

Hutchison, Sonia and Walton, Joan (2015) An inquiry into the significance of first-person research for the creation of knowledge to reduce suffering and enhance human flourishing. In: Action Learning and Action Research Association (ALARA) World Congress, 7 November 2015, Pretoria, South Africa. (Unpublished)

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An enquiry into the significance of first-person research for the creation of knowledge to reduce suffering and enhance human flourishing

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Presented at ALARA 9th Action Learning Action Research and 13th Participatory Action Research World Congress on the 7th November 2015

<https://youtu.be/LYewYM3qRI8>

Introduction

We (Sonia and Joan) have been discussing ideas with each other for several years, though not in any formal academic relationship. Both of us have a deep commitment to grounding research in the first person subjective experience of the researcher. However when we talk, we realise that although we share some perspectives, there are substantial differences in why we have come to believe in the significance of first person research, and our preferred methodologies for engaging in such research. We are currently engaged in an ongoing collaborative inquiry, the aim of which is to share our respective ideas, stories and research, in the hope that we can generate a form of knowledge that is different and greater than that which either of us can achieve independently. This inquiry is ongoing. The presentation of this paper provides a 'staging post' in which we reflect on what we have learned so far, and consider where we might go from here.

We begin by each of us sharing our individual stories as to how and why we came to believe in the value of first person research. We then identify the key issues that we have in common, followed by an exploration of points of difference.

Sonia's story

At the time of my birth, my parents were already a concern to social services. Consequently when I was born, my name was instantly placed on the child protection register. Both my parents had schizophrenia and were addicted to drugs; and in addition my father was alcohol dependent. After being placed on two occasions in short-term care twice, I was moved into long-term care at the age of three.

The statistical predictions for children born into the kind of family into which I was born are very poor, children born with both parent having schizophrenia have a 36.6% chance of getting schizophrenia compare to 1% chance of the general population (Slater and Cowie, 1971). In addition the statistical outcomes of children going into care are poor. The educational outcomes for children in care are expected to be low. Only 13.2% gain 5 GCSE's A-C compared with 57.9% of the general population; and only 6% go to university compared to 38% of young people (Department of Education 2011). Children in care make up a disproportionate population of the prison population and of prostitutes (Cameron, 2015). These figures were lower when I was in care, and were grounds for pessimism in terms of the chances of me being successful in any aspect of my life.

However I recognised the damage that generalisations can make to people's lives, and refused to be demoralised by these figures. I refused to become what Merton calls a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1948). Consequently, I have engaged in a journey which has resulted in educational achievement and professional success.

I have written about, and reflected extensively on, my early life experiences, with the aim of understanding the influences that enabled me to avoid becoming a statistical 'failure', and join the majority of others brought up in the care system. I am able to identify a number of factors that contributed to my educational success at school, my gaining a good honours degree, and becoming more recently a Chief Executive of a Carers' Charity, during which time I have been recognised for a community achievement of the year award for my tireless work in the local community. I believe that there is within my experience, learning which has something to offer others who may lose motivation when faced with third person research statistics.

However, what I also realise is that those aspects of my life that could offer valuable learning to others would not be revealed through any form of third person research which aims to gather large amounts of standardised data. It is possible that I could be interviewed as part of a group by a researcher about my experiences in care, and the information gained from me would be studied alongside the information gained from others, in order to discover factors generalisable to a large 'children in care' population. However, in that process, many of the influences unique to my specific situation would be lost; and my contention is that the resulting knowledge gained would be so 'diluted' that it would serve no useful purpose for children in the care system seeking hope or meaning in their lives, nor to those working in a helping capacity with them.

It is for these reasons that I have come to believe in the value of research that is based on first person experience. The story told by the individual researching their own experience can include a depth and a degree of subtlety that I suggest counteracts the disadvantage of not being able to generalise to a large population.

Joan's story

I began my working life looking after children in the care system. These children came from dysfunctional families, and experienced huge emotional suffering. I was distressed by these high levels of suffering, and my feelings of helplessness and inadequacy. I wanted to find knowledge that would enable me to ease their pain. I left that job in order to enter university, and enrolled for a degree with a specialism in social work. It involved studying social science theory and research, much of it focusing on children and families, including those who came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

However at no point during my time at university did I gain knowledge about how to help children who were suffering. When I became a practising social worker, I found that what I had learned was helpful to a certain extent in enabling me to understand some of the sociological and psychological reasons as to why people were in the situation they were; but when it came to helping an individual family, I was reliant on my own personality and skills, and on the experience of those with whom I worked.

Each person was a unique individual, with unique influencing factors in their lives; and I needed to be able to respond to that uniqueness.

Personally experiencing many families in difficult situations, and reading about the extreme levels of poverty, violence and oppression experienced on a daily basis by many people, I became quite depressed at the high levels of suffering that existed not just locally, but also globally. Despite the vast amount of social science research taking place, it all seemed to be focused on understanding human behaviour, but little seemed to lead to an improvement in wellbeing, which included what I would call 'human flourishing'.

