ARTICLE

Living systemic thinking

Exploring quality in first-person action research

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ABSTRACT

In this article I explore how ideas of systemic thinking, drawn from the work of Gregory Bateson and others, influence my practice of first-person action research. I track a story of inquiry through several phases, including gaining feedback from others about my behaviour. I identify quality issues in first-person action research, also called self reflective inquiry, as I proceed.

KEY WORDS

- feedback
- first-person action research
- quality
- systemic thinking

Introduction

In this article I report an inquiry in which I sought to develop my understanding and competence in practice. This can be termed 'first-person' action research, self-reflective inquiry or self-study. My purposes here are to contribute to developing such notions of research and to address issues of quality. I have therefore adopted a detailed storytelling approach, reflecting on the nature of first-person inquiry as the narrative unfolds.

Reason and Bradbury describe first-person action research as:

> skills and methods which address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness and . . . to assess effects in the outside world while acting . . . [it] brings inquiry into more and more of our moments of action – not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities. (2001, pp. xxv–vi)

They offer companion notions of second- and third-person inquiry (as do Reason & Torbert, 2001). Second-person action research involves joint inquiry 'with others into issues of mutual concern' (p. xxvi), often using an agreed research process such as co-operative inquiry. Third-person action research seeks to bring a wider community – such as an organization, a local region or a professional group – into inquiry in some way. Participatory action research could be seen in these terms.

Often action research initiatives involve all three modes. For example, second-person action research requires all participants to engage in self-reflective, first-person inquiry of some kind. As people's understanding develops, they may want to influence a wider system and so adopt third-person inquiry approaches. First-person action research is both an approach to inquiry in itself – as I research my own practice – and, in my view, foundational to overtly collaborative forms of action research, for example, by helping an initiating researcher in a project pay attention to themselves in relation to issues of power.

This way of categorizing the diverse wealth of action research approaches can be helpful if it is not over-invested with implied clarity and authority. It provides a base for considering issues of craft and quality.

Working with the notion of first-person research raises many fertile questions. For example, it might imply a modernist view of a stable and coherent self, with which I am uncomfortable. Accounts of research in this form can become confessional tales focused on the researcher, with questionable purposes, and hints, or more, of self-indulgence. Also, espousing self-reflection is a bold claim. If, as Bateson 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' (1973, p. 408), we cannot know everything through rational intelligence and must accept incompleteness.

In strong sympathy with these challenges, I continue to explore first-person action research approaches. In a world of multiple perspectives, I feel some obligation to seek to reflect on and articulate what shapes my sense-making and behaviour. Realising that there are limits to any account I can give does not offer me licence to give no account. Rather I can ponder and test limits. For example, I can consider how I might be replicating patterns of power as I espouse dialogic inquiry relationships with others, and reflect on the limits of my capacities to 'see' power, especially its more elusive dimensions (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). I am seeking not to attribute undue privilege and sense of causation to my own actions, as the research account below shows. I hold a shifting, contingent, multiple, often incoherent notion of self, and am suspicious of self-creation as a life project. And yet I work with my experiencing: seeking to bring attention into more moments of being and action; to reflect on my purposes, assumptions and patterns; to act awarely and choicefully; to encourage mutuality in relationship where appropriate; and to find ways to assess effects in the worlds in which I participate. I am mindful of creating narratives as I speak from this experiencing, and I reflect on what shapes these take. As I conduct first-person inquiry in these ways, I sometimes have a sense of increasing choice about my assumptions, attitudes and behaviours, which I see as development of some kind, although often this makes life more rather than less complicated.

My self-reflective inquiry practices have much in common with those of others in the field. I have long appreciated Bill Torbert's work on action inquiry, its demanding call to develop attentions that span purposes, strategies, behaviour and effects in the world (Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 2001). I welcome the interactive combination of phenomenology, critical social science, hermeneutics and Buddhism that Bentz and Shapiro (1998) advocate in *Mindful Inquiry*, appreciating the highlighting of research as political as well as personal process (Marshall, 2001). I experience the power and demands of action research in Gloria Gordon's work (2001) as she repeatedly asks the next almost-too-demanding question about her 'Blackness' in a UK context, turning each into inquiry for self and with others. I enjoy Taylor's exploration of off-line reflection, using presentational form in first-person research (2004). I can learn from them all. And, however resonant other people's ideas and accounts of practice are for me, they are not my tongue, not exactly my shape. They reflect each author's own approach and language. I have to develop my own crafts of first-person action research, as the reader does, making this inherently self-referencing activity also continually critical, challenging and developmental rather than self-satisfied.

