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Quality in research as ‘taking an attitude of inquiry’

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Abstract

Purpose

To offer the notion of 'taking an attitude of inquiry' as a quality process in research, enabling researchers to be aware of and articulate the complex processes of interpretation, reflection and action they engage in. To consider this as a quality process that complements more procedural approaches.

Approach

Drawing on 25 years experience in an action research community - in which the authors have developed theory and practice in the company of colleagues - to articulate and illustrate what 'taking an attitude of inquiry' can mean. The paper seeks to make quality practices thus developed available to a wider community of researchers.

Findings

Two schema with illustrations are offered. Qualities that enable taking an attitude of inquiry are suggested: curiosity, willingness to articulate and explore purposes, humility, participation and radical empiricism. Disciplines of inquiring practice are identified as: paying attention to framing and its pliability; enabling participation to generate high quality knowing, appreciating issues of power; working with multiple ways of knowing; and engaging in, and explicating, research as an emergent process.

Implications

Research is depicted as both disciplined and alive. Researchers are invited to engage fully in self-reflective practice to enhance quality and validity.

Originality/value

An articulation of a depth view of quality in self-reflective research practice which has been developed in an action research context and can be applied to research more generally.

Keywords Action Research; Inquiry; Quality; Presence; Power; Participation

Paper type Research

Focusing on self-reflection in action research

We have been working in our action research community (www.bath.ac.uk/carpp) for 25 years, developing ideas and practices together with our students and colleagues, both local and international. The ideas in this paper are developed from that community and its long-term deliberations on issues of quality. Here we take a core feature of those deliberations to explore in depth, raising questions about how researchers can be aware of and articulate the complex processes of interpretation, reflection and action they engage in as they do research. This exploration complements other discussions of validity that pay attention to specific methodological issues and look to procedures of research to confer legitimacy.

During the last few years, we have been exploring the notion of *taking an attitude of inquiry* as a development of our long-term concern with quality processes (our term for validity) involved in self-reflective action research. Here, we give some background to our interest, outline the notion, and then step back to reflect on how action research is seen in a UK context.

In action research it is taken as axiomatic that the inquirer is connected to, embedded in, the issues and field they are studying. This is particularly evident when the ‘personal is political’, as in inquiry into race, gender or deprivation of some sort, and when our studies take us beyond dominant frameworks and assumptions. However, we suggest that **all** researchers can benefit from exploring the ways in which they are connected to their research – in terms of topic and methodological approach – and how these connections influence their theorizing and practice.

‘Research is always carried out by an individual with a life and a *lifeworld*... a personality, social context, and various personal and practical challenges and conflicts, all of which affect the research, from the choice of a research question or topic, through the method used, to the reporting of the project’s outcome.’ (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p4)

Recognising that research is an engaged human, social and political activity invites and requires us to seek to account for these aspects in our researching and representations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). We can do this through adopting some forms of reflection and reflexivity. The inquirer’s simultaneous attention to their sense-making and to their action in the world has been called self-reflective practice or ‘first person action research’ (Marshall, 1999; Reason and Torbert, 2001).

We need robust resources to explore the multi-faceted dynamics of researching. This paper is offered as a contribution.

Taking an attitude of inquiry

In our action research community’s debates about quality, we often use the notion of ‘taking an attitude of inquiry’ as something we are seeking in our own practice and that of others whose work we coach and assess. What does it mean? How can we do it? How can we tell if others have done it well? We see reflection as a key action research quality indicator, but also recognise that it is not easy to talk about. It is

ephemeral, more difficult to grasp, demonstrate and account for than, for example, quality criteria about whether a specific methodology has been well conducted. We suggest that taking an attitude of inquiry is a condition for quality that applies in conjunction with, and underpins, other advocated research approaches.

The notion of taking an attitude of inquiry implies opening our purposes, assumptions, sense-making and patterns of action to reflection. These are challenging aspirations. We shall suggest certain qualities of being as significantly enabling this potentiality: curiosity, willingness to articulate and explore purposes, humility, participation and radical empiricism.