My PhD research was triggered by this early experience of the suffering of young children. I wanted to create knowledge that would enable a greater understanding of what meaning there could be in a world where such suffering was possible. I also wanted to explore whether it was possible for human beings to achieve a developmental stage where no-one would inflict suffering on another. In real terms, what I was looking for was knowledge about how to attain global transformation!

An early part of my PhD was an exploration of my own inner and outer experience, using a range of sources, such as depth psychology, transpersonal psychology, and books written from a Buddhist perspective to inform and guide me. I found this level of 'researching first person experience' invaluable in helping me gain some understanding of issues influencing human experience that is not normally explored in conventional third person research. The immense value of this led me to my belief in the significance of first person research as a means of gaining a valuable form of knowledge.

However it was not sufficient for me to stop at that point. I needed to find out whether there was a connection between my deep experience, and the experience of others. As a result, I sent out a call to a number of people, inviting them to join me in a co-operative inquiry (Heron 1996), the aim of which was to explore what was required to create positive change in the world, to lessen suffering, and to increase human flourishing. I stated that I was aiming to use methods of discovery and learning that would integrate inner and outer:

Learning involves managing the relationship between the external world (objective conditions) and the individual (subjective experience). Experiential learning theory recognises and equally values internal, subjective experiences, and external, environmental 'objective' reality. It advocates that the two interpenetrate and interrelate in subtle and complex ways – and that, through the relationship, both change. Learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. (Adapted from Kolb 1993)

A number of people responded, and a three-year co-operative inquiry began. An early conversation focused on what would be required to 'change the world'. It was readily agreed that the only person anyone could change was themselves, and the following was written as a statement from the group:

Our contention is that ultimately, the only person I am able to transform is myself - and consequently, the only way the world will be transformed is by a critical mass of people taking responsibility for their own personal transformation.

An article in a journal stated that:

.....A growing number of people from all walks of life are interested in learning about consciousness, participating through personal inquiry into the exploration of consciousness, and in applying the result of what they have learned to daily life.”

(Franklin, 2000)

Group members found this article provided a valuable pointer to the underlying direction in which they wished us to progress as a group. One person stated:

“We want to begin to identify the effects of transformational processes on consciousness, effects on action in the wider world, changes to relationships with others, changes to the inner relationship with oneself, that may arise out of shifts in consciousness that we associate with the word ‘transformation’.”

Another person interpreted their understanding of what a major issue was as follows:

“We have done damage by creating splits between ideas and personal development; we should be aiming to understand and repair this damage. Society does not encourage the integration of the development of ideas and personal development. This issue needs more thought and debate. If we are not to be limited to conversations 'about these things' without experiential direct involvement in trying them out, it is going to involve individuals in the sorts of personal transformations that take place in change, healing, and growth. Any growth in consciousness involves struggle and adjustment before one feels comfortable with the newly acquired world-view that results. It seems that we are explicitly aiming to educate in areas of consciousness itself. This in turn will require individuals to take risks, the outcome of which for some at some stages will be difficult, and they will need support in understanding and handling their experiences.”

As a consequence of engaging in this co-operative inquiry, I came to believe in the value of first person ('I') and second person (I-with-you) research as means of learning how we might create positive change in the world.

Further, as I was claiming to engage in doctoral research, it was important that I communicate the knowledge gained in a form that was of social value, and that others could use and build on. So communicating the learning in a way that made it relevant to others was a critical part of the process. In addition, there are writings and other sources of data from a third person perspective that can usefully inform first and second person inquiries. Consequently, I have come to a view that, in relation to research and its dissemination, first, second and third person form of

inquiry are mutually and dynamically informing, and are usefully seen as different aspects of an integrated process, rather than any one taking precedence over another.

Points of agreement

In our ongoing dialogue and inquiry, then, we have substantial points of agreement. The first, and probably the main point is, that we are not going to improve human flourishing through research undertaken from a third person perspective. A major reason for this is that third person research studies what already exists, and most assumes that reality exists independently of the researcher; whereas if we are focusing on what can improve a situation, we are looking at the relationship between the present and the future; that is what needs to happen now in order to create a vision of an improved reality in the future.

We are in agreement that the action-reflection cycles of action research allow us to plan future action based on present reflections and a vision of a desired outcome; and then evaluate whatever reality emerges, and consider whether our actions did indeed result in the desired consequence. After further reflection, we can modify our current practice in the light of our learning, and continue to aim to improve what we do.

A further agreement is the significance of the values held by the researcher. Action research itself is a values-driven form of research; and in making their own values explicit, the researcher is provided with personally defined principles to both guide and evaluate their own behaviour. Identifying the source of personal values, and the relationship between them and the focus of the research, can be an important part of an individual's explanatory account of what matters to them and why; and can explain the passion and commitment with which any one person engages in their doctoral or post-doctoral research.

Joan is also working on the implications of quantum physics, which she believes challenges the mechanistic worldview that has been passed on to us from Newtonian classical science.

