storming to performing (Tuckman, 1965), or from nurturing to energizing to relaxing (Randall and Southgate, 1980) – is a valuable way of understanding group development (although every group manifests these principles in their

own unique way, and the complexity of an unfolding group process will always exceed what can be said about it). In what follows we will use Randall and Southgate's (1980) model of creative group process as a vehicle for describing the process of a successful cooperative inquiry group and to indicate the kinds of leadership or facilitation choices that need to be made.

Randall and Southgate differentiated between the creative group in which there is an exciting interaction between task and people – a 'living labour cycle' – and the destructive group in which primitive emotions arise, swallow up and destroy both human needs and task accomplishment – Bion's 'basic assumption group' (Bion, 1959). The life of a creative group follows the creative organismic cycle which can be seen in all life-affirming human processes, such as sexual intercourse, childbirth, preparing food and feasting, and doing good work together. In contrast, the destructive group lurches between the basic group assumptions identified by Bion – dependency, flight/flight and messianic pairing – in its search for relief of its overwhelming anxiety. In between the creative and destructive group process is the intermediate group which is neither completely satisfying nor completely destructive, but which represents the everyday experience.

The creative group can be described as a cycle of nurturing, energizing, a peak of accomplishment, followed by relaxing (see Figure 8.1).

- The nurturing phase draws people together and helps them feel emotionally safe and bonded. At the same time, early, preparatory aspects of the group task and the organizational issues which allow the group to continue its life and work are attended to. The nurturing phase is about creating a safe and effective container for the work of the group, and leadership is primarily focused on those concerns.
- In the energizing phase, interaction intensifies as the group engages in its primary task. A degree of healthy conflict may arise as different views, experiences and skills are expressed. Leadership concerns are with the requirements of the task at hand – with containing and guiding the increasing levels of emotional, physical and intellectual energy which are being expressed.
- The peak in the creative group occurs at points of accomplishment, those moments when the emotional, task and organizational energy of the group come together and the main purpose to hand is achieved. These are moments of utter mutual spontaneity.
- In the relaxing phase, members attend to those issues which will complete the emotional, task and organizational work of the group. Emotionally, the group needs to wind down, to celebrate achievements, to reflect and learn. The task needs to be completed: there are always final touches that differentiate excellence from the merely adequate. And the organizational issues need completion – putting away tools, paying bills. Leadership makes space for these issues to be properly attended to, and usually those naturally gifted as 'finishers' come forward to lead celebrations and complete the task.

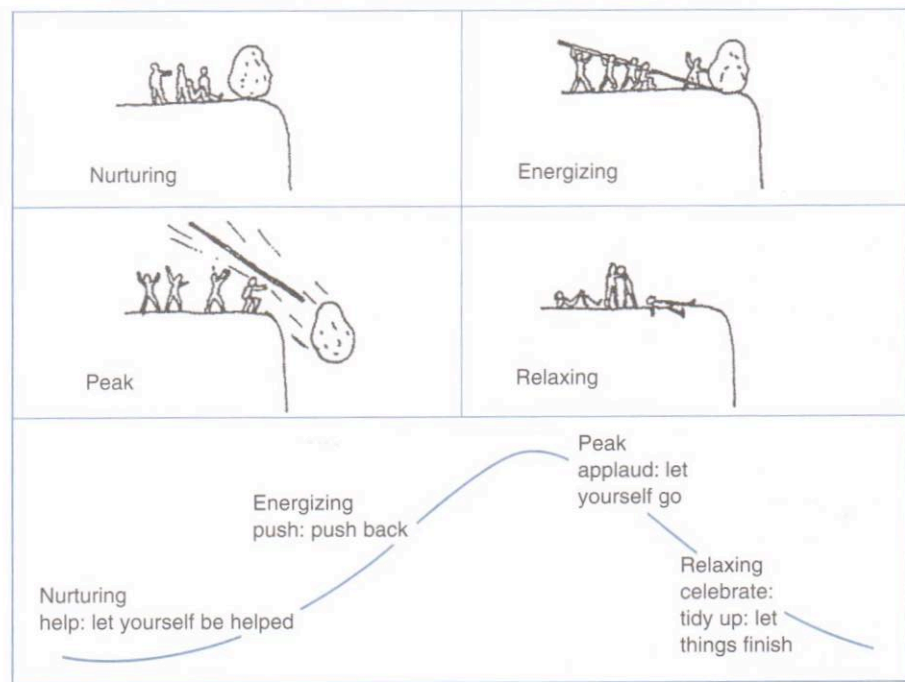


Figure 8.1 The living labour cycle and the creative group cycle (Randall and Southgate, 1980)

A group which lasts over a period of time will experience cycles at different levels: mini-cycles associated with particular tasks and major cycles of action and reflection. These will be set in the context of a long-term developmental cycle of birth, maturation and death. Early concerns focus on issues of inclusion; this is often followed by a struggle for influence, with conflicts and cliques emerging; if issues of influence are successfully negotiated a mature group may emerge characterized by intimacy and mutuality. This creative group nurturing/energizing/relaxing cycle interacts with inquiry phases of action and reflection to produce a complex rhythm of cooperative inquiry.

A creative group is also characterized by an appropriate balance of the principles of hierarchy, collaboration and autonomy – deciding for others, with others, and for oneself (Heron, 1999). Authentic hierarchy provides appropriate direction by those with greater vision, skill and experience. Collaboration roots the individual within a community of peers, offering basic support and the creative and corrective feedback of other views and possibilities. Autonomy expresses the self-directing and self-creating potential of the person. The shadow face of authority is authoritarianism: that of collaboration, peer pressure and conformity; that of autonomy, narcissism, wilfulness and isolation. The challenge is to design institutions which manifest valid forms of these principles, and to find ways in which they can be maintained in self-correcting and creative tension.

Establishing cooperative inquiry: focus on nurturing

The key issues in the nurturing phase are:

- identifying potential group members and establishing a group emotional atmosphere in which potential members feel sufficiently at home to begin to contribute their creative energy
- introducing and explaining the process of cooperative inquiry
- agreeing a framework of times and places for meeting which will provide an organized framework for the major cycles of action and reflection.

A key consideration is to provide sufficient time, to create relaxed conversational spaces, and to provide sufficient information for potential group members to make a considered choice about membership. Experience suggests that most inquiry groups are brought together specifically for the inquiry process – they come together around a shared interest or concern, or are members of an occupational group or an organization, so that when they assemble they will recognize their commonality and potential shared purpose. Some inquiry groups are actual work or living groups who choose to devote time to inquiry to address an issue of particular concern. For example, an established team of five hospital-based social workers explored the tension between prescription and discretion in front-line social work practice (Baldwin, 2001). However, it is the initiating energy of one person that brings people together and creates a potential group.

