

Mindfulness, Reflexivity and the Practice of Action Research

Richard Winter

June, 2016

Introduction

In one of the collections of early Buddhist texts the Buddha recounts the story of the blind men and the elephant: basing their interpretations on incomplete, 'one-sided' knowledge (i.e. of only the elephant's trunk, or tail, or tusk, or foot, etc.) the blind men engage in endless disputes, each asserting the validity of conclusions based only on their own incomplete experience rather than on a comprehensive understanding, including, crucially, an understanding of 'what is beneficial and what is harmful'. (1)

This ancient fable reminds us that human beings have, for almost as long as we have records, worried about the limitations of our self-understanding. In particular: 1) what form of inquiry could radically transform the inevitable limitations of our *subjective* understanding into a genuinely *comprehensive* grasp of the reality of our experience? 2) Would such a comprehensive understanding need to have as its basis some sort of value consensus, concerning the nature of what is beneficial or harmful? 3) What could the basis for such a consensus?

These questions have been addressed by both Quantitative and Qualitative research methodologies, but with limited success. Quantitative research seeks a consensual model of reality in the objective procedures of the natural sciences and mathematics, e.g. through statistical theories of significance and through experimental procedures for establishing and comparing contrasted 'populations'. The aim is always to *separate* factual observation from value judgments, but problems of values and 'one-sidedness' remain. Firstly, in identifying and constructing the contrasting populations the initiators of the research inevitably draw upon their own values and purposes, so that in spite of the neutrality of the *procedures*, the research *findings* are not received as consensual but, on the contrary, as open to question by others who do not share these values or purposes. Secondly, generalizations about the behaviours / opinions of experimental populations are incomplete, in the sense of reductionist: they 'reduce' the complexities of individual and social consciousness to the relevant categories constructed by researchers for a particular purpose.

Qualitative research, in contrast, seeks to avoid reductionism by gathering data that records the full subjective experience of respondents (e.g. in the form of verbatim transcripts); and the interpretation of this material is 'negotiated' by the researcher to take into account the full complex detail of individuals' experience. Qualitative research reports do not, therefore, even aim to be generalizations, transferable to other contexts, but 'naturalistic' case studies, conveying the 'multiple realities', the manifold experiential and value-laden perspectives, of the individuals involved in particular situations. The term 'naturalistic' suggests that the *complete* 'reality' sought by the inquiry process is to be found in a synthesis of individuals' reported accounts of their experience. However, to call this synthesis of accounts 'naturalistic' is misleading even on its own terms: the case study report can only synthesise the experiences of participants by means of a theoretical 'reconstruction' of those experiences by a particular researcher. So that we have to conclude that qualitative case studies are, in the end, idiosyncratic, subjective, and thus are also necessarily incomplete interpretations of reality. (2)

In contrast, I will argue that more firmly grounded answers to the questions posed by the fable of the elephant are provided by the two basic principles of action research, namely: 1) inquiry based on *collaboratively negotiated improvements* in the quality of social action, and 2) inquiry based on the *reflexive critique of participants' accounts*. These two principles of action research provide, I suggest, a model of social inquiry that, in contrast to other methodologies, is both firmly grounded in the experiences of *individuals*, and, at the same time, in an understanding of the nature of our *shared* experience and our *collective* capacities for development. I will then suggest important similarities between these action research principles and some of the fundamental Buddhist teachings underlying the doctrine of mindfulness

Negotiating Change, Collaboration, 'Improving Practice'

The basis of action research as a method for social inquiry is a repeating cycle of planning, action, observation and critical reflection (3). This general model is applicable at any level: the 'reflective practice' of the therapeutic relationship between individual practitioners and their clients; establishing innovative processes in specific work settings and communities; and the management of any form of organizational development that is concerned not only with economic efficiency but with the well-being of those concerned.

The iterative, cyclical model of action research suggests immediately that the form of an inquiry is not a single event, a 'snapshot' of a state of affairs, but a process that continues as long as is necessary for *new* understanding to emerge, and is in principle unending. This is of crucial importance. Because for action research a full understanding of a situation must recognise it as always in process of change. This is in some ways a very familiar idea. We all remember that according to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus 'we never step into the same river twice'. And according to Hegel's 'dialectical' model of reality change is inevitable because all phenomena are structured by internal 'contradictions' which are never entirely balanced, so that all phenomena (e.g. states of mind, social situations) always have an inherent instability. We need to understand the forces at work producing this instability in order to see what directions of future change are more likely to occur than others. Consequently any attempt to give an account of a situation as it exists at a given time (i.e. as static), no matter how elaborate the data from which it is derived, will remain incomplete, because its internal contradictions are being ignored.