With these challenges and paradoxes in mind, I offer here a reflective account of a first-person action research project to contribute to discussions of practice, which often remains opaque in published research accounts. I want to show inquiry *in action*. I shall describe two phases of exploration. The first has been reviewed, analysed and crafted. In retrospect, the account seems possibly

over conclusive. In contrast, data from the second phase is only partially digested, unwinding some of the neatness of earlier conclusions. The form of data presentation will mirror this difference to convey some impression of inquiry in process.

I will use the device of '*Quality notes*' to draw more generic questions from this specific research story. They appear *in italics* as the tale unfolds, offering a meta-commentary on key issues of quality (a term I prefer to 'validity') in the conduct of first-person research, for inquirers to address.

Continuing a journey of inquiry

This article reports next steps in my learning journey of articulating and developing the ways I seek to conduct inquiry in everyday life.

As a self-reflective researcher I apply and test ideas and practices back and forth between my research and what might be termed the rest of my life, although often there is little sense of boundary between these. I have written, for example, about 'Researching women in management as a way of life' (Marshall, 1992). I see this testing as enhancing, not undermining, the quality of my ideas and practice. In Marshall (1999) I articulated a form of everyday first-person action research I called living life as inquiry, and described some processes of action and reflection this can involve. As I worked on that publication, I realized that, theoretically and practically, my approaches to inquiry are closely intertwined with notions of *systemic thinking* – appreciating phenomena as multiply interconnected and assuming complexity (see below) – which I treat both as ideas about the nature of the world in which I am inquiring and as potential guides to action. This article pursues that realization, turning it into inquiry and tracking some of the quality processes involved in doing so.

This is often how inquiry happens for me. A sense of curiosity or a question surfaces, becomes stronger over time, creates figure against ground in my experience, demands attention and beckons, with a hint of danger too because the possible development might also challenge me in some way and take me to a learning edge. Inquiry of this kind is thrilling, making me feel especially alive.

Living systemic thinking as a focus for inquiry

I set out to learn more about, and develop, how systemic thinking informs my behaviour and approaches to inquiry. Thinking systemically, to me, includes:

- often holding in mind ideas of connectedness, systemic properties and dynamics, persistence of patterns, and resilience;
- respecting emergence and unfolding process;

- believing that often 'parts' cannot change unless there is some kind of shift in systemic pattern, but/and that sometimes 'parts' can change and influence change in the wider 'system';
- typically experiencing myself as involved, not apart, in any systemic relationships I am seeking to understand.

This is not systems thinking derived from an engineering, modernist base (hence 'parts' and 'system' are, for me, patterns, emergent, shifting qualities, not things). Over many years, I have enjoyed the works of Gregory Bateson (1973), Capra (1982, 1997), Meadows (1991), Senge (1990), Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith (1994), Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974), Weick (1979) and others for the complex, dynamic senses of the world they offer. I am drawn to sources which place the sense-maker and actor participatively within the system (Bateson, 1973; Watzlawick et al., 1974). Analysing systemic patterns from outside is potentially interesting, but this is not usually where I find myself. I have experimented with the potential implications of these ideas for appropriate ways to act. There has been a sustained testing back and forth between practice and theorizing. Hence my title here refers to living out what I first encountered as ideas. I have let them inform me, meaning both influence me and give form to how I operate, creating my own interpretations and practices. Working with the ideas includes dwelling with them, shifting frames.

How I have worked with these ideas is translated through who I am and how I have lived that: a woman, from a working-class background, 'white', living in the UK, with specific life experiences. I have done life training in *systemic living*, it seems to me, and that is still continuing.

