A LAYPERSON'S GUIDE TO CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY

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What is co-operative inquiry?

Co-operative inquiry is a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better.

We usually think of inquiry and research as something done by people in Universities and research institutes. We think there is a researcher who has all the ideas, and who then studies other people by observing them, asking them questions, or by designing experiments. The trouble with this kind of way of doing research is that there is often very little connection between the researcher's thinking and the concerns and experiences of the people who are actually involved. People are treated as passive subjects rather than as active agents.

We believe that good research is research *with* people rather than *on* people. We believe that ordinary people are quite capable of developing their own ideas and can work together in a co-operative inquiry group to see if these ideas make sense of their world and work in practice.

A second problem with traditional research is that the kind of thinking done by researchers is often theoretical rather than practical. It doesn't help people find how to act to change things in their lives. We believe that the outcome of good research is not just books and academic papers, but is also the creative action of people to address matters that are important to them. Co-operative inquiry is thus a form of what is called action research: it is concerned with revisioning our understanding of our world, as well as transforming practice within it.

In co-operative inquiry a group of people come together to explore issues of concern and interest. All members of the group contribute both to the ideas that go into their work together, and also are part of the activity that is being researched. Everyone has a say in deciding what questions are to be addressed and what ideas may be of help; everyone contributes to thinking about how to explore the questions; everyone gets involved in the activity that is being researched; and finally everybody has a say in whatever conclusions the co-operative inquiry group may reach. So in co-operative inquiry the split between "researcher" and "subjects" is done away with, and all those involved act together as "co-researchers" and as "co-subjects".

These are some examples of co-operative inquiry groups:

> A group of general medical practitioners formed a co-operative inquiry group to develop the theory and practice of holistic medicine. They built a simple model of holistic practice, and experimented with in practice,

exploring a range of intervention skills, power sharing with patients, concern for the spiritual dimensions of illness as well as attention to their own needs as medical practitioners. The experience of this study contributed to the formation of the British Holistic Medical Association. This study was taken forward when a group of general and complementary medical practitioners worked together to explore how they might effectively work in an interdisciplinary fashion.

A group of obese and post-obese women explored their experience together, looking in particular at how they were stereotyped in society, and how it was difficult for them to obtain appropriate attention from doctors and other medial people. This is one of several inquiries in which groups of people with a particular physical or medical condition have worked together to take charge of how their condition is defined and treated. Co-counselling, a form of peer self-help psychotherapy, has also used co-operative inquiry to deepen understanding of its processes and methods.

Two black social work teachers established inquiry groups of black social work students, practitioners and managers to explore their experience. They looked at relationships between black people at work, particularly the experience of black managers and subordinates working together; and how a creative black culture could be generated.

Several inquiry groups have met to explore ceremony, mystical and subtle experience in an attempt to create forms of spiritual practice which are appropriate to present times.

Several groups have formed to explore questions of gender, in particular experience of women and men at work. One inquiry looked at how black women might learn to thrive, as well as survive in British organizations. Another explored the experience of young women managers in primarily male organizations. And another is looking at whether men in organizations need to explore questions of their gender in the workplace.

How a co-operative inquiry group works

Co-operative inquiry is a systematic approach to developing understanding and action. And while every group is different, each one can be seen as engaged in *cycles of action and reflection* which go something like this.

The first thing is to bring a group of people together who have a common interest. In Phase One a group of co-researchers come together to explore an agreed area of human activity. In this first phase they talk about their interests and concerns, agree on the focus of their inquiry, and develop together a set of questions or propositions they wish to explore. They agree to undertake some action, some practice, which will

contribute to this exploration, and agree to some set of procedures by which they will observe and record their own and each other's experience.

> For example, a group of health visitors in south west England were invited by one of their colleagues to form an inquiry group to explore the sources of stress in their work. After much resistance to the idea that they could be "researchers", the group decided to explore the stress that comes from the "hidden agendas" in their work -- the suspicions they had about problems such as depression, child abuse, and drug taking in the families they visit which are unexpressed and unexplored.

