

**Collaborative Action Research Network Annual Conference**  
**Braga, Portugal, November 6-8, 2015**

**Keynote**

**'Narratives of Empowerment, Justice and Compassion:  
The 'Discipline' of Action Research'**

**Richard Winter**

Looking back after all these years, I seem to have spent most of my professional life engaging with action research. And sometimes I think, 'Was that a good way to spend a life? - After all, we only have one!'. But, that question doesn't last long, not least because, attending CARN conferences since my retirement, more than 10 years ago, I have always been really inspired by the variety, the commitment and the resourcefulness of the conference contributions. It is encouraging to find that the action research movement is still so widespread and so full of life after all these years. Also, it is fascinating to see the continuity over many years of certain action research principles. And actually there is a very good reason why the action research movement has this continuity and why it continues to grow spread and develop. The more I got involved, the more it seemed to me that the principles and processes of action research were of the utmost importance; not only as a democratic form of *research* but beyond that, as an inclusive form of *education*. And beyond that, even, action research principles and processes are, I think, crucially important from a *political* point of view. In other words, action research seemed all along (and still seems) a way of summing up something very important in our collective search for a *better society*.

And this is really my underlying theme: I want to present a sort of *refocusing* of my understanding of the social, ethical and political importance of action research in a very general way. And I thought I could start to do this by noting the interesting implications of the conference title itself: 'Action Research Across Disciplinary Settings: Challenges for Change and Empowerment'. I want to suggest that the 'discipline' of Action research takes up some key issues embodied in those other 'disciplines' we are familiar with, i.e. the *principles* underlying our professional practice. I will start by examining the issues of power, authority and empowerment within the concept of a 'Discipline', how these are illustrated in the various professional settings in which we may be working, and then, finally, how these issues are linked, crucially, to the underlying *discipline* of action research itself, as a search for change and empowerment.

To introduce the notion of empowerment, let me start by telling you a little story. Something I really enjoy is reading stories to my five year old twin grandsons. We have a large volume of Grimm's Fairy Tales and we are slowly working through it. A few weeks ago I was reading the story of 'The Sleeping Beauty', which I'm sure you know very well. A baby princess has a curse placed upon her by a wicked fairy, so that at the age of fifteen having grown up of course to be very beautiful, she pricks her finger on a spinning wheel and, along with everyone else in the palace, falls asleep for a hundred years. Gradually the whole palace becomes overgrown with weeds and thorns. But the curse only lasts for one hundred years, and on the day that the hundred years comes to an end a handsome prince comes riding by. He uses his sword to cut through the thorns, finds the sleeping princess and wakens her with a kiss. Everyone

else wakes up, the princess and the prince get married with lots of celebration, and the story ends, of course, like so many stories, with the sentence: 'And everyone lived happily ever after.' Having finished the story, I was about to close the book, when one of the twins, Jackson, said, 'What about the wicked fairy; did she live happily ever after too?'

At first I was surprised, that Jackson had noticed an issue that I never had, although I know that story so well and I've been interested in the patterns of fairy stories generally for many years. But then I wondered why I had been so surprised; and I was reminded yet again how those with a higher status in a situation (professors, adults, grandparents, for example) are so often tempted to under-estimate the capacities and the understanding of those with a lower status (five year old boys, for example). This tendency of those *with* authority and status to underestimate those *without* authority or status is one of the processes leading to *dis-empowerment*. And this general issue (Empowerment and Authority) underlies quite a lot of what I want to go on to say about the 'disciplines' of professional practice and of action research.

### **What is a 'Discipline'?**

A discipline is a form of cultural authority: it emphasises what is *required*. It poses a challenge and sets up purposes that entail *difficulty*. The opposite of discipline is doing what is easy, what 'comes naturally'. For most of us, the first examples of a 'discipline' that we came across were the 'subjects' that we studied at secondary school and university. So let's start there. A discipline is a selection of *required knowledge*, *i.e. a curriculum*, in which learners need to be *instructed* and which they need to *practice* in order to gain a recognised specialist qualification, for example as a chemist or a biologist.

Disciplines also specify *rules and procedures* for what is to count as '*proper work*'. For example, the disciplines of psychology, chemistry and biology have quite different well rules for what is appropriate evidence and how to set about gathering it.

However, disciplines are not historically permanent: the boundaries of disciplines can change and new disciplines can arise, with different sets of rules for proper work. So, for example, the disciplines I mentioned earlier (psychology, chemistry and biology) have in a sense *combined* to form the new discipline of 'neuroscience' which seeks evidence that might explain *psychological* states of mind in terms of *bio-chemical* events in the brain. And the professional 'disciplines' of education, nursing, social work and management have only fairly recently become identifiable, also by combining selections from older disciplines - for example: philosophy, psychology, sociology and medicine.