For example, Kate McArdle's doctoral research used cooperative inquiry to work with young women managers in large organizations.

At the end of October I took part in a day celebrating 'diversity' within XYZ. I was given half of a stand promoting women's interests. I covered it with bright yellow posters asking questions such as: 'What is it like to be a twenty-something woman in XYZ?', 'Does gender matter?' I littered the entire floor with bright orange flyers, which asked the same questions, gave the date of an introductory session and my contact details. I was expected to remain on the stand, but I had little interest in being interrogated or speaking to people who were not in the age bracket of my inquiry. I needed to use my voice in the right kind of conversations. I wandered around talking to people who looked as if they were in my 'target audience'. We sat on couches, drank coffee, shared stories about my research and their work and exchanged contact details. (McArdle, 2002: 180)

Several of Sarah's undergraduate students have set up cooperative inquiry projects for their dissertations. These have involved relatively small numbers of participants, between three and six, where students have used informal and formal methods of advertising their project to potential participants. For example, a project looking at older women's experiences of beauty involved a student asking her mum, who in turn asked her friends, while a project on street harassment recruited participants from a psychology student subject pool.

Whether the inquiry group arises as an independent initiative or from within an established group, the first proposal to initiate inquiry is a delicate matter: it needs to be clear enough to catch the imagination, address a felt need or interest, attract people's curiosity and interest, and at the same time be sufficiently tentative for potential members not to feel invaded or put upon by yet another demand on their busy lives. Many initiating facilitators of inquiry have spent considerable time talking through their ideas with potential members, sowing seeds in informal conversation. Some have established a reputation in their organization or community as initiators of interesting new projects, and are trusted to take a lead; and others are able to attract people to their idea, and then have to work to establish an atmosphere of trust and inquiry.

One approach is to write a letter or an email that attractively summarizes the proposal and the method on one side of a sheet of paper, and invites people to come to a meeting to discuss the idea in greater depth. It can be a substantial, all-day meeting, with some profile within relevant communities, or a more intimate, face-to-face affair. For example, Agnes Bryan and Cathy Aymer, black social work lecturers, were concerned to address issues in the development of professional identity among black social workers in the UK, issues they had identified on the basis of their experience and some prior research. They invited a large group of black social work professionals – practitioners, managers and teachers – to a day-long meeting at their university to discuss the issues and explore the establishment of inquiry groups (see Aymer, 2005; Bryan, 2000).

An introductory discussion meeting, as described above, is often the first occasion at which a potential inquiry group meets, and thus can be seen as the beginning of the creative process, and as needing to address the emotional, task and organizational requirements of the nurturing phase.

The *emotional needs* of group members are, first of all, to feel safe, included and welcomed. The early stages of any group are characterized by free-floating anxiety in which every group member feels more or less isolated and is seeking to know that there are others around sufficiently like them to connect with. They will be asking questions about identity and inclusion ('Who am I to be in this group?' and 'Who is like me?') questions about purpose ('Will this group meet my needs and interests?') and questions about intimacy ('Is this a place where I will be liked and valued?'). If group members are part of an organization, there may be other questions about potential conflict between individual and organizational needs. These questions are rarely fully articulated in consciousness: they are acted out in everyday chitchat and stereotypical interaction. However, they are powerful influences on the group. It follows that careful attention to these questions is essential.

It is usually helpful if the meeting starts with opportunities for people to meet each other. There is nothing more off-putting than the silence that a new group can generate as people come into a room for the first time; and if this is followed by a meeting which launches immediately into a task agenda without hearing why people have come together, the new group can be off to a really bad start. In a small group, it may be sufficient for the facilitator to introduce people as they come in; for a large group, some structure of meeting in pairs and trios can be helpful. This can be followed by a round in which everyone is asked to say their name and what attracted them to the meeting, or some form of 'name game' that gives

people an initial sense of knowing who others are. The physical arrangements for a first meeting can be important:

I arrived to find a beautiful conference room filled with large wooden tables arranged in a square, on top of which at regularly spaced intervals were a mixture of mineral waters, glasses arranged in diamond shapes and small dishes of mints on paper doilies ... I wanted a circle of chairs. I phoned Facilities to remove the tables. Two big men in overalls arrived ... removed the tables and put the chairs back in a square. Then they all left and I was alone again. I wheeled the huge plush chairs into a circle and wondered what the women would think when they arrived. Would they be as bemused by what I had created, as I had been by what I'd seen when I'd arrived? (McArdle, 2002: 181)

The *task needs* of the group in this first meeting are to initiate people into the cooperative inquiry method, and explore together the potential focus of the proposed inquiry. Of course, these are closely related to the emotional needs explored above, because people's sense of insecurity is in part associated with uncertainty as to whether the group will meet their needs and interests. Usually both of these will have been briefly described in the invitation to the meeting, but it is likely that most people's interest will be diffuse and unformed at this stage. In particular, the methodology of cooperative inquiry can be confusing because most people associate 'research' with filling in questionnaires designed by the researcher, not with becoming co-researchers in a relationship of mutual influence.

It is here that the initiators of the inquiry need to exercise authentic authority in setting out as clearly as they can the principles and practices of cooperative inquiry, and in responding to questions and comments from the group. It is important that at this stage potential inquiry group members understand the logic of the inquiry method and also the personal and emotional investment that needs to be made if the inquiry is to be truly transformational. One approach is to talk through different phases of the inquiry cycle, emphasizing the different kinds of knowing that are primary at each stage, and emphasizing that the quality of the inquiry comes from the quality of engagement that group members have with the issues and their willingness to be experimental in their practices. It can be helpful to give a ten-minute talk, and then invite people to chat in pairs for a few minutes to clarify their questions before opening a general discussion. In terms of the extended epistemology we described earlier, this will give people an opportunity to draw on their tacit experiential knowing, and articulate this through a narrative (presentational knowing) which will contribute to the articulation of questions and issues that people want to address (propositional knowing). While clarity at this stage is important, one must also realize that cooperative inquiry, as an experiential process, can only be fully learned through engagement – there are important tacit learnings that take place as people enter the cycles of action and reflection, and as the group develops as a community of inquiry.