Systemic thinking is integral to inquiry for me, partly because I and the people I tutor, coach and study are often seeking to 'act for change' in some way, frequently from within an organizational system, and not always with a formally designated remit and positioning (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). We need to be appreciative of systemic qualities and dynamics, and aware that there is information we do not know. Using systemic thinking in these ways, I am not typically seeking control, however defined, but exploring how to live with integrity my belief that I see, and act by, only arcs of circuits (Bateson, 1973), and yet want to participate influentially in the unfolding worlds I inhabit.

Following my sense that this questioning was a next territory of learning for me, I set out to explore what it means to see notions of systemic thinking as integral to my conduct of first-person research. Within this general inquiry intent I devised three interconnected research pathways: articulating the notions of *living systemic thinking* I already carried to open them to review, critique and development; tracking examples of my practice; and exploring associated ideas. In this article I concentrate on the first two inquiry approaches, grounding the article in an example, as my focus is the conduct of action research.

Quality note: inquiry intent Having identified a potential territory or topic of first-person inquiry such as this, it is valuable to be questioning about its intent (Marshall, 2001). Where has it come from? How is it held? Is it shallow or robustly grounded? Does it persist and grow when considered? Can I sense a strong learning edge here? Does that pull potential defence as well as engagement? How can I keep aware of and work with that? Typically, I partly test out my intent, and its framing, by speaking it to others, paying attention to how I articulate it, learning from their feedback and challenges. In this case, the pull of inquiry – and its interest for others – was affirmed.

Tracking an example of first-person inquiry: phase 1

Below I report a meeting and some of the subsequent developments. I have chosen this example because: I was especially aware of being on an inquiry edge (of needing to pay attention to my perceptions and behaviour) and of being informed by systemic thinking during the experience itself; I worked actively to consider what it meant to act with integrity; and I have tracked the inquiry through several phases, benefiting from high levels of access to feedback from others involved.

Quality note: writing accounts 1 How to write accounts that are alive, rich and multi-faceted but also succinct is a challenge in first-person action research. How can we bring experience to the reader sufficiently well and not draw them into too much detail?

Some early examples of *living systemic thinking* I drafted felt thin and did not recreate the scene or my behaviour. The account below is the richest I have produced. Writing it, and eliciting feedback, has been part of the ongoing inquiry.

Quality note: research approaches What strategies of inquiry do I adopt? How appropriate to the issues are they? Do they open my view of the world to reflection, feedback and challenge? How thorough have I been? And what does thorough mean in this context? How have I maintained attention to, and balanced, externally and internally generated data?

There have been two phases of active exploration in relation to this example of practice. I will briefly outline the first here, explaining Phase 2 later. Cycles of writing and discussion have also contributed to the inquiry.

I found myself in a meeting which exemplified *living systemic thinking* and so adopted an active inquiry stance. I reviewed the experience immediately afterwards from this perspective. As the situation unfolded during subsequent months,

I continued to track and reflect on my participation. I checked my first version of this article with two other people involved (identified as K and P below), for their feedback and clearance to speak from it publicly. They suggested minor clarifying amendments. I then presented the article at an international management conference. This section is from that article, with some crafting, editing and contextual explanation. I will present it in some detail, wanting to give a fine-grained account of inquiry in action, facing the challenges of reporting first-person action research, aware that everyday inquiry experience can be devalued.

Context

In our Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the School of Management, University of Bath, tutors work with their postgraduate research students in supervision groups within a wider programme and community (www.bath.ac.uk/carpp). We seek to create communities of inquiry within these groups, in which members can support and challenge each other.

An academic meeting

K, a mature, part-time postgraduate research 'student' whose work I supervise – a management consultant – is presenting a paper to transfer from Masters registration to PhD registration (this approximates to the qualifying process at a USA University). There are published criteria the work must meet to show competence at PhD level. The meeting is attended by three members of academic staff: one colleague, P, as the main assessor (he has come as the 'outsider', to give a fresh perspective for this review), me (I can influence, but cannot unilaterally make the decision), and another colleague, ST (as an observer because he is relatively new to the UK academic system). There are also five fellow students (F, MA, ME, R and SU, all but one are mature part-timers too), who can participate in discussion, including being supportive to K. They are a newly formed supervision group (having met three times before): some have transferred from other groups; some have only recently registered. We sit round heavy tables in a room with windows on two sides. Separated by the tables, we are spaced out, but the room seems crowded. We tape record the meeting (as we do all supervision sessions) for the student's future reference.