### **Disciplines, Ethics and Politics**

Most importantly, for my argument, disciplinary rules and procedures also include an ethical dimension, in that they specify *codes of ethical behaviour*. And this is where things start to get interesting, and indeed controversial. Because, as Aristotle points out, issues of ethics require that we consider what are the 'virtuous' actions that are 'conducive to the good life'. (1) Moreover, my attempts *as an individual* to lead a good

and virtuous life are always part of my life as *a member of a community*, and so, Aristotle implies, actions are only 'virtuous' insofar as they contribute to establishing or maintaining a 'good society. Therefore, he says, 'complete virtue' is a matter of 'justice' (2). In other words, the 'values' of individual ethical conduct cannot be separated from the *political* values of a just society. And because societies (as we know them at least) consist of groups seeking to maintain or increase their own power, the social and political arrangements that constitute a 'just' society are almost always a matter for conflict or debate.

For example, let us consider two contrasting codes of ethical behaviour and rules for proper work in the discipline of social research. On the one hand an ethics committee may require, as an essential procedure, that we secure the 'informed consent' of all participants, in order to avoid the ethical and political 'harm' of 'exploitation'. But there is another version of 'harm' in social science, namely 'bias'. And in order to avoid bias, we may find that we are required to adopt the procedures of a 'double blind' experiment. This means that each group taking part in the experimental procedure is paralleled by a 'control' group that doesn't take part but is made to believe that it *is* taking part. And only the overall director of the inquiry knows which group is which. Participants may, of course, 'consent' to take part in a double blind process, but the extent to which their 'consent' is 'informed' is severely limited. On the contrary, they must consent to *not knowing*. So, we have here two different versions of the discipline of social inquiry and two different versions of its underlying ethics and politics. Both involve challenge and difficulty. But one is based on procedures for the *control* of participants by an *expert* authority, and the other tries to ensure the *consent and empowerment* of participants. In other words: two sets of 'values' and two models of a good society.

In the rest of my talk I want to consider how the issues arising from these two sets of values are relevant to our work in the disciplines with which we are concerned, namely action research and professional practice. I will return to action research at the end, but first let us consider the disciplines of professional practice.

### **Versions of 'Education': Expertise, Hierarchy and The Process of Inclusion**

I will start with the profession of teaching and two versions of the 'discipline' of education, and with the work of my friend and first mentor in the world of action research, John Elliott. By one of those helpful coincidences, John has just recently summarised the basis of his work in an article in the *Educational Action Research Journal* (3).

In his article John points out that 'education' is often described in terms of a set of desirable curriculum *outcomes*, i.e. knowledge and skills, specified in advance, that learners must acquire and for which teachers must provide instruction. According to this model, educational *research* is concerned with *improving* teachers' ability to achieve these specified outcomes in a particular situation. This is the model of education and educational research favoured by governments; and underlying it is a concern to prepare students effectively for a hierarchy of *roles* in society's various institutions, depending on the students' differing aptitudes and abilities.

However, there is, as John argues, and has done for many years, another conception of education in which there are no predefined outcomes, abilities or roles. This alternative conception of education emphasises the fostering of the maximum autonomy and creativity of every individual learner. And to realise this conception of education, he says, it cannot be described as a set of desired outcomes but as a *process*, i.e. the process of interaction between teachers and learners. Every interaction between teachers and learners embodies, in principle, the ethical and political values that make up the core meaning and purpose of 'education'. The purpose of education, according to this model, is to provide scope and opportunity for *all* to realise their full 'potential' (And potential, of course can never be specified in advance.) The 'values' of the model require that learners be engaged in processes of *inquiry* and *discovery*, as autonomous seekers of meaning, posing questions and respecting others' views. And so the expertise of teachers does not reside in the fact that they know in advance what different learners need to discover (defined perhaps by what they suppose to be students' differences in ability). Rather, teachers provide resources and guidance, to help learners manage their *own* seeking, *wherever* it may lead.

All this of course suggests a very different model of educational research, and one which goes back to Aristotle again: research as an effort to put into practice more fully the ideals of a *just* society, i.e. a society which provides fully and equally for the needs and aspirations of all its citizens. In other words, as far as we are concerned: action research. In this way, John Elliott's distinction between defining education in terms of outcomes or as a process also implicitly expresses the general contrast I indicated earlier between two versions of 'discipline', and thus two versions of challenge, difficulty, ethics and justice: 1) discipline as the practice of authority. and 2) discipline as the practice of equality, freedom and inclusiveness.