This introductory meeting needs also to attend to the inquiry topic proposed in order to generate at least an initial agreement as to the focus. Usually the initiating facilitator has done some preparatory work: they may be fired up themselves with concern for some

issues, have had preliminary conversations with potential inquiry participants, and by proposing a set of questions or an arena for inquiry be playing a valuable role in initiating and focusing attention. It is important that the potential inquiry topic is put forward with clarity as an attractive and exciting venture; it is also important that a dialogue is initiated in which the initiator's vision can be explored and amended so that it becomes more generally owned and genuinely adopted by those who will join the inquiry. Geoff Mead was clear that:

Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning *about* theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders. (Mead, 2002: 191)

He therefore initiated a series of briefing meetings:

designed to help people make a positive decision to opt into the action inquiry or to decide, without any stigma, that it was not for them. The underlying principle was that of voluntary, informed self-selection. I spoke a little about the rationale for offering this opportunity to focus on leadership and said something about the participative and democratic ethos of action inquiry. I talked about the possibility of transformative learning and asked people to decide if they wanted to take part using their head (Do you have enough information? Does it make *sense* for you to do it?), heart (Are you intrigued, curious, drawn? Does it *feel* right for you to do it?), and will (Are you able and willing to meet the commitment? Do you really *want* to do it?). (Mead, 2002: 196)

This early process of clarifying the inquiry focus, so that the group in time meets with a clear and agreed sense of its own purpose, is a crucial stage in the establishment of an inquiry group. It is not to be rushed. Experience suggests that at least two pre-meetings, as well as informal conversations, are necessary.

The *organizational needs* of the inquiry group must also be met in these early meetings, and again these overlap with the emotional needs of nurturing the group into being, since people will feel more comfortable if they know they can meet the demands, such as time and money. A first introductory meeting is often so fully engaged with discussions of method and topic that the organizational details can only be touched on, to be revisited at a second meeting. The most significant decision usually concerns how often the group should meet and for what period of time. Ideally, the group will need: enough time in meeting together at the beginning to fully clarify the topic area and details of the inquiry method; enough time during the main body of the inquiry to thoroughly reflect on the information and experiences gathered; and enough time at the end to draw some conclusion and agree about any writing or other reporting that is desired – and in addition enough time to maintain a healthy group process through social activities (eating together and going for walks are common practices) and more formal group review sessions. Similarly, the group needs sufficient time between

meetings for members to try out and observe their own and each other's behaviour, to gather experience with a thoroughness that matches the complexity of the inquiry topic.

In practice, these decisions are made pragmatically, not on the basis of what is perfect but on what is good enough under the circumstances and for the task at hand. A substantial amount of work can be accomplished in a series of 6–8 half-day meetings, but more time is desirable. As with all aspects of cooperative inquiry, the issue is not one of getting it right, because every decision has its own consequences; rather, it is a matter of being clear about the choices that are made, and their consequences for the quality of inquiry. So if a relatively small amount of time is available, it is probably better to be modest in the aims of the inquiry group, and to keep the group small, remembering always that the purpose of cooperative inquiry is to generate information and understanding that are capable of transforming action rather than generating valid but impersonal and abstract understanding on a large scale.

In practice, these decisions are usually made on a 'propose and consult' basis: the initiator, with some sense of what is required from the inquiry topic itself, may propose to the group a number of different formats for meeting, and from the group's reaction to these will come to a decision which best approximates a consensus. For further examples of good studies, see Box 8.3 at the end of this chapter.

In summary, in the introductory meetings that launch a cooperative inquiry the emotional, task and organizational needs of the group are closely intertwined. The initiating facilitator must work to establish qualities of interaction that will allow the group to grow towards a full expression of the creative cycle. This includes: helping potential group members feel included in an emerging group which can meet their needs; finding a sense of purpose for the inquiry to which people can subscribe; and making organizational arrangements that enable the inquiry task to fit into people's lives. Thus the introductory meetings are both part of phase one on the inquiry cycle, in which the inquiry questions are clarified, and an essential grounding for the whole inquiry process is provided.

We want to emphasize the value and importance of spending time and giving careful attention to these early contracting arrangements, which is why this section on nurturing the group is substantially longer than those that follow. If you get this right (or at least 'good enough', to borrow from Winnicott), the rest will follow. We believe that more attempts at participative research fail because not enough attention is given to these early stages than for any other reason.

Cycles of action and reflection: moving into energizing

Following these initial meetings, which establish the existence of the inquiry project, the group is ready to move into the inquiry proper. In terms of the major phases of the group endeavour, this means moving from a primary focus on nurturing towards greater energizing. This doesn't mean that the work of nurturing the group has been done: every meeting, almost every interaction, involves a creative cycle; and this always includes bringing the group together with a clear sense of purpose as a foundation for good work together.

Throughout the life of a group the business of nurturing continues – ‘Who is feeling left out?’, ‘Who might be feeling oppressed?’, ‘Are we clear about our purposes?’ In particular, the first full meeting will probably be longer than subsequent ones and it may be the first occasion when the whole group is assembled: it is worth spending a good length of time on deepening the sense of mutual knowing and discussing in more detail the dimensions of the inquiry task.

However, if the group remains in a nurturing mode, the task of inquiry doesn’t get done (and the group will be at risk of smothering itself in destructive nurturing mode). The key task need is for the group to establish cycles of action and reflection since this is the major vehicle for moving the inquiry forward. This research cycling carries a fundamental rhythm of learning through which group members deepen their engagement with the inquiry, open themselves to more subtle understandings, engage with previously unsuspected aspects of the inquiry task, and so on. The research cycling, moving through the four ways of knowing described above, complements the creative group cycle.