As the meeting unfolds, it becomes apparent that my colleague P is unsure whether the student's work is yet ready to allow transfer. P is working with his own first-person inquiry. I recognize this by noting his question posing approach, and it opens the space even more for my own self-reflectiveness. As I contribute to the meeting, I am engaging in first-person action research in the moment, continually reflecting on how to conduct myself, including how much, and how, to speak. I move between different frames on the situation, judging my potential

purposes and appropriate conduct within different potential systemic configurations. I feel especially challenged when MA asks me directly why I have not checked K's work thoroughly beforehand to make sure that it will 'pass'. Later I join in considering how the uncertainty about the readiness of the work for transfer can be addressed.

My inquiry in the moment took the form of reviewing different ways of making sense of the meeting systemically and then considering appropriate behaviour. Some of the choices I was aware of processing were that:

- The short-term goal of 'passing' the transfer might be less important than the long-term value to the student's research of her hearing and addressing my colleague's concerns;
- If I spoke on the student's behalf I could undermine her authority about her work;
- The student might need some encouragement from me to articulate what was not being appreciated (perhaps even by her) in her work;
- P would not welcome feeling under pressure from me about his judgement;
- My own positioning and credibility with this new supervision group was being created and tested through this exchange; and
- This exposure to what was ahead on the PhD journey could be valuable to the other students.

I noted and was thrilled about how the unfolding meeting was enacting issues to do with the student's stated research topic – the creation of generative spaces for people to flourish – making those issues available in the moment to be experienced, and therefore analysed in dynamic depth, as well as debated intellectually. I was guiding my own behaviour by choosing purposes systemically, especially considering whether my interventions would help the inquiry going on in the meeting, and whether they would support the student's deeper agenda of learning and my colleague's capacity to act with integrity.

At the close of the meeting, K was allowed to transfer to PhD registration, her articulation of the readiness of her work had been accepted. We had lived the decision making process overtly, transparently, it seemed, being open about dilemmas, trying to clarify criteria for making a decision and seeking to move away from authoritative unilateral assessment towards mutuality. But much else was going on for each person there. It had been a demanding session. I was left with many impressions, no fixed interpretation of what had happened, and certainly no clear sense of what other people had experienced. I did not want or need to collapse these into one sense-making, I could allow the varied strands, including the uncertainties, to co-exist. But I was not sure of other people's comfort in doing this. Would they want things resolving or clarifying, a more settled form of truth? I chose not to ask, lest we try to talk this complex event into one shape. If someone had raised the need, I would have spoken about the potential

benefits of maintaining multiple, partly formed truths about the meeting, and then seen what kind of discussion was needed. Also, in the immediate aftermath, I wanted to review the meeting for myself, scrutinizing my behaviour and purposes against my multiple systemic interpretations.

The following day

My heightened sense of alertness continued as the group and I met for a further day together. I felt some concern about how I might now be seen as the group members' supervisor, might I have become a little less 'safe'? But I did not think I detected any tensions (I now wonder how I think I would have known) and did not choose to ask my more self-referring question at that early stage in the group's development. I was concerned, however, about how K was feeling. In a break, I asked. She was somewhat subdued, deflated. I tried to tell her how interesting, multi-dimensional and related to her research topic I thought the meeting had been. She seemed to agree, but I was wary lest I seem to be forcing my view onto her, and so pulled back. I did not ask if she thought I had helped her enough to prepare her transfer paper. That was too stark a question, within one potential sense-making frame, which polarized authority about her work in ways I resisted. K said that the event had been challenging and she was still making sense of what had happened during it and subsequently. Her feelings were not resolved. I left her to digest the meeting for herself.

I will pause here in my detailed storytelling, not because the inquiring stops at this point, but because there is too much to tell, for the space available, and probably for the reader's interest.