### **But First A Note on 'Justice'**

My argument so far has come to focus on two contrasting models of justice. And I seem to be coming down very heavily on one side: justice as equality, freedom and inclusiveness, rather than justice as justifiable difference and hierarchy. And you may well be asking: why? Is this just an ethical *choice*? Or am I saying that the model of justice as freedom, equality and inclusiveness, is *inherent* both in professional work and in the practice of action research?

In order to answer this question, I want to draw upon an argument put forward by John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice*. He calls this part of his argument 'The veil of ignorance' (4). It is very simple, but it has very radical implications. It goes as follows. In order to determine whether a given set of social arrangements is just or unjust, we must imagine what we would think of these arrangements if we were entirely ignorant of what our own position within these arrangements was going to be. If we did not know whether we or our parents were going to be economically privileged or destitute; if we or our children were going to be healthy or disabled, employed or unemployed, well-connected or isolated; if we were going to be white or black, male or female; if we were going to be a professional worker or a vulnerable client, a manager or a cleaner. Of course, in the natural course of things we tend to adopt our attitudes and opinions in the light of our own circumstances, and so we are tempted (even if subconsciously) to adopt a model of social justice that would work to our own probable advantage. But Rawls calls upon us to imagine that the circumstances of our

actual lives were hidden by the 'veil of ignorance': what model of justice would we choose then? Then, indeed, we might agree that we would all need a model of justice that would confer *equal* advantage on *everyone*. Because under this veil of ignorance, we *ourselves* could be *anyone*. Rawls' theory of justice, then, reminds us of that aspect of 'discipline' I earlier called 'challenge' and 'difficulty': in this case, the sustained effort of subordinating our subjective, spontaneous impulses to the work of reasoned argument and, above all, to a sustained effort of imagination, of empathy with other peoples' lives.

It is this sort of argument that underpins what I now want to emphasise in some documents and examples from the professions of nursing, social work and management, considered as activities where 'good practice' is the search for the virtues, the values, the ethics of a good society - a society that seeks 'the good' for all citizens.

### **The Discipline / Challenge of Nursing: Expertise, Compassion and Empowerment**

So, following my general line of argument, I want to suggest that the practice of nursing involves managing the contrast between the *authority* of specialised expertise and responsibility for the rights of service users as *autonomous citizens*. Nurses' power to make decisions about their patients has behind it all the authority of medical science. And so the 'Code of Conduct' document issued by the Nursing and Midwifery Council for Great Britain (revised in 2015) (5) has long sections on 'safe' and effective' practice, emphasising that decisions must always be based on 'the best available evidence'. But the first section has a very different emphasis. Contrasting with the *power* conferred upon nurses by their expertise is an emphasis on the need to *em-power* their patients. So, for example, nurses should 'empower people to share decisions about their treatment', they should 'respect the contribution that people can make to their own health and well-being' and 'act as an advocate for the vulnerable'.

Some people consider that the word 'empowerment' has become something of a cliché, but I think it has a crucial importance. Professional staff *have power as their starting point*, both from their expertise and from the bureaucratic structures within which they operate. But, as the British Nursing Code of Conduct suggests, a key aspect of their role entails a responsibility to *give up aspects of this power*, in other words, to *empower* precisely those in the situation who do not have power - their patients.

It is this contrast between 'power' and 'empowerment', I suggest, that underlies what one might call the 'professional art' of nursing, namely working with dilemmas and contradictions and sustaining the effort of imagination in order to achieve *empathy* and '*compassion*', a word repeated at several points in the Code. All this, of course, is time-consuming, and is made all the more difficult by the chronic shortage of staff and resources in medical settings. Nevertheless, nurses pride themselves on this imaginative, empathetic part of their role, and it often provides a focus for interesting research work. For example, when I was teaching a course on nursing research and professional knowledge, some years ago, one of the most popular assessment tasks asked the students, all experienced nursing staff, to describe their practice from the point of view of a patient. The following (6) is a shortened version of a piece written by one of the students, Lindsay Brown, who was working in the Accident and

Emergency Department of a large hospital. I think it conveys very well the conflicts implicit in the nurse's task.