A significant chunk of time at the first full meeting of the group is usually taken up with discussing in detail the basic ideas on which the inquiry will be founded, converting the sense of joint purpose into a practical task that can be accomplished (phase one of the inquiry cycle). This may involve sharing experiences, concerns, hopes and fears so that group members raise their awareness and establish a sense of solidarity about what questions are important (Douglas, 2002). More formally, the group may establish a model, or a set of questions, to guide the inquiry:

The holistic medicine group, established to explore the theory and practice of holistic medicine in the NHS, spent much of its first meeting with members in small groups reflecting on their practice as doctors, and drawing from this experience themes which defined the nature of holistic practice. By the end of the weekend a tentative five-part model of holistic practice had been developed which was to guide the rest of the inquiry. (see Reason, 1988)

These ideas then need to be translated into plans for the practical actions (propositional to practical knowing) which will form the basis of members’ activities while away from the group. Some groups will simply agree to carefully notice aspects of their experience that fall within the scope of the inquiry:

We ended with an agreement that the time until the [next] session would be an ‘exploratory’ cycle, rather than taking one of the themes discussed and working solely with that. We talked about today’s session as being an ‘awareness-raising’ one and the coming six weeks as time to mull over, digest and notice more awarely. I encouraged an already present sense of not wanting to rush the process. I believe in order for our questions to be meaningful, we have to give ourselves time to find them and give them space to grow. (McArdle, 2002: 185)

On the other hand, it may be appropriate to start more systematically:

The Hospital Group focused on a specific bureaucratic procedure to investigate differences of practice. The document chosen was a form that had to be signed by a potential service user, to give consent for the social worker to contact third parties to seek information about the user. Consent was seen by the authority as good practice in that it reflected partnership. Social workers in the Hospital Group were concerned that requesting a signature was a threatening practice for some people. When they felt that to be the case, they did not ask for a signature, even though they knew they *ought* to ... The group devised a technique of investigation and recording. Every time one of the forms *should* have been completed, participants recorded the reason why they did or did not ask service users to sign the form. In effect, they were required to justify their actions, both to themselves and to their peers in the co-operative inquiry group. (Baldwin, 2002: 290)

The holistic medicine group brainstormed ways in which each dimension of the five-part model could be applied in practice and how records of experience could be kept. Each doctor chose activities that were of greatest relevance to themselves and contracted with the rest of the group to study these. (see Reason, 1988)

It may be appropriate for all members of the group to undertake the same activity, or for each to choose their own idiosyncratic path of inquiry. Whichever way, cycles of action and reflection are established. Group members leave the group with more or less specific plans: they may agree to some very specific activities, as with the social work group, or more generally to observe particular aspects of experience; they may choose to experiment with novel activities, or to deepen their understanding of their everyday practice; they may record their experience through diaries, audio or video recordings, or mutual observation; they may choose to collect quantitative data where relevant. After the agreed period, the group reassembles to reflect on the experiences, to revise and develop their propositional understandings, and to enter a second cycle:

We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful – both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account. We quickly got into the habit of tape-recording our sessions and sending copies of relevant sections of the tapes to individuals to aid further reflection. Most sessions began with an extended ‘check in’ of this sort and then followed whatever themes emerged. On one occasion, following a ‘spin-off’ meeting arranged by several women members of the group, this led to a fascinating exploration of gender and leadership. We learned to trust the process of action inquiry and that, in an organisational setting at least, it needs to be sustained by careful cultivation and lots of energy. (Mead, 2002: 200)

Some group members will not find it easy to enter this inquiry cycle. They may enjoy the group interaction and enter fully into the discussions about the inquiry, but be unwilling to commit in practice. Others may rush off into new activity without giving sufficient attention to the reflective side of the inquiry. The inquiry facilitator has a crucial role to play here in initiating people into the iteration of action and reflection and helping people understand the power of the research cycle.

Heron (1996a) suggests that inquiry groups need to draw on both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities in their research cycling. Apollonian inquiry is planned, ordered and rational, seeking quality through systematic search: models are developed and put into practice; experiences are systematically recorded; different forms of presentation are regularly used. Dionysian inquiry is passionate and spontaneous, seeking quality through imagination and synchronicity: the group engages in the activity that emerges in the moment, rather than planning action; space is cleared for the unexpected to emerge; more attention is paid to dreams and imagery than to careful theory building; and so on. Apollonian inquiry carries the benefits of systematic order, while Dionysian inquiry carries the possibility of stretching the limits through play. To the extent that co-inquirers can embrace both Apollo and Dionysus in their inquiry cycling, they are able to develop diverse and rich connections with each other and with their experience.

Research cycling builds the energetic engagement of the group with its inquiry task and with each other, and thus meets the *emotional needs* of the group as it moves into energizing. As the group adventures into deeper exploration of the inquiry topic, to the extent that nurturing has built a safe container, members will become more deeply bonded and more open to conflict and difference. Deep and lasting friendships have started in inquiry groups, and relationships which are already stressed may fracture. When conflict arises between members, the group needs to find a way of working through differences, rather than ignoring or burying them, and different members will be able to offer skills of mediation, bridge-building, confrontation and soothing hurt feelings. The deepening engagement with the inquiry task may itself raise anxieties, for as people start to question their taken-for-granted assumptions and to try out new forms of behaviour, they can disturb old patterns of defence, and unacknowledged distress may seriously distort inquiry. Inquiry groups will need to find some way to draw the anxieties which arise from both these sources into awareness and resolve them; one of the best ways of doing this is to allow group process time in every meeting for such issues to be raised and explored.

The *organizing needs* of the group often revolve around maintaining the schedule of meeting, and within the meetings agreeing together how much time should be devoted to different activities. Typically, the structure for a meeting will be planned collaboratively, with different members taking increasing responsibility for leading different aspects. As the inquiry progresses, questions arise as to how best to complete the inquiry task – questions which often concern the validity and quality of inquiry. John Heron has explored the theoretical and practical aspects of validity in cooperative inquiry in detail (Heron, 1996a) (see Box 8.2). These may helpfully be seen within the wider context of validity in action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Reason, 2006). Often the initiating facilitator will introduce these validity procedures and invite the group to consider the implications for their inquiry.

This may raise questions about the appropriate balance of convergent and divergent cycling, the quality of interaction within the group, the amount of attention paid to anxiety, the degree to which the group may be colluding to avoid problematic aspects of the inquiry, and so on.

BOX 8.2 INQUIRY SKILLS AND VALIDITY PROCEDURES

Cooperative inquiry is based on people examining their own experience and action carefully in collaboration with people who share similar concerns and interests. But, you might say, isn't it true that people can fool themselves about their experience? Isn't this why we have professional researchers who can be detached and objective? The answer to this is that certainly people can and do fool themselves, but we find that they can also develop their attention so they can look at themselves critically – their way of being, their intuitions and imaginings, their beliefs and actions – and in this way improve the quality of their claims to fourfold knowing. We call this 'critical subjectivity'. It means that we don't have to throw away our personal, living knowledge in the search for objectivity, but are able to build on it and develop it. We can cultivate a high-quality and valid individual perspective on what there is, in collaboration with others who are doing the same.