In brief

In subsequent months, my inquiry persisted, less intensely. I supported K in working through her unsettlement about the transfer event and its aftermath, and in taking authority in her PhD work. Listening to the tape recording of the meeting contributed to her learning. She generated an account of the meeting using imagery, photographs and words, taking the aesthetic representational experiments which are a core aspect of her research to a new level of creativity. She presented this work to the supervision group, inviting their experiences of the transfer. Hearing the differing views raised strong feelings and insights for her, including some sense of futility about whether it is ever possible, in her role as management consultant, to work for change if people have such different constructions of events. Now K refers to her transfer meeting and its sequels as rich sources prompting her development. Thus one of my aspirations for the meeting was realized, in the longer term. But I do not claim this as a consequence of my behaviour.

Through reflection and discussion, my sense of what had shaped my behaviour towards K as she prepared for the transfer process was heightened. At this stage in the PhD process especially, I want to encourage the student to take authority for their research. I had behaved accordingly, giving K detailed feedback on extensive draft material, reminding her of the stated criteria, and then leaving her to decide when her paper was revised sufficiently for submission (again acting systemically – not seeking control, playing a considered part, engaging with what emerges). I articulated this framing more overtly in conversations with her.

During the following months, I also paid attention to the supervision group's development. Prior to the transfer meeting, I had already been seeking to foster the group's capacities to be supportive and appropriately challenging. (This had been an explicit inquiry project; I had invited feedback from previous students on my supervision practice, offered a qualitative analysis of the resulting data to the new group and invited discussion of how we would work together.)

Quality note: sense making *If I cannot fill out every potentially relevant pathway of activity and of what I attended to, how do I decide what to include and exclude, how detailed, and where, to be? Telling this as a systemic story, which seeks to honour and keep alive multiple connections, I have faced choices about what I depict, what I bring into focus. The event in its poly-semic multi-dimensionality is collapsed. As I direct attention through this one construction for writing (whilst I maintain other senses too), I punctuate the event (Bateson, 1973), making some things potentially figural. I thus risk implying causes and effects, when interdependence may mean that something which is 'background' may be more influential in shaping patterns than the events to which we want to attribute cause (Weick, 1979). In dialogue with K it has been interesting to see how the transfer meeting itself is only part of the experience, for her especially, but for me also; an exemplification of this point. Working with the group more generally, I am moving back into 'background' rather then focusing on this potentially critical incident. This seems more satisfactory as it is more potentially multi-dimensional, rather than the select configurations (different for each participant) of the issues, feelings and needs which emerged in that specific meeting. And it allows that in a world of interdependencies 'any change made anywhere will eventually itself be changed by the consequences it triggers' (Weick, 1979, p. 77).*

Despite its extent, this is then a limited systemic account.

Articulating notions of *living systemic thinking*

My first step in this research project (starting six months before K's transfer meeting) had been setting out to surface the ideas and practices of *living systemic thinking* I already carried. As noted earlier, I had identified them as significant theories in use. I wanted to open them to review, critique and development. I deliberately pursued this as first-person action research, undertaking several cycles of exploration. Initially I used writing as a process of inquiry, informed by 'freefall' principles (Turner-Vesselago, 1995; similar to Goldberg, 1986); in further cycles I refined and expanded the original text. This exploration generated a list of principles and associated strategies for action/being I use, worked partly through brief examples. I shared this writing with colleagues and with participants on the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath (who are all change agents in some way), and received (verbal, taped and written) feedback.

A sample of these principles of acting with notions of systemic thinking in mind will give some impression:

- inquire into when to persist and when to desist;
- recognize that not much matters that much;
- recognize that everything, or nearly everything, matters greatly;
- operate more often from inquiry than from advocacy;
- realize that taking an approach of control to situations is seldom appropriate, and often futile;
- set goals of effectiveness with their systemic levels in mind;
- pay attention to how you help to keep things the same.

These are not formulae of what to do, but rather dimensions of attention to scan, offering potential choices of behaviour. *Living systemic thinking* is a form of inquiry, seeking to act with context sensitivity and agency in a multi-dimensional world.

Inquiring along this pathway, I found that unless I explore how I seek to *live* these principles they seem vacuous and obvious. To bring them alive a little, I will illustrate them in relation to the transfer meeting, expanding my account of conducting first-person action research. My attention and behaviour are often (tacitly?) informed by such concepts; the transfer meeting was a heightened example.

