> with materials, and the intellectual part which questions the associations of such materials, how they are shaped in the art-making and what it all means. She invited immediate artist friends and colleagues to a meeting at her house to explore establishing an inquiry group. (Adeline, personal communication, 2002)

Such a meeting 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 chit-chat and stereotypical interaction, but, nevertheless, 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 tasky agenda without hearing why people have come together, the new group can be off to a 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 people are asked to say their names 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 becoming co-researchers in a relationship of mutual influence.

It is here that the initiators of inquiry need to exercise authentic authority in setting out as clearly as they can the principles and practices of cooperative inquiry, and 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. My own usual practice 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. I find it 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. While clarity at this stage is important, one must also realize that cooperative inquiry, as an experiential process, can be fully learned only 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: facilitators 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, are 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 in to 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 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 have enough time in meeting together at the beginning fully to clarify topic area and details of inquiry method; enough time during the main body of the inquiry thoroughly to 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; also 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 which 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 is 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:

> The inquiry exploring the theory and practice of holistic medicine met for two extended half-day introductory meetings, agreeing then to meet for six two-day residential workshops spaced at six week intervals. (see Reason, 1988)

> Four young women students explored their experience in organizations entirely on the telephone as part of a university term paper. (see Onyett, 1996)

> Twelve facilitators and organizational consultants met to explore their practice in a combination of weekends and full half-days over two years. (Reason, unpublished research diary, 1999)

> Inquiries into transpersonal experience have taken place in a residential workshop over a period of a week. (see Heron, 2001)

> The inquiry into leadership in the police force met on eight occasions over a fifteen month period starting and ending with a residential two-day meeting, otherwise meeting for afternoons during mid-week. (see Mead, 2002)

In summary, in the introductory meetings which 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 toward a full expression of the creative cycle. This includes helping potential group members to feel included in an emerging group that 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. I do not think it is possible to overestimate the value of spending time and giving careful attention to these early contracting arrangements, and that is why this section on nurturing the group is substantially longer than those which follow. If you get this right (or at least 'good enough', to borrow from Winnicott), the rest will follow.

Cycles of Action and Reflection: Moving into Energizing

After 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 toward greater energizing. This does not 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?' and 'Are we clear about our purposes?' In particular, the first full meeting will probably be longer than later ones, and it may be the first occasion when the whole group is assembled: it is worth spending plenty 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 does not get done (and the group will be at risk of smothering itself in the 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 in discussing in detail the basic ideas on which the inquiry will be founded, converting the sense of joint purpose into a practical task which can be accomplished. 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, 2001); 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 [National Health Service], 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 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 notice carefully 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)

However, 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, 2001: 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 either to undertake the same activity or 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, enter fully into the discussions about the inquiry, but be unwilling to commit themselves 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 (1996) 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 offers 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 both more deeply bonded and more open to conflict and difference. Deep and lasting friendships have started in inquiry groups, but relationships which are already stressed may fracture. When conflict arises between members, the group needs to find a way of working through, rather than ignoring or burying differences, 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 how much time should be devoted to different activities. Typically, the structure of 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, 1996) (see Box 10.1); these may helpfully be seen within the wider context of validity in action research (Bradbury and Reason, 2001).

Often the initiating facilitator will introduce these validity procedures and invite the group to consider their 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.

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 may become the centre of attention, 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 their lives which show how the group is transforming their experience and practice.

Relaxing, Appreciating and Completing

Randall and Southgate 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, it means adding the final touches to group activities that move the task 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' that 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

Box 10.1 Inquiry skills and validity procedures (adapted from Heron and Reason, 2001: 184)

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, what if people 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 – their way of being, their intuitions and imaginings, and their beliefs and actions – critically and in this way improve the quality of their claims to fourfold knowing. We call this 'critical subjectivity'; it means that we do not 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 about 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.

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.

continued

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 develop 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 unawarely projected out, distorting thought, perception and action within the inquiry.