We have developed a number of inquiry skills and validity procedures that can be part of a cooperative inquiry and which can help improve the quality of knowing. The skills include:

- *Being present and open.* This skill is about empathy, resonance and attunement – being open to the meaning we give to and find in our world.
- *Bracketing and reframing.* The skill here is holding in abeyance the classifications and constructs we impose on our perceiving, and trying out alternative constructs for their creative capacity; we are open to reframing the defining assumptions of any context.
- *Radical practice and congruence.* This skill means being aware, during action, of the relationship between our purposes, the frames, norms and theories we bring, our bodily practice, and the outside world. It also means being aware of any lack of congruence between these different facets of the action and adjusting them accordingly.
- *Non-attachment and meta-intentionality.* This is the knack of not investing one's identity and emotional security in an action, while remaining fully purposive and committed to it.
- *Emotional competence.* This is the ability to identify and manage emotional states in various ways. It includes keeping action free from distortion driven by the unprocessed distress and conditioning of earlier years.

(Continued)

(Continued)

The cooperative inquiry group is itself a container and a discipline within which these skills can be developed. These skills can be honed and refined if the inquiry group adopts a range of validity procedures intended to free the various forms of knowing involved in the inquiry process from the distortion of uncritical subjectivity.

- *Research cycling.* Cooperative inquiry involves going through the four phases of inquiry several times, cycling between action and reflection, looking at experience and practice from different angles, developing different ideas, and trying different ways of behaving.
- *Divergence and convergence.* Research cycling can be convergent, in which case the co-researchers look several times at the same issue, maybe looking each time in more detail; or it can be divergent, as co-researchers decide to look at different issues on successive cycles. Many variations of convergence and divergence are possible in the course of an inquiry. It is up to each group to determine the appropriate balance for their work.
- *Authentic collaboration.* Since intersubjective dialogue is a key component in refining the forms of knowing, it is important that the inquiry group develops an authentic form of collaboration. The inquiry will not be truly cooperative if one or two people dominate the group, or if some voices are left out altogether.
- *Challenging consensus collusion.* This can be done with a simple procedure which authorizes any inquirer at any time to adopt formally the role of devil's advocate in order to question the group as to whether any form of collusion is afoot.
- *Managing distress.* The group adopts some regular method for surfacing and processing repressed distress, which may get unwaveringly projected out, distorting thought, perception and action within the inquiry.
- *Reflection and action.* Since the inquiry process depends on alternating phases of action and reflection, it is important to find an appropriate balance, so that there is neither too much reflection on too little experience (which is armchair theorizing), nor too little reflection on too much experience (which is mere activism). Each inquiry group needs to find its own balance between action and reflection.
- *Chaos and order.* If a group is open, adventurous and innovative, putting all at risk to reach out for the truth beyond fear and collusion, then, once the inquiry is well under way, divergence of thought and expression may descend into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder and tension. A group needs to be prepared for chaos, tolerate it, and wait until there is a real sense of creative resolution.

(Adapted from Heron and Reason, 2001: 184)

Thus, in the major working phase of a creative cooperative inquiry, group members will continue to pay attention to nurturing each other and the group, while more attention is given to developing energetic cycles of inquiry. The task of the inquiry becomes figural, but it is nevertheless important to maintain attention for the continued health and authenticity of group interaction.

The creative peak

Randall and Southgate (1980) suggest that the peak is an important aspect of the creative group process, a moment when the 'living labour cycle' reaches a particular point of task accomplishment. In a cooperative inquiry group, which may be extended over weeks or months, there may be many 'mini-peaks' and if the group is successful there is likely to be an overall sense of accomplishment rather than a sharply defined moment in time. However, such moments do occur, particularly when members bring stories from the lives which show how the group is transforming their experience and practice.

Relaxing, appreciating and completing

Randall and Southgate (1980) call the third phase of the creative group 'relaxing', which in emotional terms means stepping back from the task, celebrating and appreciating achievements; in organizational terms, it means tying up loose ends; and in task terms, adding the final touches to group activities that move it to completion. Relaxing in this sense is an active, energetic engagement, different in quality from the feeling of 'getting out of the room and down to the pub', which so often characterizes our group experience.

We have also found that many groups express the emotional side of relaxing by choosing to give time to social activities – eating together, maybe going for walks – which provide a contrast to the intensity of inquiry and continue to build and deepen relationships:

After this first [midwives inquiry group] meeting, having tea and coffee with cake or biscuits while we talked seemed such a normal thing to do. After all, people do this ordinarily at any social gathering where conversation is to be the primary activity. Food and fluid as a 'social lubricant' made sense for subsequent meetings as participants were in the middle of working days and their bodies needed nourishment to keep going. (Barrett and Taylor, 2002: 242)

The organizational side of relaxing often involves keeping the group's records in good order, transcribing tapes of meetings, keeping flip-chart records together, providing summary statements of what has happened in meetings, and so on. This may be undertaken by each person looking after their individual records, or by one or more people taking care of this for the group:

I found that it took a considerable amount of energy and attention to hold the whole process together. Although we shared the tasks of arranging venues and of 'rounding

people up' for meetings, a good deal of the work came my way – from negotiating a budget to cover our costs for the year, to writing innumerable letters keeping members in touch with developments and making sure that those who could not get to particular meetings were kept in the picture. (Mead, 2002: 199–200)

The task requirement of the relaxing phase involves doing whatever is required to complete the inquiry, which often centres on how the learning from the project will be written up or otherwise reported to a wider audience. Sometimes groups attempt to write collaboratively, but more often one person or a small group does the actual writing in consultation with other group members (e.g., Maughan and Reason, 2001). It is important to agree the basis on which group members can use the material generated by the group, attending to issues of both confidentiality and ownership. A good rule of thumb is to agree that anyone may use the experience in any form they wish, so long as they include a clear statement about how the material has arisen (e.g., 'This is my account of the XYZ inquiry group; as far as I know I have represented the group's learning but I have not checked in detail with all members').

If the inquiry project has formed part of a higher degree or other formal publication that the initiator is undertaking, ensuring an authentic representation is particularly important:

Agnes Bryan and Cathy Aymer initiated and facilitated several inquiry groups of black professionals. Agnes subsequently worked with the transcripts of the groups as part of her PhD dissertation, finding immense difficulties in arriving at an authentic representation. She offered her findings to as many group members as she could, received challenging feedback and rewrote much of her text. She recorded and explored these difficulties of sense-making at length in her dissertation. (Bryan, 2000)

The relaxing phase of a creative group also involves winding down emotionally, saying farewells, and dealing with unfinished business. It is always tempting, particularly if the group has been successful, to avoid finishing properly, colluding to pretend that the group will meet again (this hints at a destructive dimension to the group's life, placing hopes in a future ideal state rather than dealing with the messy present reality). So time must be given for group members to have their final say as they separate from the group – it is often helpful to have a final 'round' at which each person can say what they have taken from the group, and leave behind any resentments or unfinished business.