As we are passionately concerned with the *doing* of quality research, we shall then explore disciplines of inquiring practice: paying attention to framing and its pliability; enabling participation to generate high quality knowing, appreciating issues of power; working with multiple ways of knowing; and engaging in, and explicating, research as an emergent process.

What, then, do we mean by quality?

In this view, quality becomes having, or seeking, a capacity for self-reflection, so that we engage our full vitality in the inquiry and attend to the perspectives and assumptions we are carrying. And we recognise that espousing self-reflection is a bold claim. If, as Bateson (1973a) argues, the conscious self sees an unconsciously edited version of the world, guided by purposes, and 'Of course, the *whole* of the mind could not be reported in a *part* of the mind.' (p.408), we cannot know everything through rational intelligence and must accept incompleteness. But realising that there are limits to any account we can give does not offer us licence to give no account. Quality is thus about becoming rather than being. It incorporates noticing how identity, ethnicity, class, our positioning in the world impact our research, and being aware of the creative potential that this awareness makes available in speaking a perspective and acting inquiringly. Quality is also shown in the nature of our engagement with others. It suggests that we are open to experiencing and hearing what is going on, that we are paying attention, that we create the conditions for open mutual engagement; and that we open communicative spaces (Kemmis, 2001). Thus our concern is about the researcher's capacities for and practices of presence and how these impact on whether the claims to knowing - expressed descriptively, theoretically, artistically or in practice - are well founded.

The criteria used to judge the quality of action research are in no sense absolute, rather they represent choices that action researchers must make - and then articulate - in the conduct of their work (Reason, 2006).

In this paper we suggest that underlying these choices and bringing quality to them, is 'an attitude of inquiry', that enables us to engage in research which is both disciplined and alive.

Qualities of being

At the most general level we can consider what we might call the researcher's 'quality of being'. While this quality is impossible to pin down - as a reading of Heidegger & Stambaugh (1996) will show - some tentative, provisional sense of 'presence' can be

attained by considering values, attitudes, perspectives and orientations to the world. Or we might quite simply ask, 'is the researcher *there*?', 'there' as an awake, choiceful, reflective human person, rather than as a researcher working strictly in role and with techniques to follow. A researcher who is awake respects and is engaged with many ways of knowing, holding intuitive, emotional, practical and other ways of knowing alongside their intellectual reasoning; some of this knowing is prior to languaging (Heron, 1996); (Heron & Reason, in preparation 2008). The researcher is a centre of experiencing participating in a wider interconnected field of co-subjects. We note similarities between our explorations and those of Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers (2005) in their development of 'presence' to signify both depth and wholistic connection to emerging context in awareness.

Practices of presence

Our experience is that these qualities of being can be developed and enacted through practices or disciplines, the second, complementary, level of presence that we shall explore in this paper. Senge et al. (2005) identify, for example, development of the capacity for 'suspension' as a basis for enhancing awareness, so that 'we begin to notice our thoughts and mental models as the workings of our mind' (p29). It is through the enactment of such practices that the quality of presence is articulated. The description in a research document of how inquiry practices are used therefore provides a foundation for assessing quality.

Qualities of being in taking an attitude of inquiry

The notion of taking an attitude of inquiry implies opening our purposes, assumptions, sense-making and patterns of action to reflection (Marshall, 1999, 2004). These are challenging aspirations. We suggest the following approaches as significantly enabling this potentiality. They provide generic questions about quality that can be used to interrogate reflective practice, and how it is represented, in research.

Curiosity

An attitude of inquiry starts with learning to ask good questions and a commitment to a serious exploration of the implications of asking. It means really wanting to find out about something of significance in our world, and seeking and working with feedback of some kind as research progresses. In an action research approach this might mean inquiring into how to improve our practice (Whitehead, 1989, 2006), inquiring through practices of first person action research (Marshall & Mead, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Researching is an emergent process and the inquirer seeks to maintain their reflective curiosity throughout, following questions as they arise, working in real time with emerging answers to inform and ground both practice and developing theorizing. Generic questions might be: What assumptions inform these formulations of concepts? How is power in play here? How as a researcher am I helping to keep things the same?