During the meeting itself, I was often processing *whether to persist* (whether to speak for the student's work; how much to participate in the judgement about readiness for transfer) *or desist* (leaving her to speak for herself; leaving my colleague to clarify his view of the work). I both believed that whatever the outcome, it could progress the student's PhD journey (*not much matters that much*) and that the moments of the meeting were significant and deserved

acute attention (*nearly everything matters*). I operated *from inquiry* strongly in my own sense making, noting the several systemic frames which could be entertained, being especially alert if it seemed I could become defensive about my role in the preparation for transfer. And I operated *from inquiry* in my contributions in the meeting, posing questions rather than moving into advocacy for the student's work (which I thought could undermine her position, reinforce any doubts my colleague had about her readiness to transfer, and deny her the opportunity to be an agent in pushing her own understanding of her work further).

I reflected that I could want to control the outcome of the meeting (make sure that 'my' student 'passed'), but saw this as inappropriate, as the learning and developmental agendas were more significant (*realize that an approach of control is seldom appropriate*). (And in other situations, where I judge that defending someone is appropriate, I might make a different decision.) I wondered actively what would be a valuable outcome, and felt that passing the transfer was not as important as the student learning more about her work, and taking authority for it (*judging goals of effectiveness at different systemic levels*). In relation to all the above, I paid attention to my own behaviour (both contributing and being silent) to see what patterns I might be reinforcing (*paying attention to helping keep things the same*), especially moving back if I felt I might potentially be shaping aspects of the exchange which I judged should unfold more through others' participation but with my watching attention. (I enjoy holding in mind Watzlawick et al.'s image of 'Two sailors frantically steadying a (steady) boat' (1974, p. 37) to prompt me to ask myself if my own behaviour is pulling against some pattern of interaction which is maintained, or even created, by my pulling, and what interpretations or assumptions on my part are prompting the pulling, and might be open to review.)

Quality note: writing accounts *Finding that I can interpret my behaviour in the meeting in systemic terms provides some confirmation for this inquiry's purposes. But I am slightly edgy about the above account. It is faithful to my scanning of attentions and acute alertness at the time. And it could seem that I am over-claiming being aware and systemically 'clever'. This is not my intention. I surfaced what I was doing, treating it with curiosity, hoping to learn. Helpfully, the group's feedback reported below does not make me look perfect; its questioning contributes to my learning.*

Working in this pathway of inquiry, I have articulated a list of 15 principles and practices of my version of *living systemic thinking*, partly self-created and partly showing connections back to ideas I have savoured and turned into practice over the years. That some of them are paradoxical and mutually contradictory seems fitting. I can draw on experiences of what has happened when I applied them, including some long-term tracking of unfolding developments, and this informs

my choicefulness in any situation. I could generate more if I chose, but having a long list does not seem a generative form, so I have paused where I am.

Quality note: theorizing   *What kinds of theorizing do I engage in? How can I tell when I am about to push theorizing too far, or into an inappropriate form? I could develop this list into a possible publication. And yet I note reluctance about doing so, a false note, and choose to pay it attention.*

Seeking to articulate principles I live by and discussing them with colleagues has had interesting effects, influencing my sense making. I will outline some of these, illustrating my quality tracking.

Whilst my initial writing articulating notions of living systemic thinking was spontaneous, playful and engaged, sharing it with others made me doubt its value (the content seemed potentially mundane) even though people responded appreciatively. In conversation with academic colleagues, I was reluctant to 'ham it up', to make my illustrative stories of practice more coherent or heroic than their initial representation. I wanted to speak just enough and no more, to maintain a sense of 'truthfulness' to my experience. (There is an edge of attention in the moment of writing/speaking that I am referring to here, which you may know. Catching that edge, and working with it, is a quality process in first-person research.) Writing in retrospect did not usually keep the experience and my practice in the moment alive and complex to tell. (The example above is the fullest I have achieved.) Having to prove to others that I was warranted in claiming I live systemically (it was interpreted as a claim) produced a pressure I did not want to collude with. When questioned, my response was sometimes, 'well maybe I don't then', willing to give away the ground because holding it was not my purpose or congruent. Although in saying this I knew that I was negating my experience in some way. I struggled in these conversations to speak my knowing but not distort it. I was aware that these encounters mirrored challenges of living systemic thinking. I therefore strove to maintain both inner and outer arcs of attention (practices of first-person research offered in Marshall, 2001), rather than seek refuge in either futility/acquiescence or grandiosity/over-claiming agency.