By way of comment

We have offered two ways of seeing the inquiry process: through the logic of the inquiry process, cycling through propositional, practical, experiential and presentation knowing; and through the dynamics of the creative group cycle of nurturing, energizing, peak and relaxing. Please don't try to map these two descriptions onto each other in simple ways, but rather allow the two descriptions to interact and illuminate different aspects of the overall process. In the early life of the group, when the interpersonal emphasis will be

on nurturing, the group will most likely engage with the inquiry cycle in mechanical and tentative ways. As the group matures, it will be able to engage in inquiry more energetically and robustly, adapting it to members' own needs and circumstances. There is always a complex interplay between the logic of inquiry and the process of the human group, as is described in many of the accounts of cooperative inquiry (for a collection of these, see Reason, 2002).

OUTCOMES

If, as we argued at the beginning of this chapter, action research places a primacy on practical knowing – on localized, pragmatic, constructed, practical knowings – what is the 'outcome' in terms of a research product? Are 'research reports' (in whatever form) illegitimate, misguided, epistemologically in error? Clearly not, or the accounts of cooperative inquiry processes referred to in this chapter would never have been written. But the outcome of an inquiry is far more than can be written.

The practical knowing which is the outcome of a cooperative inquiry is part of the life experience and practice of those who participated: individual experience will be unique and reflect shared experience. The inquiry will continue to live (if it is successful), and the knowledge will be passed along, in the continuing practice of participants as informed by the inquiry experience: doctors practise differently and it affects their patients, colleagues and students; black women discover more about how to thrive, and it changes how they are as professionals and as mothers; police professionals see how leadership is a practice of continued learning with others; young women are empowered to speak from their experience, and so on.

So the first thing to remember about all forms of representation is not to confuse the map with the territory. The knowing (the territory) is in the experience and in the practice, and what we write or say about it is a *re-presentation*. Sometimes action research is seen – wrongly in our view – as primarily a means to develop rich qualitative data that can be put through the processes of grounded theory or some other form of sense-making; but in action research the sense-making is in the process of the inquiry, in the cycles of action and reflection, in the dialogue of the inquiry group.

Nevertheless, we may want to write. We may want to write for ourselves, for first-person inquiry, to keep records, to help make sense, to review or to deepen experience. Inquiry group members keep journals, dream diaries, write stories, draw pictures, and engage in all kinds of representation as part of their inquiry. We may want to write 'for us', for the inquiry group and for the community that it represents, to pull together ideas, create frameworks of understanding, and communicate what it is we think we have discovered. We may want to write for an outside audience to inform, to influence, to raise questions, to entertain. In these writing projects it is important to be clear about both authorship and audience. Rather than write in the 'voice from nowhere' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), reports from inquiry groups are clearly authored by members and directed to a particular purpose.

THINKING ABOUT USING COOPERATIVE INQUIRY FOR YOUR DISSERTATION?

Cooperative inquiry is an exciting method that should provide you with a rewarding dissertation experience, in part because both you and 'your' participants are engaged with the process. However, the difference between you and the other members of the group is that their engagement in the inquiry isn't tied into meeting institutional requirements for a dissertation, whereas yours will be. So it's useful to think through how you can both engage in inquiry in a deep way that is informed by the principles of cooperative inquiry (participatory, flexible, process oriented, employing cycles of action and reflection to facilitate flourishing and change) *and* write an excellent dissertation. Here is one way in which you might do this.

Start with a broad issue that you know/think a small group of relatively homogeneous people would be interested in meeting with you and each other on at least three occasions to discuss, reflect and develop ideas about.

Advertise or invite them through personal networks to meet with you and/or each other to learn about the inquiry process and if they want to participate in your study. Discuss what your and their time boundaries are to the inquiry. You will need to discuss with your supervisor what will be considered appropriate 'data collection' time for your institution, but what has worked for Sarah's students is a group size of 3–6 people who meet for an agreed period of time between 3–6 sessions, when a session lasts approximately an hour. Typically, if the participants/co-inquirers are students, this means that they will meet together once a week during term time for the agreed number of sessions. It doesn't sound like much, but some people will find that a lot to commit to and there will be at least one session that some people can't make and will need to be rescheduled, so build extra time into your planning.

Once you have volunteers and an agreed structure for the inquiry in terms of time, then you will need to meet your institutional ethical requirements, including consent forms and participant information sheets. Your challenge will be managing this administration well, while also allowing participants to feel energized and enthusiastic about the project. You may want to consider, for example, doing the paperwork before your first meeting, and then verbally reminding participants of what they have consented to and their rights (for example, to stop participating at any time without giving a reason).

While you are setting up the inquiry, discuss with your participants and your supervisor some potential content for the inquiry sessions. Then plan the first one in detail with the aim of providing a safe container for participants to explore their propositional knowledge about the issue and develop a sense of nurturing and trust in the group. Try to include an energizing activity so that the experience is enjoyable and they want to come back. Conclude with a summary activity that allows the participants to share a sense of where they are and what action they might want to explore over the week. Meet with your supervisor after each session and talk through the issues raised and also the energy in the room (did people seem enthusiastic, anxious, etc.? What do you need to do to help them feel supported enough to

explore this issue further?). Consider your own emotional responses in the meeting and how these might either enable or limit you in your facilitation. Cooperative inquiry is an emotional business – as a facilitator you need to provide a safe container from which the group can do good work. This will involve emotional work and it's important to talk through your emotional responses with the group. Often cooperative inquiry facilitators have a mentor with whom they can discuss their experiences and feelings, so use your supervisor as your mentor.

After your first session, plan the subsequent sessions in response to the discussions you have with your supervisor and any other lead from your participants, so that you have something to suggest if they turn to you. But hold this plan lightly – it's there for when your participants look to you for direction. Often inquiry members enjoy someone else making the effort to structure a session, but try to create opportunities for your participants to take the lead so that it is a participatory inquiry, and don't push an activity if people don't seem to want to engage with it.