In Phase Two the group apply their agreed actions in their everyday life and work: they initiate the actions and observe and record the outcomes of their own and each other's behaviour. They may at first simply watch what it is that happens to them so they develop a better understanding of their experience; later they may start trying out new forms of action.

The health visitors first explored among themselves their feelings about these "hidden agendas" and how they managed them at present. They then decided to experiment with confronting them. They practised the skills they thought they would need through role play, and then agreed to try raising their concerns directly with their client families.

In Phase Three the co-researchers become full immersed in their experience. They may become more open to what is going on and they may begin to see their experience in new ways. They may deepen 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. This phase is in some ways the touchstone of the inquiry method, and is what makes it so very different from conventional research, because here people are deeply involved in their own experience so any practical skills or new understandings will grow out of this experience.

The health visitors' experience of trying out new ways of working with clients was both terrifying and liberating in ways none of them had expected. On the one hand they felt they were really doing their job; on the other hand they were concerned about the depth of the problems they would uncover and whether they had adequate skills to cope with them. The woman who had initiated the project in particular was anxious and had disturbing dreams. They found they had to keep in good contact with each other to provide support and reassurance as they tried out new behaviours.

After an agreed period engaged in phases two and three, the co-researchers re-assemble to consider their original questions in the light of their experience-this is phase four of the inquiry. As a result they may change their questions in some way; or reject them and pose new questions. They then agree on a second cycle of action and

reflection. They may choose to focus on the same or on different aspects of the overall inquiry. The group may choose to amend or develop its inquiry procedures-forms of action, ways of gathering data-in the light of experience of the first cycle.

The health visitors came back together and shared their experience, helping each other understand what had taken place and developing their strategies and skills at confronting hidden agendas. After several cycles they reflected on what they had learned and wrote a report which they circulated to their managers and colleagues.

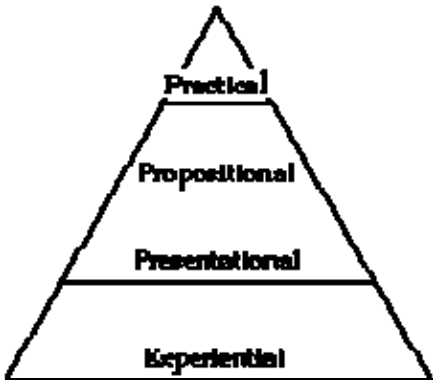
A co-operative inquiry often engages in some six to ten cycles of action and reflection. These can take place over a short workshop or may extend over a year or more, depending on the kind of questions that are being explored.

The kinds of knowledge a co-operative inquiry group can create

Co-operative inquiry involves at least four different kinds of ways of knowing. We call this an "extended epistemology"-*epistemology* meaning a theory of how you know, and *extended* because it reaches beyond the primarily theoretical knowledge of academia. Experiential knowing is through direct face-to-face encounter with person, place or thing; it is knowing through empathy and resonance, and is almost impossible to put into words. Presentational knowing emerges from experiential knowing, and provides the first form of expression by drawing on expressive forms of imagery through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance and so on. Propositional knowing "about" something, is knowing through ideas and theories, expressed in informative statements. Practical knowing is knowing "how to" do something and is expressed in a skill, knack or competence.

In co-operative inquiry we say that knowing will be more valid -richer, deeper, more true to life and more useful-if these four ways of knowing are congruent with each other: if our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives. You can see that this was so for the Health visitors in their work together.

The relationship between the four ways of knowing is shown in the following figure:



Other ways to improve the quality of knowing and action

You will see by now that co-operative inquiry is a radically different ways of doing research. It 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 their beliefs and theories critically and in this way improve the quality of their claims to knowing. We call this "critical subjectivity"; it means that we don't have to throw away our living knowledge in the search for objectivity, but are able to build on it and develop it.

We have developed a number of procedures that can be part of a co-operative inquiry which can help improve the quality of knowing. These are some of them.

1) **Research cycling.** It should be already clear that co-operative inquiry involves going through the four phases of inquiry several times, cycling between action and reflection, looking at experience from different angles, developing different ideas, trying different ways of behaving. The health visitors went through four or five cycles as the experimented with different ways of relating to their clines. 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 cycling 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 the group to decide which one is appropriate for each piece of research.