Reflection and action. Since 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.

> 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 people looking after their own 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 both to issues of 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 (for example, '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. (see 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 members can say what they have taken from the group, and leave behind any resentments or unfinished business.

By Way of Comment

I 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 do not 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 the 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, 2001).

Outcomes

If, as I 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 and 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 passed along, in the continuing practice of participants as informed by the inquiry experience: doctors practise differently and this affects their patients, colleagues and students; black women discover more about how to thrive and this 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 my 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, first-person inquiry, to keep records, to help make sense, to review or to deepen experience. Inquiry group members keep journals and 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 or to entertain. In these writing projects, it is important to be clear about both authorship and audience. Rather than being written in the 'voice from nowhere', reports from inquiry groups are clearly authored by members and directed to a particular purpose.

An Experiment in Cooperative Inquiry

The best way to learn about cooperative inquiry is to do it. The following outline experiment is intended for a group of students to use in a classroom setting to explore together the practice of cooperative inquiry. Clearly, it is not possible to describe such an activity in complete detail (if it were, it would no longer be inquiry!). Rather, I invite you to try the activity out in the spirit of exploring cooperative inquiry in an experiential fashion – and of course you may wish to design a different experiment to explore an issue of your own choice. If your class group is large, you may wish to split into smaller groups to facilitate the process.

Improving Conversations and Dialogue in the Classroom

Undergraduate courses often have seminars running alongside formal lectures, in which students are expected to participate in discussion. But these seminars are often problematic – people do not want to or do not know how to contribute, the ground rules are unclear, and often what happens is that one or two students who are prepared to speak (and are often fed up with their colleagues who will not) dominate the proceedings, while the seminar

leader (often a relatively inexperienced postgraduate student) struggles to keep things going.

Phase 1 (propositional knowing). Identify an aspect of your interaction as a class you would like to improve. It might be a general issue, such as 'improving the quality of our dialogue in class discussion', or, better, maybe something more specific to the needs of the group. See whether you can identify something you really care about. Then brainstorm practical things you might do to achieve this and agree on one or more to try out.

Phase 2 (practical knowing). Carry on with your normal class activities, with everyone doing what they can to implement the agreement. Keep some kind of notes of the experience.

Phase 3 (experiential knowing). As you do this, allow yourself to attend to the fullness of the experience; to shyness, irritations, embarrassments, angers, delights and triumphs. Notice the subtleties of experience.

Phase 4 (presentational knowing to propositional knowing). Take some time in pairs or trios to review your experience, and then discuss together what you have noticed. What do you learn from this experience that you should take into a further cycle of inquiry? How could you develop your practices of dialogue? How does what you have learned experientially relate to formal theories you are learning?

An inquiry such as this could continue through a whole semester of seminar meetings, and could focus on skills of interpersonal practice, on questions of authority, gender, power and competition, and so on.

Further Reading

Heron, J. (1996) *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition.* London: Sage.

Here John Heron sets out the theoretical foundation for cooperative inquiry practice and outlines the many different options in practice, based on 25 years' experience with this approach.

Reason, P. (ed.) (2001) *Special Issue: The Practice of Co-operative Inquiry. Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 14 (6).

Six examples of cooperative inquiry in practice, with commentaries.

Toulmin, S. (1990) *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity.* New York: Free Press.

One of the most accessible accounts of the rise of Enlightenment science, and its relationship to the spirit of the time, it also provides a powerful philosophical argument for action research practices.

Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) 'Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds), *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice.* London: Sage.

An introduction to the field of action research and to a some of the philosophical considerations about paradigms, world-views and epistemology; contains many useful references to other scholarship on these matters.

Randall, R. and Southgate, J. (1980) *Co-operative and Community Group Dynamics . . . Or Your Meetings Needn't Be So Appalling.* London: Barefoot Books.