The aim of traditional western science has been to discover the (assumed) laws of existence, where the observer exists independently of that which is observed. Findings from quantum physics suggest that determining laws do not exist, and it is the questions and actions of the observer which influence the reality that is created; and that in fact we live in a 'participatory universe', where everything is interconnected (Wheeler 1994; Heron 1996). As each observer is a unique individual living in a unique context, the nature of relationship between the individual engaging in the research, and the reality which emerges as a consequence, can only be understood through the systematic and theorised practice of many individuals researching individually and collaboratively. By reviewing and reflecting on the narratives of many such individuals giving their own explanatory accounts, it may be possible to identify common themes which connect different stories. Sonia is interested in the relevance of such research for her own inquiry, and is totally in tune with the conclusion emerging from quantum physics, which is that (in any research,

even conventional scientific investigations), the idea that the researcher can entirely remove themselves from the focus of their study is not only absurd, but leaves the research lacking authenticity and perspective.

Finally, a major part of our dialogue has focussed on the feelings of vulnerability that can arise when an individual is sharing their first person experience, especially when that experience is about an area of life that would often be seen as more relevant for private rather than public sharing. Linked to the vulnerability is the feeling of fear that others may not respect such personal sharing, and may indeed ridicule or negatively criticize the researcher for entering into domains not seen to be appropriate in academic research. We have both experienced the vulnerability and reservations about engaging in first person research because of the fear of these consequences; but because of our strong feelings that grounding research in the first person of the researcher is going to be critically important if we are to reduce suffering and enhance human flourishing, then we have decided to face that fear, and continue along the first person path of enquiry.

Points of difference

The main point of difference that has arisen between us, and which, indeed, has to date occupied most of our verbal and written exchanges, is the choice of research methodology that is most likely to achieve our shared vision of a reduction in suffering, and an enhancement in human flourishing

Sonia's perspective

My choice of methodology is Living Theory (Whitehead, 1989). Living Theory asks questions of the kind 'How can I improve what I am doing?' The research starts with who I am and my story. I am keen that there is not a danger of a single story (Adichie, 2009) being told about children in care rather enabling my living theory to emerge in my life and my leadership. The main point of Living Theory is, not only does it require me to be clear about what values are guiding my practice, but I make myself accountable for how these values are put into practice by offering them as 'standards of judgement' by which others can evaluate what I do. I am aware of the risk of being a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989), and in believing that I can 'be the change I want to be in the world', my research focuses on what I can do to create positive change in the world, based on developing my own Living Theory. It is my aim that, in telling my own story in depth with integrity and authenticity, then others will find hope and meaning in what I write, and will feel inspired to follow their own path of transformational change.

Joan's perspective

I am not committed to a single methodology. Having come to the worldview that we live in a participatory universe (Heron 1996), supported by findings from quantum physics (Wheeler 1974), I understand all of reality to be interconnected. This leads to the view that neither the first, second or third person perspective is primary, and that what I seek in research is an integration of the three perspectives, put into

practice in a way that recognizes the dynamic and mutually informing influence of these three perspectives. Can I really separate myself out from you, or from the external world I observe?

My response to this is that I can't. Hence I am encouraging forms of research where people explore the interrelationship between themselves, the other, and the wider world, using methods that suit their particular circumstance. All of the doctoral students with whom I am working are researching an issue that is significant for them, but also is of social and cultural importance. For example, one student who is a former offender, and who has discovered the transformative influence of engaging in an extended educational process which has kept him away from further offending, is now using his own experience in his employment with other former offenders, and is enquiring into how he can support them also to gain meaningful work and/or educational qualifications. The issue of rehabilitating offenders, and encouraging them into positive social pathways, is an important social and political issue. Thus the work that the student is doing, in researching his own life and practice, and in engaging co-operatively with the men with whom he is working, is generating knowledge that is of potential value to policy makers and practitioners. Consequently, autoethnography is providing a means for him to 'to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). He is also using the action-reflection cycles of action research to help him plan, implement and evaluate ways of improving his practice with these men.

Another student has taken the concept of young people who are labelled as 'NEET' (not in employment, education or training), and, grounded in her own values-based practice of fairness and social justice, gained from her reading of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, has engaged in a participatory action research process of actively engaging the young people in educational activities which are enabling them to gain qualifications and employment. In the first phase of her project there was a 98% success rate in learners gaining qualifications, compared with a national average of 54% for learners coming from similar backgrounds. She is now challenging the governmental label of a 'NEET' young person, as her experience is that young people are by nature motivated to learn, and because of the processes which has been developed by her, in partnership with others, as soon as a potential learner walks through their doors, they become engaged. In her writing, she is paying attention to the interrelationship between her own practice, the work she is doing with her colleagues and the young people, and the learning she wishes to communicate to politicians and policy makers that will challenge existing stereotypes, funding choices, and methods of evaluating outcomes. The emphasis is on the process of mutual influence, rather than highlighting as more important either personal, collaborative or third person research.

Summarising for now.....

The conversation between the two of us has been lively and challenging. Because of our geographical distance and the fact that we both have other major commitments, it can be difficult to sustain the dialogue without substantial gaps in time. However, the conversation has proven mutually useful, and is set to continue.....

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