A few years ago Cathy Aymer and Agnes Bryan, two black social work lecturers, embarked on a research project to explore the experiences of black students in higher education and black professionals in welfare organisations. Their stories show the unfolding of curiosity, and how it can lead into challenging territory. Their main inquiry question, which arose from their experience as teachers, was "Why is it that when we read about the experiences of black students on social work courses they are always negative?" They saw that students' positive stories were kept in the private domain.

To develop this work they set up a network of co-operative inquiries (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001) among Black social work professionals. As they proceeded, they realized that they were also engaging in the 'reconstruction of knowledge from a black standpoint' (Bryan, 2000:6), taking them beyond their original question. Agnes reviewed the experiences of 'black on black' relationships in organizations, exploring the 'difficulties inherent in affirming each other within white organizations and in a society which denigrates black people as 'other'' (Bryan, 2000:6). Cathy developed her perspective on 'knowledge for black cultural renewal' to heal the persisting hurts of colonial experience: 'The need to tell our stories and recover this knowledge is a critical form of resistance and renewal' (Aymer, 2005:4).

Their curiosity and need to develop understanding was driven by their personal and political commitment to the development of the black community. Engaging in this work, and asserting the significance of black on black inquiry, necessarily caused ripples in the political processes of the organization to which they belonged, which they then had to address.

Willingness to articulate and explore purposes

Awareness of their perspectives and purposes offers the opportunity for the inquirer to locate themselves and their work. This is a project with an ever-receding horizon rather than a state that can be easily achieved. Being willing to explore purposes, and being open to renewed insights into these, however provisional and shifting, is an underlying value in much action research. This also requires attention to the processes through which the researcher constructs things as 'good' or 'true'.

Action research is explicitly value-oriented. Our purpose, as Orlando Fals Borda puts it, is to 'understand better, change, and re-enchant our plural world' (Fals Borda, 2001:31); or in Robin McTaggart's words it is 'to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence' (McTaggart, 2002). There is a close match here with the purposes of post-modern qualitative research as articulated by Denzin and Lincoln:

'The seventh moment [in the development of qualitative research] asks that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversation about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community... We struggle to connect qualitative research to the hopes, needs, and goals of a free democratic society.' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3).

Working with purposes means necessarily working with values. If action research is about working for a world 'worthy of human aspiration' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001),

action researchers must be willing to engage in the contested territory of what is worthwhile, what purposes are worthy. This might mean exploring what it means to be inquiring whilst simultaneously either engaging in strong framing advocacy about what is good and true, or tacitly holding such notions in ways which influence the practice and outcomes of research. Appreciation of these issues in itself requires a continual, explicit, inquiry which includes what Rorty calls 'irony': both a commitment to the values one holds and for the researcher to have 'a sense of contingency of their own commitment' (Rorty, 1989:61).

Humility

Adopting an attitude of inquiry means that we accept the limits of our current knowing, recognising that we do not already understand or know how to do something. It also means that we accept the limits of what we can know (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness express well the requirement to live on this edge of knowing and not-knowing. Through their long-term explorations into white supremacist consciousness, they suggest five first-person inquiry behaviours and a more general 'quality of being' which contribute to research quality. Of the latter, they say:

'With a hunch that this habit of being may be relevant to other inquiries that put self-concept at risk, we tentatively suggest the importance of cultivating a meaning perspective that we call 'critical humility' the practice of remaining open to discovering that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time being committed and confident about our knowledge and action in the world.' (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a:250).

In their experience this notion means that they 'strive on a daily basis to take confident actions that challenge racism and white hegemony.... [and] to remember that even as we challenge white supremacist consciousness, we are not immune to it. Remaining open to discovering the insidiousness of our *unconsciousness* is an ongoing challenge.' (p250).

Generic research questions might be:

How can I show the created and therefore conditional and potentially provisional nature of the theorising I offer?