With a four-week inquiry, week one is focused on setting up and week four on drawing discussions together and finding a way to close the inquiry. Between that you have two sessions to develop reflection on the issue. That's not a lot of time, but it is enough to see some changes. Typically, participants highlight various issues in the earlier sessions which they return to in later ones, perhaps thinking about them differently or more deeply; this allows the inquiry to develop a more focused approach to the issue at hand. Group members may also outline actions for change either during the inquiry or afterwards. For example, a student of Sarah's ran a group with older women about their issues around beauty. One thing that emerged was that the group members, who were already friends, realized that they ignored each other's compliments, but that these compliments were spoken genuinely. The group resolved that after the inquiry they would not dismiss a friend's positive comments, but instead would choose to enjoy them.

There is a potential tension between your role as an inquiry group member facilitating the participants in developing a focused inquiry, and you as a student needing to complete a project that can be written up as a dissertation. Cooperative inquiry in its fullest sense is cooperative: everyone is involved in the sense-making and that includes activities and outputs from the inquiry. Torre et al. (2001), for example, wrote up a participatory project located in a prison that involved training inmates in research methods so that a community of researchers was formed within the inquiry. All were authors of their publication. However, it might be that the outputs from your work move down the participatory continuum, with you applying a form of qualitative analysis on the audio recordings of the meetings in a less collaborative way to meet the requirements of your dissertation.

If you have participants' permission to audiorecord the meetings (always with the possibility of turning the recorder off), then a relatively straightforward approach is to transcribe these recordings, which gives you a data set. You will also need to formulate a research question, which you can answer using this data set and with an appropriate form of analysis. This question may not be the same question that you started with, or expected to end with, or which your participants are inquiring into, and it might be driven by your own methodological and theoretical interests as much as the content of the data set.

For example, if your participants started their inquiry asking 'How do older women make sense of beauty issues in their lives?' and developed this into 'How do older women negotiate pleasure in their appearance?', in the process they will have discussed their meanings of beauty and age at great length. A student interested in taking a social constructionist approach might then consider analysing this data using Foucauldian discourse analysis or social constructionist-informed thematic analysis to explore constructions of age and beauty, whereas a student more interested in experiential understanding might employ a phenomenologically informed thematic analysis with the question 'How do older women experience their feminine identity?', and thematically explore how this experience is tied up within understandings of age and beauty.

This tactic, of applying a qualitative method of analysis to the recordings of your inquiry sessions, has the potential to pull you back into the observer/subject dichotomy of research that participatory approaches resist. In effect, you could take the data and run. To avoid this, work with your participants on the inquiry so that they can be as engaged with the analysis and outputs as they want to be. Bring the transcriptions to the meetings, perhaps leaving longer gaps between meetings so that you have time to transcribe and share the transcriptions. If your inquiry group is interested in exploring their transcriptions with you, look at developing an analysis collaboratively. It can be part of an action-reflection cycle. If your group is less interested in applying qualitative techniques, then a distinction between shared sense-making and applying qualitative techniques to that sense-making may emerge in your study. In effect, following this procedure means that your dissertation becomes one inquiry among many going on in the group and the process is experienced as participatory at the level that people want to engage.

This is not the only way that cooperative inquiry can be produced as a dissertation, but as long as you have permission from the group to explore their talk in the way you envisage, then this approach allows a cooperative inquiry to meet the needs of a dissertation in a relatively straightforward way. There are other ways (see Chowns' example of participatory video research at the end of this chapter), but at this stage most students will find enough challenges in helping to facilitate a dynamic and fully immersed inquiry. The benefits of doing an 'academic inquiry' within the inquiry are also evident when writing up, as students can follow the normative format for the chosen method of analysis (e.g., discourse analysis), although the method might be longer and with named quality criteria specific to cooperative inquiry also included (e.g., on group processes).

To increase your confidence that you are doing a good cooperative inquiry, focus on your process. In particular, consider the following:

- Group processes: take care of the process and the outcome will take care of itself.
- Extended epistemology: try to focus on experiential knowledge. Cycling between experiential and presentational knowledge for as long as possible will prevent shifting too quickly to propositional knowledge and reproducing frameworks with which you are already familiar.

- Cycles of action and reflection: structure your design to include cycles of action and reflection so that your group can experiment with the ideas they are developing, and review and reflect on how valuable they are in changing a system or helping them to understand it differently.
- Build in consultation time: share your analysis ideas with your participants/co-inquirers so that they may contribute, concur or have the fact that they disagree with your analysis recorded in your thesis.

Top tip: given that your dissertation markers may be unfamiliar with cooperative inquiry, make it easier for them to know how to assess your report by stating in your method section the quality criteria by which your cooperative inquiry should be judged.

And note that while many of the examples we offer in this chapter come from a series of projects that Sarah has supervised on women's experience of appearance issues, cooperative inquiry can be used for a range of projects, including those in educational, health, organizational and social psychology. For example, Sarah supervised a cooperative inquiry project on the experiences of mature students at university. A similar inquiry could be done by students in organizations where they have done a work placement or in their own university, if you can identify a group of people who would like to inquire into their work practices. This could include how to be more environmentally sustainable or how to work creatively within organizational constraints.

CONCLUSION

Cooperative inquiry offers a radical, empowering approach to research that can move flexibly in the direction that most suits the participants. It has the potential to contribute to a range of questions in which psychology students may be interested, and offers exciting opportunities for new and established psychology researchers.

Cooperative inquiry provides a different way of thinking about and doing research, focusing on working with people collaboratively to learn and enhance lives – both the lives of those involved in the inquiry and, in some cases, the lives of those affected by the institutions to which the co-inquirers belong (see, for example, the legacy of Piran's (2001) cooperative inquiry with ballet school pupils that changed an institutional culture). As such, cooperative inquiry research is particularly timely, addressing as it does recent drives for research that impacts and benefits individuals or organizations outside academia (for UK examples, see the impact requirements for the Research Excellence Framework or those of the Economic and Social Research Council). Its spirit, though, is less on addressing current concerns of research review bodies and more on imagining into being new ways of engaging in and with the world in ways that allow people to flourish – a rationale that is behind many people's decisions to study psychology, but one that is often lost in the drive for systematic, validated knowledge. Cooperative inquiry offers students and researchers the possibility of doing quality research while not forgetting the values that brought them there in the first place.