In the light of this fundamental principle the task of social inquiry is always to understand how the multiple (and conflicting) perspectives of those involved in a situation are interacting with each other to bring about certain possibilities for development. And this, precisely is the focus of action research. It is by successfully negotiating the collaboration of all participants in a developmental programme that we come to understand the interactions (actual and potential) between their different perspectives. And it is only by attempting to negotiate an actual, practical developmental process that we can establish what are real possibilities (as opposed to the opinions or hopes of individuals): anyone's refusal to take part reveals some limitation or other in our sense of what needs to be understood; reveals, in other words, some lack of 'completeness' or 'consensus' in our collective understanding.

Moreover, it must be assumed that those who are to be involved in the practical programme will only collaborate fully if they agree that it is 'beneficial': the change

proposed must be seen by all as not only a *change* in practice but an *improvement* in practice, i.e. a process that fully engages (one way or another) the motives and values of those concerned. In this way, the process of negotiating participation in an agreed programme of improving practice is in itself a process of gradually deepening our understanding of a particular aspect of social reality, including, crucially, its ethical dimensions. Because what counts as an 'improvement', since it involves our values, is always an ethical question.

Multiplicity, Inter-subjectivity, Reflexivity, Critique

The elephant fable suggests that the basic issue for social inquiry is: how can the inevitable limitations of an individual interpretation be remedied to provide a more *comprehensive* understanding? But although the fable is a powerful and telling metaphor, there is an important sense in which it overstates the problem. It ignores the complexity of an individual's state of consciousness and consequently our capacity (for which we may use the term 'imagination') to remedy in part the limitations of our immediate perceptions. In contrast, the action research principle of participation and negotiation assumes that individuals are not 'blindly' determined by a subjective perspective that traps us completely: on the contrary we make sense of our experience by recognising it as, in the end, *inter-subjective*. Our lives involve us in a multiplicity of social roles (each with differing motives and values) so that although our initial perspective on a situation may be influenced mainly by a single role (e.g. nurse or social worker or manager or accountant or patient or family carer), the multiplicity of our own experience provides us with the capacity for imaginative empathy and thus the possibility of learning to appreciate the different perspectives of others.

Without this capacity for imagining others' experience it would be impossible for us to negotiate any sort of shared understanding with others who, almost by definition, have motives and values that differ from our own. More precisely, it is an awareness of the complexity underlying everyone's perspective that enables us to see that, in principle and in spite of our differences, we may be able to agree on a set of shared aims. And through joint participation in attempts to realise these aims in a shared programme of action we may learn more about possibilities that were initially hidden by our differences. The basic argument is nicely summed up by Merleau-Ponty. 'The problem of knowing' he says, 'is how my experience is related to the experience which others have of the same objects... In the perception of another I find myself in relation to another "myself" who is, in principle, open to the same truths as I am'. (4)

The inter-subjectivity underlying individual experience thus provides our first resource for negotiation and collaboration, for agreeing on collective action and thereby engaging in collective inquiry. But in order to make use of this resource we must go further and recognise and make explicit that the reality of the social world we inhabit is fundamentally permeated by its 'reflexivity', i.e. the 'reflexivity' of the interpretive judgements by means of which we all engage in constructing our shared reality.

The principle of 'reflexivity' is a fundamental dimension of sociological and linguistic theory. And its profound significance for social inquiry is that it radically contravenes the common-sense assumption that our accounts of our experience have the authority of being in accordance with 'the facts' of an external reality. In contrast, the principle of reflexivity reminds us that all such supposed facts are our own collective creation. This is not to

suggest that our social world 'does not exist', but that we can only fully grasp our relation to the reality of the situations in which we are involved by recognising that we continuously participate in a socially constructed framework of meaning.

Thus, we construct the intelligibility of all accounts of the social world through a set of 'interpretive procedures' which we acquired along with language itself. When we engage in any form of collective action or communication we always need both to improvise and to make assumptions, and to assume that others are doing so too. For example, as part of our early socialization we learned how to assume that others will use words in the same way as we do and that our acts in relation to others have the same meaning for others as theirs for us. So social life is constructed on the assumption that others are able to make their own sense of what we say and do by filling in for themselves the inevitable gaps in the meaning of our statements and the potential ambiguities of our actions created by the initial subjectivity of our standpoint. (5) Our perceptions and judgements about others, and our actions in relation to others therefore, are reflexive in the sense that in order to understand the basis on which they rest we must see them as 'bent back ('re-flex-ed') into the socially constructed meanings, on which we depend for our awareness of the social world and the place of ourselves and others in it. (6)

In our everyday lives we do not, of course, notice the reflexivity of the social world we inhabit, i.e. the background assumptions on which our interpretations depend as we use them to navigate our way more or less neatly and smoothly through our interactions. Hence, the first methodological task of all social inquiry must be to address and make explicit the reflexivity of all the accounts it makes use of. Otherwise, instead of conducting a *critique* of our spontaneous understandings of events, we will simply reproduce and legitimise the categories and themes of our immediate perspectives, which always present themselves to us spontaneously as familiar, 'natural' and thus already appropriate and adequate. In other words, unless the methodology of social inquiry makes the reflexivity of the social world its first and essential topic, our inquiries, rather than *investigating* (and thus *questioning*) the nature of the social world, will simply take it for granted (7). It is through recognising the principle of reflexivity that social inquiry can be more than just one more common-sense or bureaucratic activity and become (remembering again the fable of the elephant) a comprehensive *critique* of consciousness with its implicit question: how can we *transform* our understanding?