Unfortunately out of print but available through inter-library loan, this is still, in my view, a most useful, practical account of creative group practices.

Chapter 11

Validity and qualitative psychology

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There is now considerable discussion among qualitative psychologists about how to assess the quality of qualitative research. The background to this was growing disaffection with the judging of qualitative research within the traditional framework of validity and reliability applied to quantitative research. This was particularly the case with journals, for example, which might reject a qualitative paper because it did not meet the assumed requirements of validity for quantitative work. The view of many qualitative researchers is that validity and quality are important considerations, but that qualitative research must be judged by criteria which are appropriate to it.

While there has been thinking and writing about this for some time (for example, Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992; Smith, 1996b; Stiles, 1993), the discussion has reached a new maturity with the publication of two papers which present general guidelines for assessing the quality of qualitative psychological research (Elliott et al., 1999; Yardley, 2000). I think of these publications as mature for two main reasons. First, their suggested criteria are wide-ranging and offer a range of ways of establishing quality. Second, they attempt to offer criteria which can be applied irrespective of the particular theoretical orientation of a qualitative study. That first factor is important because some qualitative psychologists feared this debate might lead to a simplistic prescriptive checklist of items, whereby a journal editor could read a qualitative paper and award it a score of, say, 7 out of 10 on quality and use that to decide whether it was publishable or not. The papers by Yardley and Elliott et al. avoid that pitfall.

Lucy Yardley offers three broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research. The first principle is *sensitivity to context*. She argues that a good qualitative research study should demonstrate a sensitivity to the context in which the study is situated. However, she offers a number of different ways in which such sensitivity can be established. Researchers can show an awareness of the existing literature, and this, in turn, can be either substantive or theoretical, the former related to the topic of investigation, and the latter to the underpinnings of the research method itself. For example, a phenomenological study of perceptions of kindness might use

much of the introduction to outline the rationale for a phenomenological study and show an awareness of the key concepts of the approach. The discussion could link the study's findings to the extant psychological literature on the substantive area.

Alternatively, one might consider the degree to which the study is sensitive to the data itself, for example, in terms of how well the unfolding argument is evidenced with material drawn from participants. So, for example, a discourse analytic study on how participants account for political allegiance would usually have detailed extracts from the participants' responses to provide evidence for the interpretation being offered. Yet another way the researchers can demonstrate sensitivity to context is by attending to how the socio-cultural milieu in which the study takes place may have influenced its conduct and outcome. Thus, for example, a narrative study on orchestral musicians' biographies might attend to how normative expectations in this historical period and the socio-cultural situation of the particular group from which participants have been drawn may influence the results. Finally, the relationship between researcher and participant itself is a further context one might be sensitive to. Thus, an author might note how the expectations of participants affected their response in an interview and draw on examples of the interview process to illustrate that.

Yardley's second broad principle is *commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence*. Commitment can be tested by the degree of engagement demonstrated, but this can itself be in a number of domains, such as through extended experience using the particular qualitative approach or from extensive knowledge of the substantive field. So, for example, as part of the write-up of a study on attitudes of professionals and viewers towards 'reality television', a grounded theorist might attest to her or his 'commitment' from having conducted several grounded theory studies over the course of ten years. At a more particular level, the grounded theorist might demonstrate it through intensive and prolonged 'fieldwork' during this specific study and by indications of extended immersion in the data collected.

Rigour refers to the thoroughness of the study, in terms of the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand and the completeness of the analysis undertaken. Transparency and coherence refer to how clearly the stages of the research process are outlined in the write-up of the study. A researcher using interpretative phenomenological analysis to study how participants make sense of government foreign policy may attempt to enhance transparency by carefully describing how participants were selected, how the interview schedule was constructed and the interview conducted, and what steps were used in analysis. The coherence of the analytic argument and claims being made can be evaluated by the reader as well. Yardley suggests that coherence can also refer to the fit between the research carried out and the underlying philosophical assumptions of the approach