How can I offer assertive sense-making, and simultaneously leave it open to question and further development?

Participation

An attitude of inquiry includes developing an understanding that we are embodied beings that are part of a social and ecological order, that we are radically interconnected with all other beings, not bounded individuals experiencing the world in isolation. Thus an attitude of inquiry seeks active and increasing participation with the human and more-than-human world. In action research, participation of various kinds is espoused as a key value and purpose of research. This is especially clearly articulated in participatory action research (Fals Borda, 2001) drawing on the work of

Paulo Freire (1970) and concerns to engage the potentially oppressed in consciousness raising and action.

Participation in inquiry means that we stop working with people as 'subjects' and build relationship as co-researchers. Researching with people means that they are engaged as full persons, and the exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experience, rather than filtered through an outsider's perspective. Participation is political, asserting people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and claim to generate knowledge about them. And, in addition to producing knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, it can also empower them at a deeper level to see that they are capable of constructing and using their own knowledge (Freire, 1970; Reason, 2005).

Practices of participatory research take place in many fields of endeavour. In Bangladesh, our colleagues at Research Initiatives Bangladesh are working with thousands of villagers who pride themselves on being *gono gobeshoks* (peoples' researchers) who tell how participatory research has 'sharpened their minds' and helped them develop self-reliance (Wadsworth, 2005). In the contrasting Northern world, co-operative inquiries have been established with young women in management (McArdle, 2002), police personnel (Mead, 2002), community leaders (Ospina et al., 2003) and many others.

Radical empiricism

An attitude of inquiry draws on a wide range of evidence in seeking confirmation and disconfirmation of sense-making and of positions held. It is iterative, feeding earlier views into cycles of active testing. Radical empiricism acknowledges the paradox that the world we inhabit is largely created by our language and perspectives while at the same time being utterly unknowable.

In our view, knowing is rooted in a preverbal, unmediated encounter with 'what is'; it is given its first form as it is articulated in presentational form - verbal story, physical gesture, graphic art. Such first form may be elaborated into storytelling, theatre, dance, painting and sculpture. And it may be developed as idea and theory, expressed more abstractly and symbolically in concepts and propositions. Our knowing is then consummated in practice, the skill or knack of doing things in the world, which of course gives rise to new encounters. We call this view of many ways of knowing an epistemology which is 'extended' beyond the usual narrow empiricism and rationality of Western academia (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, in preparation).

Kathleen King illustrates the combined use of multiple ways of knowing in her PhD Thesis. Based in her experience as an organization consultant, she tells stories of her work. These stories are accompanied in the thesis by photos, graphics, and pieces of music which are to be played while reading certain chapters. Kathleen then makes sense of her experience through her own theorizing, bringing this into dialogue with academic sources, including those of relational practice. This whole process of sense-making takes her into evolving skilled practice, and into further cycles of inquiry (King, 2004)

Disciplines of inquiring practice.

How do we enact these qualities of being? What do they look like in practice? From our own experience, working with graduate students and hearing other people's research accounts, we have generated the following listing of potential disciplines. It is not exhaustive, and we notice how the initial vitality of expressing them is somewhat lost as we place them here - a fitting reminder of the elusiveness of these aspects of quality in researching, of which we spoke earlier.

The features of research discussed below are not as simple as 'skills' that can be benchmarked and assessed. They are disciplines which infuse the research approach and its conduct, and which people should be able to recognize when they see them.

We have phrased these disciplines as injunctions in order to give them a clear and direct voice, removing qualifying wordings such as 'seek to'. They are, however, aspirations we continually work with - invitations to be fully alive *and* disciplined - rather than states that can be wholly achieved. They point to the capacities we need to cultivate to be able to enact them. We offer them as a generic quality checklist. Researchers can report *in what ways* they have addressed each invitation (rather than attempting to get them 'right').

Pay attention to framing, and its pliability:

Increase awareness of the frames you are employing (Torbert, 1991; Senge et al., 2005) and how these affect your sense-making and action.