But for action research there is a further question - a question that is both epistemological and ethical: how can we emancipate ourselves from our initial, taken-for-granted subjective understandings in order to place ourselves in a relationship with others that will enable us to engage in forms of action that develop the possibilities of our shared 'Being-with others'?

For action research, recognising the reflexivity of our accounts is not only important at the level of theoretical principle (as is the case with any form of social inquiry). It also guides the process of negotiating agreed improvements in practice and it means that all rigorous inquiry is (also) self-inquiry. It means that we do not try to justify our own perspective as being already 'correct' because it is 'based on the facts', which will lead to the usual insoluble disputes with others, who will justify their own perspective in the same way. Instead, starting out from the reflexivity of all accounts, and stimulated by the initially surprising differences of others' accounts, we can begin to reflect on how we have come to construct our own perspective in a particular way. We can juxtapose the reflexivity of our own interpretations with the reflexivity of others' accounts, and thus see them all as

'interesting' (as opposed to 'correct' or 'incorrect'). In this way all participants to an inquiry are called upon to subject their various interpretations of events to a 'critique', i.e. an investigation into what alternative interpretations have not yet been considered. And it is in this way that new possibilities for collective action are brought into view. (8)

Action Research and Buddhist Mindfulness Practice

I suggested above that action research entails a concern with the central issues of our 'Being with others'. Its concern with improvements in practice means that it is inherently concerned with ethics. And its concern with negotiating the commitment of all participants means that it is inherently concerned with equality, democracy and freedom. Peter Reason, for example, sees 'participative inquiry' as essentially concerned with 'healing' the fragmentation and alienation of contemporary reality (9) And John Heron, discussing validity criteria for 'Co-operative Inquiry', emphasizes that 'value criteria' are essential: 'Does the practice contribute to personal and social transformation according to the inquirers' view of an intrinsically worthwhile way of life for human beings?' (10). All of which suggests important parallels between action research principles and values and those of Buddhist 'Mindfulness'.

The starting point of the Buddhist teachings on the benefits of and (indeed) the necessity for mindfulness practice is our tendency to misrepresent to ourselves the nature of our experience. This arises because the structure of our mental and emotional processes can always only provide us with a continuous flow of impermanent moments of perception, whereas we *conceptualise* our experience in terms of fixed, stable entities, e.g., in particular: emotions, anxieties, opinions and personalities - our own and others'. The apparent fixity of our experience is a self-induced and self-confirming series of *stories* about our selves, other people and our relationships. Clinging to these conceptualisations and stories, we fail to see that our experiences are continuously created by a multitude of 'conditions' which themselves are continuously changing, so that the terms in which we conceptualise our experience are, in this sense, 'insubstantial': the ceaseless flow of questions and interpretations by means of which we make use of rules or concepts are like the ceaselessly flowing eddies of water in a stream. In principle, therefore, the practice of mindfulness means recognising the impermanence, conditionality and insubstantiality of our experience, as it presents itself in our current set of stories and conceptualisations, and thereby liberating ourselves to recognise alternative ways of understanding ourselves and the situations in which we are involved.

There is a clear parallel here with the action research principle of recognising the reflexivity underlying the apparent objectivity of our experience of our world. And indeed this is made quite explicit by some contributors to a recent volume analysing the concept of mindfulness in exhaustive detail (11). John Dunne, for example, uses the term 'reflexive awareness' to describe the traditional (*Mahamudra*) Buddhist analysis of the state of 'non-dual mindfulness', in which experience is not structured in terms of a primary distinction between 'my' subjectivity and external objects (12). Bikhu Bodhi also interprets mindfulness precisely in terms of an analytical awareness of the reflexivity of experience: 'a stance of *observation* or *watchfulness*... a "bending back" of the light of consciousness upon the experiencing subject in its physical, sensory and psychological dimensions. This act of 'bending back' serves to illuminate the events occurring in these domains, lifting them out from the twilight zone of unawareness into the light of clear cognition' (13).