2) **Balance of action and reflection**. Too much time in reflection is just armchair theorizing; too much time in action is mere activism. But it may be important, particularly in the early stages, to spend considerable time reflecting in order to gather together experience; and it may be important later to concentrate on trying out different actions to see how they work. Each inquiry group needs to find it own balance between action and reflection, depending on the topic being explored.

3) **Developing critical attention.** Co-researchers need to develop the ability to look at their experience with affectionate curiosity with the intention of understanding it better. They need not to be so attached to what they have been doing that they cannot be look at it critically. The process of research cycling is a discipline which helps people develop this ability. As the group matures it may be helpful to use constructive challenge in order to hone people's critical attention. For example, in the Devil's Advocate procedure each person takes a turn in saying what they believe they have discovered, and other group members challenge their statements, trying to find other explanations for their claims, or evidence which shows their claims are not based in experience.

4) **Authentic collaboration**. It is really important that members of a co-operative inquiry group develop ways of working which are collaborative. You can't really call it co-

operative inquiry if one or two people dominate the group, or if some voices are left out altogether. This doesn't mean that everyone has to have exactly the same role: it may be that one person in the group has more knowledge of the subject, another knows more about the inquiry method. But it does mean that specialist knowledge is used in the service of the group. In order to develop equal contribution within a group it may be useful to rotate formal leadership round the group; to have "rounds" in which everyone can have a say about the topic being discussed wile the rest listen: and regular review periods where all group members can say how they feel about the way the group is working. (It is also important to note that there may be people outside the inquiry group who are affected by what it does; while they cannot be full co-researchers, they too should be approached in the spirit of co-operation and dialogue.)

5) **Dealing with distress**. Co-operative inquiry can be an upsetting business. If the co-researchers are really willing to examine their lives and their experience in depth and in detail, it is likely that they will uncover things they have been avoiding looking at and aspect of their life with which they are uncomfortable. Indeed, many inquiry groups are set up to explore these kinds of issues. So the group must be willing to address emotional distress openly when it arrives: to allow the upset persons the healing of self-expression, which may involves expressions of grief, anger or fear. Further, it may well be right for a group to spend time identifying the emotional disturbances within the group which have not yet been expressed, and providing space for this to happen. If the group does not pay attention to distress management, it is likely that the findings will be distorted by the buried emotions.

6) **Chaos and order**. Clearly co-operative inquiry can be seen as an orderly process of moving through cycles of action and reflection, taking account of experience in one cycle and applying it to the next. And so it is. But co-operative inquiry is also about intuitive discovery, happenstance and synchronicity. It is sometimes about throwing all caution to the winds in a wild experiment. The best inquiry groups find a balance between chaos and order. If the group is really going to be open, adventurous and innovative, to put 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 is likely to descend into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder, and perhaps chaos, with most if not all co-researchers feeling lost to a greater or lesser degree. There can be no guarantee that chaos will occur; certainly one cannot plan it. The key validity issue is to be prepared for it, to be able to tolerate it, to go with the confusion; not to let anxiety press for premature order, but to wait until there's a real sense of creative resolution.

Practical issues in setting up an inquiry group

Initiation. Most inquiry groups are initiated by one or two people who have enthusiasm for an idea they wish to explore. They are quite often engaged on a research degree and are attracted to co-operative inquiry as a means of doing research; but they might just as well be members of an interest group-a patient's group, a women or minority person's group, a professional interest group-who see that co-operative inquiry might be a way of moving forward their interests.

Establishing a group. The initiators first task is to gather together a group of people who will be interested in joining the project. Sometimes the group is self-evidently formed, but more often it is recruited by some form of circular letter: for example the black social workers mentioned above invited social work managers, practitioners and students to a meeting to discuss mutual interests and propose the establishment of inquiry groups. Groups of up to twelve persons can work well. Below six is a little too small, cutting down in variety of experience; above twelve needs time and maybe professional facilitation to manage.