Test assumptions.

Foster an ability to move flexibly between frames (Bateson, 1973b).

Engage actively with the perspectives of others.

Welcome paradox and contradiction.

Question how system boundaries are being drawn and by whom (Marshall, 2004).

Develop a sense of self-irony, playfulness and lack of ego-attachment.

Actively exploring framing is a challenging process. Whilst individual self-reflection can yield insights, sustained disciplines are often required, and this aspect of taking an attitude of inquiry benefits especially from robust feedback from others (Marshall and Mead, 2005). A sequence of articles shows the quality of tracking that could be involved. Foldy (2005a) initially wrote a reflective paper on her research into race, being self-challenging about her framings. She identified her tacit wish to establish herself as a 'trustworthy white person, someone aware of prejudice, discrimination and racism' (p38). The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2005b) responded, identifying several ways in which Foldy's exploration resonates with their own studies, but also asking 'How can we come to know what we don't know?' (p59). Foldy's response (2005b) adds layers of complexity; her own framings and those of the Collaborative are explored. It is not possible to do the subtleties of this exchange justice here. It is interesting that, on further reflection, Foldy was struck by the 'finished' quality of her initial article, 'it seemed like I had been so intent on documenting my progress, that I conveniently forgot the unfinished journey' (p66). This suggests the additional challenge for the reflective researcher, of writing in ways which keep sense-making open and provisional.

Enable participation to generate high quality knowing; work actively with issues of power

Engage actively with all those who might be seen as stakeholders in the matters to hand, and build capacities for inquiry.

Question the boundaries of the system and review who counts as a stakeholder.

Explore the different kinds of power involved in the research context.

Attempt to create mutuality, 'power with', so that others participate on equal terms in the research engagement (Kemmis, 2001).

Attend to and moderate your own 'power over' which derives from unearned, or earned, privilege.

Pimbert & Wakeford (2003) offer a suitably complex example of working with the notion of participation in a situation of multiple power-differences. They established an action research project which they intended to be 'power-equalizing' (Wakeford & Pimbert, 2004:25), using a process of citizens' juries (*Prajateerpu*) to involve farmers in Andhra Pradesh in shaping a vision of their own future. Within its own framework, the *Prajateerpu* process was highly generative. But two major donor organizations had chosen not to participate in the project originally, and one would not then confer recognition on the outcomes reached by the participatory process (Wakeford & Pimbert, 2004). These developments had to be worked with, through further, challenging, cycles of inquiry.

Develop capacities for working with multiple ways of knowing

Increase the amount and range of 'evidence' brought to bear on what is going on.

Expand your range of attention to include empirical, observational, emotional, behavioural, embodied knowing.

Seek to uncover and articulate that which is usually tacit.

Process and present evidence through a range of different presentational forms

Taking an attitude of inquiry requires that all those participating in the inquiry process engage with an 'extended epistemology' discussed above, opening themselves to non-traditional information and evidence. This can be supported through a variety of attentional practices. Individual practices include journaling (Goldberg, 1990; Turner-Vesselago, 1995), mindfulness meditation, martial arts, psychotherapy, gestalt (Heene, 2005). Shared practices include dialogue groups (Isaacs, 2001), public conversations, and the mutual support and challenge of friends willing to act as enemies (Torbert, 1991).

Engage in, and explicate, research as an emergent process

Pay close attention to the *process* of engagement with the issues and with others, as well as to the content.

Attend to the continuing process of learning as well as to outcomes.

Be aware of the evolving choices you and others are making about frames, about who is included and excluded, about positions taken, about evidence employed and so on.

Be willing to act in circumstances of radical uncertainty.

Develop discernment about what/how much can be achieved whilst retaining a sense of the urgency and importance of the work.

Be willing to start from where you are without necessarily knowing where you are going.

Marshall (1984) illustrates how emergent properties of research can become key to conceptual sense-making. She opened her book on women managers by explaining: 'I have spent the past few years in an often turbulent dialogue with the issue of women in society' (p.6). She then explicated her evolving, sometimes highly uncomfortable, sense-making, especially noting her shift of orientation from reform to radical feminism which then informed her theorizing.