### **A service users experience of my professional practice.**

*Hello I'm Mabel. I'm 86 years old. Last Thursday I burnt my hand on the cooker and went to Accident and Emergency. When I arrived I saw a nurse who took some details and told me to take a seat in the waiting room as it would be at least 2 hours before I saw the doctor. She gave me some pain killers and a bowl of iced water and advised me to put my hand in it to take some of the pain away.*

*It took almost 3 hours before I was seen by the doctor who said that he would get a nurse to dress my hand. Then the same nurse came back and explained what type of dressing I would need and that I would have to return in the morning for the dressing to be changed. She then looked at my hand and said that I needed to remove my wedding ring. We both tried and neither of us could remove it. She then told me that she would have to cut it off. I couldn't believe my ears. I have not removed it since my wedding day 62 years ago, and since George passed away it has gained sentimental value. If she had told me to remove my ring when she first saw me, 3 hours ago, I may have been able to get it off. At this point I started to cry. The nurse patted my back and gave me a tissue.... But later her tone changed and she seemed to get annoyed with me... I tried to explain why it meant so much to me but she wasn't listening. She said that I could get it fixed at a jewellers and that nobody would notice. That wasn't the issue, I would know, the ring would not be the same.*

By imagining Mabel's experience, Lindsay, the nurse who is writing here, raises the question of how a busy nurse can manage the potential conflict between the routines of the hospital bureaucracy and patients' personal sensitivities.

### **The Discipline / Challenge of Social Work: Social Justice; Challenging Cultural Stereotypes**

This central professional dilemma (exercising power versus promoting empowerment) is perhaps even more acute in the practice of social work than in nursing. One important reason for this is that it is, in principle, relatively easy to identify with someone suffering from ill-health, since we know that this is a fate that awaits all of us at some time. In contrast, people become the clients of social workers as a result of the accumulated effects of poverty, isolation, and oppressive circumstances. Thus the form of their vulnerability poses questions of social justice that the wider culture would like to ignore. Instead, the public and the media prefer to attribute the problems of social work clients to some sort of personal inadequacy, as part of a general culture of blaming individuals for social problems. As part of this culture, social work clients are all too easily stigmatised as 'different from the rest of us' so that they can be blamed for failing to manage their responsibilities and for causing danger and harm to themselves and others. The social work discipline, of promoting the welfare of such easily stigmatised clients, is thus a severe one, because, implicitly, it involves challenging many of the stereotypes and prejudices of the wider culture.

These tensions in social work practice spring out from the pages of the British Association of Social Workers' 'Social Work Code of Ethics' (7). From the beginning it announces that 'the core of social work' involves 'promoting social justice' and 'social inclusion', 'alleviating poverty' and working 'in solidarity with' 'disadvantaged

... vulnerable and oppressed people'. The conflicts in the role are made quite explicit: on the one hand it involves supporting and empowering people, and, on the other hand, carrying out duties... that, although they are legally required, 'are constrained by the availability of resources and institutional policies in society...and that may be coercive and restrict people's freedoms'. So for social work, the frequently repeated principle of 'empowerment' includes not only 'challenging discrimination' but also 'liberation' . Even more emphatically, the Code states that, although, as part of their 'professional integrity' 'social workers should strive to carry out the stated aims of their employers' they should *only* do so 'provided that [these aims] are consistent with the Code of Ethics'.

All this confirms that in seeking to enact the values of a just society, the discipline of social work is always likely to involve working with ethical and political conflicts. But the Code also states: 'Social workers should recognise their own prejudices'. In other words the ethical struggle for social justice is not just a struggle against an external, cultural ideology but a struggle against the impulses and ideas that this culture has implanted within one's own mind-set. The discipline of social work, in trying to enact the values of a just society then, is not just a matter of political courage but of self-questioning. Self-questioning is, of course, familiar as the action research principle of reflexivity. But we might also see it as the attempt to recover one's own particular version of John Rawls' 'veil of ignorance'. To free ourselves, in other words, from the assumptions and stereotypes implicit in the contrast between our sense of our own generally positive identity and the always potentially negative identities of the stigmatised and marginalized members of our communities.

### **The Discipline / Challenge of Management: Listening; The Devolution of Responsibility**

I have suggested that the hierarchical expert model of professional practice is *contested*, in different ways, in the professions of education, nursing and social work, and is thus both a source of dilemmas and a starting point for critical research. But one might assume that for the professional manager this is not the case: the very concept of management would seem to imply some sort of bureaucratic hierarchy of roles and responsibilities. So it is interesting to note that even within management theory we can find challenges in principle to the hierarchical model.

For example, a recent article by Katalin Illes and Martin Matthews of the University of Westminster Business School (8) argue that, in order 'build the sense of ... trust... and shared purpose' essential for an effective, 'creative' organization, managers need to 'start with listening, listening with an open mind, heart and will... to the latent needs and aspirations of all people.' 'We have moved on', they say, from the 'obsolete... theory of an all-powerful omniscient... leader...the old way of leadership by command, control and charisma through superior knowledge'. 'In many cases [say Illes and Matthews] employees know more than leaders'.