Contracting. This is possibly the most important aspect of the establishment of a group: it is really important that as far as it possible people have an opportunity to define the inquiry agenda and establish the process of the group. But this does not mean that they have to start from a blank sheet: usually the initiators put forward some proposal in a letter inviting people to a meeting to discuss the possible formation of a group. The meeting can explore the following agenda:

a) Welcome and introductions, helping people feel at home

b) Introduction by initiators: what we are interested in researching

c) People discuss what they have heard informally in pairs, followed by questions and discussion

d) Introduction to the process of co-operative inquiry

e) Pairs discussion followed by questions and discussion

f) Decision time: who wishes to join the group?

g) Practical discussion: dates, times, financial and other commitments.

It may be that full discussion of items a)-e) is as far as a group can go in one meeting, and a second meeting is needed for decision making and practical arrangements.

Devising an overall research plan. Most groups agree to a programme of meetings arranged so there is sufficient time for cycles of action and reflection. A group wishing to explore activities that are contained within the group, such as meditation skills, may simply meet for a weekend workshop which will include several short cycles of practice and reflection. But a group which involves action in the external world will need to arrange longer cycles of action and reflection with sufficient time for practical activity. The Holistic Doctors group met for a long weekend to reflect after every six weeks of action on the job. The health visitors for an afternoon every three weeks or so. An inquiry into interpersonal skill met for a weekend workshop at the home of two of the participants and then for a long afternoon and evening every month to six weeks, finishing with another residential weekend workshop.

Roles It is helpful to agree early on how roles will be distributed. If the initiator is also to be group facilitator that should be made clear. It may be helpful to identify who has skills in group facilitation, inquiry facilitation, management of differences, working with distress and so on and share out roles appropriately. Decide if you wish to be fully democratic and rotate leadership, or if you would prefer one or two people to facilitate on behalf of the group. And so on.

Groundrules. You may wish to agree groundrules, particularly to preserve confidences within the group.

Writing. It is helpful to decide who is the audience for your research early on. Is it just for yourselves, or do you wish to influence some outside persons? If you are want to produce a written report or article, it is worth discussing who will write it and on what basis. Do all members of the group have to see and agree it before it can be sent out? Or is it acceptable for one or two people to write their own report based on the group experience. We have found it helpful to adopt the rule that anyone can write whatever they like about the group, so long as they state clearly whose was author and whether other group members have seen and approved the text.

Further Reading

Heron, J. (1996). *Co-operative Inquiry: research into the human condition.* London: Sage. The latest comprehensive account of the co-operative inquiry method. Covers everything from philosophical underpinnings to the details of practice. Best read as a handbook dipping into the chapters that seem most helpful.

Reason, P. and Heron, J. (1995). Co-operative Inquiry. In *Rethinking in Psychology* edited by R. Harre, J. Smith, and L. Van Langenhove. A shorter introduction which might be good to circulate among potential inquiry group members.

Heron, J. (1989). *The Facilitators Handbook*. London: Kogan Page. A useful discussion of choices in facilitation of groups

Randall, R and Southgate, J. (1980). *Co-operative and Community Group "Dynamics.....or your meetings needn't be so appalling.* London: Barefoot Books. An excellent discussion of who to help develop creative group discussions in cartoon form- may be difficult to get hold of.

Reason, P. and Rowan J. (eds.). (1981). *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research.* Chichester: John Wiley. The original handbook rather out of date but with lots of useful ideas and practices

Reason, P. (ed.). (1988). *Human Inquiry in Action.* Sage Publications, London. Contains some good examples of collaborative research.

Reason, P. (ed.) (1994a). *Participation in Human Inquiry.* London: Sage Publications. Discussion of the nature of participation followed by six examples of collaborative forms of research. Some good examples of co-operative inquiry described in some detail.

Heron, J. (1992). *Feeling and Personhood: psychology in another key*. London: Sage. Background theory and philosophy to co-operative inquiry. Some people find this a difficult book to read

Reason, P. (1994b). Co-operative Inquiry, Participatory Action Research & Action Inquiry: three approaches to participative inquiry. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K Denzin & Yvonna Sessions Lincoln, Thousand Oaks: Sage. Sets co-operative inquiry in the context of other participative research methods

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