BOX 8.3 THREE GOOD EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE INQUIRY

Dilemmas of femininity

Riley and Scharff (2013) participated in an inquiry with six other academics to explore their experience of contemporary gendered identities. The participants were all white women working in British universities, able-bodied and feminist-identified, but they differed in terms of sexuality, original nationalities, personal histories, understandings of feminism, levels of participation in beauty practices, and motherhood. The group met for eight all-day meetings over a six-month period. The meetings followed a similar pattern: a checking-in activity to get sense of what was being brought to the group; a review of any actions or reflections since the last meeting; reflection activities to develop experiential or presentational knowing on a topic that had emerged from previous meetings or which had been introduced in the warm-up activities of that day; and closing activities. The paper clearly describes its application of the cooperative inquiry method before applying a form of discourse analysis to the recordings of the meetings. Focusing on one theme that emerged in this talk, the paper explores a dilemma between the participants' feminist-informed critical understanding of beauty practices, such as wearing makeup, and their own participation in such beauty practices. The paper reports how the group explored this dilemma, considering their own pleasures in meeting culturally defined beauty norms while also feeling that somehow their feminist consciousness should mean that they were able to resist these. They also brainstormed strategies to resist or engage differently with this dilemma, providing interesting examples of change possibilities from both the successful and less successful solutions.

Fixed by gaze and space

This was a Master's in Research dissertation project led by Stephanie Stafford Smith and supervised by Sarah Riley (Stafford Smith, 2010). Its focus was on exploring body image development through a cooperative inquiry with 14- and 15-year-old girls, supporting them to ask critical and reflective questions about when and where they felt conscious of their bodies. It highlighted for both the participants and the researchers the social aspects of body image development. It is a good example of how to provide structure and support for critical thinking, while enabling participants to have a sense of being in a nurturing and energizing environment of which they had ownership. Friendship groups were recruited to facilitate a safe space for a three-meeting inquiry. A range of activities aimed at evoking memories of experiences were offered to allow experiential, presentational and propositional knowing, and themes that emerged in one meeting were developed in subsequent meetings. The focus of the meetings was to identify where participants felt self-conscious of their bodies and to develop strategies for dealing with these situations. Techniques included a 'learning pathways grid' (Rudolph et al., 2001) adapted for use with young people, which was further developed in a subsequent project (see Figure 8.2). Using the questions on the grid, participants were encouraged to reflect on and challenge their frameworks for making sense of an experience. In the process, they identified different ways of making sense of the experience and discussed ideas for how they might respond differently should it occur again. The grids were used as a solution-focused strategy to develop practical knowing, thus giving the inquiry sustainability.

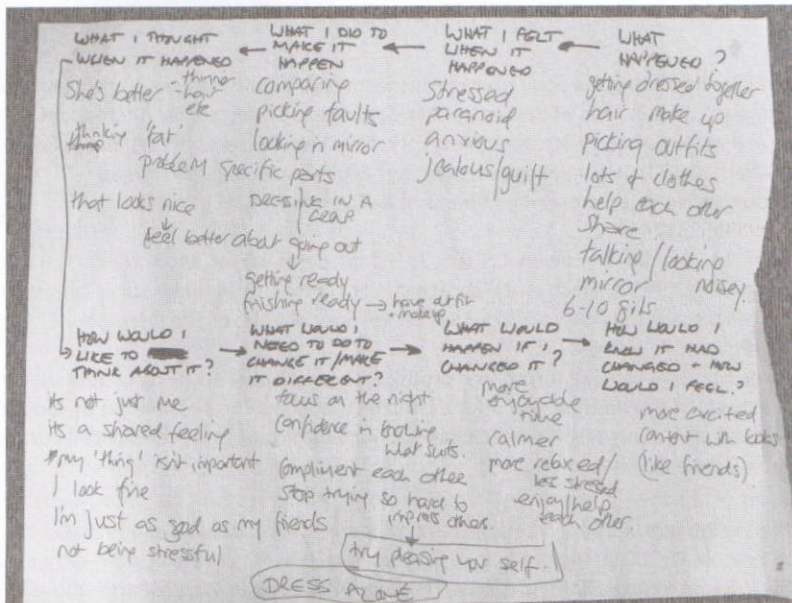


Figure 8.2 Recent example of a learning pathways grid adaptation for working with young people (designed by Stephanie Stafford Smith). The example is taken from a project led by Sarah Riley with young women aged 16–17, who were discussing the stress of getting ready for a night out with friends. Stages of this learning pathways grid include: What happened? What I felt when it happened? What I did to make it happen? What I thought when it happened? How would I like to think about it? What would I need to do to change it and make it different? What would happen if I changed it? How would I know it had changed and how would I feel?

No you don't know how we feel

Cooperative inquiry can also be combined with participatory video so that one output of the project is a video made by the group members that articulates an issue of importance to them. For example, Gillian Chowns, a social worker engaged in palliative care with children and families, convened a group of children, each of whom had a parent dying of cancer, as a cooperative inquiry group to research the experience of these children as they saw it. Chowns chose cooperative inquiry as an approach that offered a more ethical, respectful and democratic way of working with these children, a marginalized group in the world of palliative care. The group worked together to produce a video to help make findings more readily accessible, as well as being a contemporary, attractive medium for the young co-researchers (Chowns, 2006, 2008). For further discussion of participatory video, see: <http://betterpracticewordpress.com/the-webinars-2/>, and Lunch and Lunch (2006).

FURTHER READING

- Piran, N. (2001) 'Re-inhabiting the body from the inside out: girls transform their school environment', in D.L. Tolman and M. Brydon-Miller (eds), *From Subjects to Subjectivities: A Handbook of Interpretive and Participatory Methods*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 218–38.
- Riley, S. and Scharff, C. (2013) 'Feminism vs femininity? Exploring feminist dilemmas through cooperative inquiry research', *Feminism & Psychology*, 23(2): 207–23. DOI: 10.1177/0959353512454615.
- Torre, M.E., Fine, M., Boudin, K., Bowen, I., Clark, J., Hylton, D., Martinez, M., Roberts, M.R.A., Smart, P. and Upegui, D. (2001) 'A space for co-constructing counter stories under surveillance', *Under the Covers: Theorising the Politics of Counter Stories*. Special issue of *The International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 4: 149–66.

The above three readings represent research produced by psychologists using cooperative inquiry. They discuss aspects of the method and offer examples that show the possibilities of cooperative inquiry in terms of producing new knowledge and actions that change the lives of the participants.

- Heron, J. (1996a) *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London: Sage.
- Heron, J. and Reason, P. (2001) 'The practice of co-operative inquiry: research "with" rather than "on" people', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Reason, P. (2002) *The Practice of Co-operative Inquiry*. Special issue of *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 15(3): 169–270.

The above three readings are work from originators and leading figures of cooperative inquiry, John Heron and Peter Reason. They detail the principles of the method and offer interesting examples of its application. Publications by Peter Reason can be found at: peterreason.eu