Reviewing the purposes of inquiry

Rather than further elaborate the list, of more interest to my inquiry at the moment is what these principles and practices are for. Connecting inquiry, systemic thinking and acting for change is key. One strand of my processing is that of bringing attention to the point of connection between my internal and external experiences (of a system), as I locate myself within the system under inquiry (Marshall, 2001). Also, I realize that I am often inquiring, overtly or covertly, into whether the field of issues in which I am engaged is open to change, influence

or development. I sniff the wind; I seek to judge timeliness (a theme Chandler & Torbert, 2003, pursue). I scan a sense of people's energies and interests, and hence potential for development of some kind. I use inquiry a lot in this testing, taking initiatives and treating outcomes as system diagnostic (Meyerson & Scully 1995), seeking to be curious, non-judgemental, rather than attach undue personal weight to what happens (for example, noting, but seeking not to adopt, any concern I might have about getting something 'right' or 'wrong'). And it does not have to be me who acts, I might support someone else who does, perhaps 'only' by paying attention. So, I am often making judgements (not always consciously) about whether this is a moment to be worked with, or not. My principles and practices provide flexible choices as I conduct myself in this territory.

Tracking an example of first-person inquiry: phase 2

Quality note: saturating inquiry *How do we know when we have inquired enough, reached some sort of saturation? How can we tell whether pausing in inquiry is defensive or appropriate closure?*

The story of self-reflective inquiry explored above could be considered complete enough for the purposes of this article. Its neatness was, to me and early readers, appealing. But several factors led me to pursue this inquiry further: curiosity to learning more about 'living systemic thinking', which I could explore in this relatively 'safe' situation; wanting to check with other group members before seeking to publish my account; and learning (after presenting the initial article at a local research conference) that K's transfer meeting had been unsettling for at least two members of the group.

I therefore initiated a second phase of inquiry as I moved this article towards journal submission. I circulated the initial draft to members of the supervision group, invited feedback, and tape recorded discussions, with the group and with one person separately. I then asked by email for explicit feedback on my behaviour in the transfer meeting and whether my written account was 'credible', as these questions were only partially addressed in our conversations. I asked similar questions of the two other tutors who had attended the meeting. I have amalgamated these sources below.

Quality note: working with feedback *What kinds of feedback can people give me? There is no objective or full view, although the audiotape can take us back to the situation. If we each see an unconsciously edited version of the world, guided by purposes (Bateson, 1973), what kinds of dialogue are possible?*

In research quality terms I now face a dilemma. I have far more data than I can adequately portray here. Asking for feedback has greatly amplified the

material. Below I present an initial look at that material, leaving it in a somewhat 'raw' note form, showing some of the nature of this less conclusive, divergent phase of inquiry in the form of representation. I note the tension, excitement and challenge of working with feedback from others, an important aspect of first-person action research (Torbert, 2001), as I seek to hear other people's perceptions, but not lose my own 'base'.

This further cycle of inquiry happened a year after the transfer meeting. The group had moved on. A rich culture of support and challenge was developing. (Looking back gives another perspective on timing and timeliness in inquiry. Inquiring into our conduct together, initiated by other members of the group as well as me, had taken us into second-person action research, from which I benefited when inviting feedback – see below.) Another member had recently undertaken their successful PhD transfer, with the same visiting assessor. Much care had been taken with this process by all involved, with some references back to K's transfer, and much laughter.

In the discussions of my article and behaviour, group members joined me as fellow researchers interested in inquiry, quality, writing accounts, and what can be known and said.

I have received group members' and colleagues' permission to publish their comments, and checked wordings with them.

Feedback on my behaviour from group members and tutors

Quotations are from tape recordings and emails.