But our experience is not only continuously conditioned by the flux of our own multifarious thoughts and feelings; we are also being continuously conditioned by others in an endless system of mutual influence. To become aware of this is to recognise the insubstantiality of ourselves and others as separate entities and to recognise that our fundamental experiential reality is what Thich Nath Hanh calls our shared 'inter-being' (14). To grasp fully our connectedness with the being of others is not only possible but necessary: the ultimate *task* of mindfulness practice. Not only possible and necessary as a form of understanding, but (making a further link with action research) necessary and beneficial as a form of practice. Having recognised the insubstantiality of the stories of our own and other limitations, we can then experience *compassion* (directed towards ourselves and others) for the suffering created by these stories and recognise the possibility and the desirability of developing collaboratively with others, new ways of being and acting that are fully informed by the shared reality of our connectedness. Christina Feldman and Willem Kuyken, writing in the volume on mindfulness previously mentioned, argue that compassion means 'perceiving one's experience as part of the larger human experience' and that our capacity for experiencing such compassion (including empathy and refraining from judgment) is 'hard-wired' in the human species as an evolutionary necessity (15).

Mindfulness practice, then, is a process whereby we contact our otherwise hidden energies and capacities for understanding the nature of the reality we experience and for compassionate action with others based on this new understanding. In some Buddhist traditions this potentiality is termed our 'Buddha mind' as a potential within us all, which Rigdzin Shikpo describes as our capacity for openness (to new experiences), sensitivity (to other beings) and clarity (in our understanding of reality), which includes an understanding of both 'emptiness' (the insubstantiality of the phenomena of our experience) and of compassion (16). Stephen Batchelor expresses it slightly differently: Buddhist practice involves a process of 'awakening'; and what the Buddha 'awoke' to, he suggests, was a radical understanding that there is no 'certain place' to which we belong but a 'groundless ground of contingency and conditionality' (17). In other words, Buddhist practice is a matter of contacting our capacity to go beyond our spontaneous inclination to respond to experience with a stance of either affirming or negating and, instead to respond always with the question: 'What is this?' (18).

To sum up: both action research and Buddhist Mindfulness depend on ethical purposefulness, an awareness that reality is a continuous process of change, reflexivity, compassion, connectedness with others, liberation from habitual thinking, and critique: subjective, institutional, cultural and political. In Mindfulness practice, we try to develop our capacity for continuous questioning and 'non-judgmental knowledge', leading to more sensitive awareness of self and others, and thus more effective communication and transformed understanding. This can be seen, simultaneously, as personal 'self-therapy', as an elaboration of the forms of awareness and activity required by action research, and also as the ideal underlying our everyday professional practice as nurses, social workers, managers, and educators.

* * * * *

Notes

(This paper is adapted from an earlier paper presented at a meeting of The Cambridge Theological Federation on June 2nd, 2014)

- 1) *The Udana*, Chapter 6, pp.86-9, Trans. John Ireland, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society, 1997
- 2) Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba: *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, Sage, 1985:, pp. 37-43.
- 3) Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (ed.): *New Directions in Action Research*, London: Falmer Press, 1996, p.3
- 4) Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'The primacy of perception and its philosophical implications', in *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p.17
- 5) See Harold Garfinkel,; *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall,1967; Aaron Cicourel: *Cognitive Sociology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973,Chapter 2
- 6) Richard Winter: *Learning From Experience: Principles and Practice in Action Research*, Lewes, Falmer Press, 1989, p.41
- 7)) See Michael Phillipson: 'Stratifying speech', in Barry Sandywell, David Silverman, Maurice Roche, Paul Filmer, Michael Phillipson: *Problems of Reflexivity and Dialectics in Sociological Inquiry*, Routledge, London, 1975
- 8) See Richard Winter: op. cit., pp. 39-46. On the centrality of reflexivity for action research see also Susan Hall: 'Reflexivity in emancipatory action research', in Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (ed): *New Directions in Action Research*, London, Falmer Press, 1996, pp.28-48
- 9) Peter Reason, (ed.) *Participation in Human Inquiry*, London: Sage, 1994, Chapter 1, pp.10-11
- 10) John Heron: *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, London, Sage, 1996, p.171
- 11) *Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives on its Meaning, Origins and Applications*, A Special Issue (Vol. 12, No.1) of *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, May 2011
- 12) John Dunne: 'Towards an understanding of non-dual mindfulness', in *Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives...*, p.74
- 13) Bikkhu Bodhi: 'What does mindfulness really mean? A canonical perspective', in *Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives...*, p.25
- 14) Thich Nath Hanh: *Being Peace*, London: Rider, 1987, Chapter Six
- 15) Christina Feldman and Willem Kuyken: 'Compassion in the landscape of suffering', in *Mindfulness: Diverse Perspectives...*, p. 144
- 16) Rigdzin Shikpo: *Openness, Clarity, Sensitivity*, Oxford, Longchen Foundation, 1992, p viii
- 17) Stephen Batchelor: *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*, New York, Spiegel and Grau, 2010, pp. 127-31
- 18) Martine Batchelor: teaching given at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Day Retreat, May 3rd, 2014