Management therefore needs to be 'collective' rather than 'done by the few to the many', and so the principles of management involve 'inclusivity', 'devolution of responsibility', 'interdependence', 'empathy' and 'empowerment'. The key process at work is 'two-way communication' and, in the end, the work-place, i.e. the organization itself, must become a site for 'education'.

Although this article was published in 2015, it has a tradition. As long ago as 1960 Douglas McGregor published *The Human Side of Enterprise*, (9), in which he argued that an authoritarian management style based on close supervision discouraged organizational creativity, recommending instead the devolution of responsibility and the sharing of decision-making.

And in 1998 I reported (10) the very interesting work of a social services manager whose research I was supervising. Although he was supposed to be responsible for implementing a set of new guidelines for carrying out inspections, he realised that he was ignorant of the detailed conditions in which his inspectors were working. His solution was to arrange a series of 'brainstorming' sessions with the staff concerned, where they described how *they* perceived the task. He then collected and organised their ideas, circulated them for comment and amendment, and then provided all staff with the resulting guidelines, based on their own descriptions of their practice. In some respects this was, I now realise, an enactment of the professional principles of effective management described by McGregor and by Illes and Matthews, i.e. creative decentralization. But it was also, at the time, a piece of action research..

### **And So, Finally, The Discipline / Challenge of Action Research**

I have suggested that what the disciplines of professional practice have in common is the difficult challenge of trying to enact in our work the ethical and political values of a just society, i.e. inclusiveness and empowerment. And this is reflected in a number of the principles of action research that have been proposed over the years.

First, action research involves the difficult discipline of trying to manage *dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions*, because we have to work within institutions that are far from embodying either inclusiveness or empowerment.

And because these dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions are inherent in our culture our research projects will never reach a 'final answer', even though we can always, as it were, try to make a small positive move forward. An action research report, then, will always be the *narrative of a search*. Its 'validity' will always be based within *a specific situation*. But the challenge is always to try to make our reports potentially *transferable to other situations*, by making our narrative *persuasive and convincing* to others.

Moreover, these conflicts and contradictions are not only external, institutional and cultural, but aspects of our own mind-sets. So our work will also entail the discipline of *reflexive self-questioning*: always asking: 'Why am I responding in this way?' and 'How could this be better?'

So action research always entails *change*, i.e. a process evolving over time, as we try to find new possibilities for *improving practice*, within the dilemmas we face.

This in turn means that action research involves procedures of *collaboration*, in which we try to ensure that *all* participants, whatever their status in the situation, have a full and equal share in the decision as to what will *count* as an improvement in practice, and can play a full part in trying to put this decision into practice.

Action research, then, involves *empowerment*. This means, firstly, seeking empowerment for the action research participants within the institution, and secondly, trying to ensure that the research 'methods' empower each of its members within the research process..

And in order to realise all this, I am tempted to say, finally, that the underlying ideal of action research, like that of professional practice, is the *imaginative discipline* of empathy, in other words, of *compassion*. Or, in the words of one of the most celebrated of English poets: 'The great instrument of moral good is the imagination ...To be greatly good [we] must put [ourselves] in the place of another and of many others' (11).

## References

- 1) Aristotle: *Ethics*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1976, Book VI, p. 209
- 2) Ibid. Book V, p. 173
- 3) John Elliot: 'Educational action research as the quest for virtue in teaching', *Educational Action Research*, Vol, 23, No.1, 2015
- 4) John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 136 ff.
- 5) Nursing and Midwifery Council: 'Revised Code of Conduct', London, 2015, quotations, in order, from paragraphs 2.3, 2.2, 3.4, 1.1, 2.6, 3.22.
- 6) Lindsay Brown: 'Perspectives on research and knowledge in professional practice' in *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* The Journal of the Staff and Educational Development Association, Special Issue: 'The Patchwork Text', Vol. 40, No. 2, May 2003, pp. 177-8
- 7) British Association of Social Workers: 'Code of Ethics' Birmingham, 2014, quotations, in order, from paragraphs 1.1, 2.2, 1.2, 2.3.
- 8) Katalin Illes, and Martin Matthews: 'Leadership, trust and communication', University of Westminster Business School, 2015.
- 9) Douglas McGregor: *The Human Side of Enterprise*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1960
- 10) Richard Winter: 'Finding a voice, thinking with others: a conception of action research', *Educational Action Research*, Vol. 6, No..1, 1998
- 11) Shelley: 'In Defence of Poetry', 1821.