Closing reflections

Is the quality of being we have advocated and explicated here as a core component of alive and disciplined research unusual? We suggest that it is both extra-ordinary, because it is still often obscured or denied, and an everyday quality of being. The disciplines we have offered in this paper invite us to reach beyond habitual social and individual muting processes to be more ordinarily alive (Senge et al., 2005).

Reflecting on this paper, we are highly aware of research as political process. We anticipate that many researchers will be deterred from radically inquiring into the nature of their situatedness and presence. Whilst radical practices of research are developing, from our experience of management science prevailing orthodoxies maintain much power. Many researchers have to work their identities to maintain credentials within a still often positivist view of science, to safeguard their careers and be acceptable to publish in so-called 'mainstream' management journals.

A core implication of this paper is that we would like to see evocative evidence of the researcher as both alive and disciplined in the research account, so that we can judge the quality of their doing of research. These issues are in debate in some areas of academia. For example proponents of autoethnography are creative in their forms of representation, write themselves strongly into their accounts, and address directly potential accusations that their work may be self-indulgent (eg Sparkes, 2002) – refuting this by articulating the personal as political.

We are not convinced that 'mainstream' management journals want the full-blooded sense of inquiry that alive and disciplined research might offer.

There is some evidence that action research is becoming more popular. We hear it advocated in practice and academic circles, especially as an answer to developing applied research which will make a difference in the world rather than sit un-regarded in research reports. More action research is being conducted and commissioned. And yet, the pull of apparent legitimacy in traditional, positivist, objectivist, methodologies is strong. The demands of seeking to develop a high quality, multi-dimensional attention and capacity for inquiring action of the sort we are advocating in this paper are typically under-estimated, or treated as a turn to practice which compromises scholarship, undermines what it is to be 'academic'.

And currently prevailing contexts of academia reinforce this questioning of the legitimacy and place of action research. Disciplining is, for example, exercised forcefully by the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which periodically rates scholars work by publication outlet, and then rewards institutions with rankings and finance accordingly. The top ratings are reserved for mainstream, international (meaning USA) journals. The RAE has been a highly conformist influence in all disciplines, biting harder each time it is conducted. Few, if any, action research papers are acceptable in the elite 'mainstream'. Authors are typically required to show their fit with established traditions of research before offering their work, diluting the latter in consequence, stifling their alternative tongues. No action research journals are rated as even mid-level in the guideline listings. In our own School, action research has been referred to as a 'niche' area – a framing which we contested, obviously. Also funding bodies, especially the Research Councils, seem hesitant to sponsor action research, whilst also enticed by its potential to deliver more of the applied knowledge that they seek.

And, looking again, it seems that these established canons are creaking and perhaps cracking (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). From this view, action research is part of a flourishing of diverse forms of research that address important issues of epistemology, representation and praxis. Politically we take this view. And this situation presents people with tough choices. For example, we repeatedly hear from young researchers who have been deterred from adopting action research approaches or accounting for themselves in their research, because they need to safeguard their careers by conforming to mainstream notions of legitimate methods. There are hints of issues of control and anxiety here, alongside any concerns about quality. Are we able to debate these openly? How should action researchers speak to those seeking to maintain 'the mainstream'? If they do so only in the latter's own registers, they collude with the dominance of 'mainstream' science and its ways of operating. Action researchers need also to invite people inside their own world and craft to explore some of the challenges of doing research this way.

But in our own deliberations about these issues, we also, and primarily, ask what the world needs from us as scholars at this time. As we experience a fuller understanding of climate change and appreciate the persisting poverty and social injustice around the globe, how should we respond? We reach for disciplines of inquiring practice as outlined in this paper as fundamental resources to help us engage epistemologically and in action. Scholarly detachment, creating knowledge that denies or suppresses our embodied, connected being in the world, seems ill-suited to the issues of our times.

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