People thought my descriptions of my behaviour and processes credible, and they made additional comments.

> I had not paid attention to the second tutor's, ST's, part in the meeting, which others saw as influential (contributing alongside P in the early stages, later saying little). Nor had I acknowledged the subgroups and their/our history. Moreover I had not considered power/authority dynamics between myself and P (as long-term colleagues).

> The account does not say how I was feeling. (This observation raises important issues about first-person action research, which values and works with multiple ways of knowing – Clinchy, 1996; Heron, 1992.) What was going on for me? How might that have shaped my behaviour? Was I choosing not to show that in the writing?

Responding, I tried to articulate the approach I had found myself taking. I include it here as an example of working with attentions, as often advocated in first-person action research (Torbert, 2001).

What I feel was going on was I was noticing what it was like to start to feel something and paying attention to what it was . . . and putting it on one side . . . having this sense of 'what are the many things that could be happening here?' So it was not about one self that was feeling one set of things, it was about several possible selves that were at the same time feeling several possible things, and using those as data.

K suggested that the writing mirrored my behaviour in the meeting, a careful holding of emotional stuff.

People's views of my behaviour varied significantly:

P: Not particularly aware of my behaviour, occupied with his own in a challenging meeting, 'I completely trusted you to monitor your own behaviour and to respond appropriately and creatively, so I could safely not give attention to you.'

Two people (both men) noted my 'inaction' as significant; for one this was uncomfortable:

ST: I saw your behaviour as being dominated by 'not acting' even though there were explicit and implicit calls for you to act.

R: I noticed you struggling to hold a tension between several forces . . . I don't suggest 'failing'. So you seemed to me a little uncertain about how and when to intervene as K was questioned by P . . . I wasn't quite sure (I felt in consequence slightly anxious) of your role in the meeting . . . I believe it was quite a time before you said anything substantial about the developing drama between K and P. It was a relief to me when you did say something: it . . . helped me locate you.

Two people (both women) were upset by my behaviour:

ME: Realized she had felt I had betrayed K by not vetting her work and by sitting back in the meeting. She had then repressed these feelings but they affected her relationship with me.

F: Found it a very painful experience, was mad at me, felt stressed that the supervisor might not assure that someone's work passed; it made the PhD process feel unsafe.

K: Felt supported by me in the meeting and afterwards. Her impression of me was 'dichotomous': 'not getting eye contact with you' and 'of you intervening, looking at me encouraging me to speak up for the qualities of my inquiry that might not be obvious from the paper' . . . 'I . . . [drew] courage and strength from that look. After that I felt able to challenge P on the nature of the process and to speak about my work' . . . 'I struggled for a bit to "read" you. And then became aware that one interpretation was that you did not want to speak "for me" but were waiting for me to speak for myself' . . . 'Admired your ability not to rescue me' . . . 'The one occasion where you appeared to me a little off guard was in your response to MA's challenge' . . . perhaps because 'I wasn't quite sure I wholly agreed . . . It felt like a difficult moment. And we came through it, I feel, because of your subsequent intervention, inviting me to speak for my work'.

> SU (Student with longest experience of CARPP): The meeting was a roller-coaster. She was pleased with it. The group asserted itself in discussion. There was learning for all.

Three people (MA, F and K) saw MA's question to me as significant punctuation in the meeting.

> MA: 'I saw you behaving very much in the way you describe up to the point that you were asked why you had allowed K to present her paper if you felt it was not ready. Until this point you appeared to be neutral' giving P and ST space. 'You appeared to share some of their concerns. Your position appeared to change from this moment. Your change appeared to result in P "backing down"' and ST becoming more observer.

Quality note: representation   *As we make sense and select 'data' for presentation, how might potential vulnerability influence us? First-person inquiry can seem so 'personal'. Presenting this feedback makes me feel a little exposed. I can view it non-judgementally, as information, and simultaneously recognize how I might have acted differently. But I wonder how others will see it; will they be uni-dimensionally critical? I notice the tension of including other people's views that I should havechecked K's work thoroughly in advance (I do not want to be drawn into self-justification), but include them. In first-person action research, how I engage with 'data' is 'data'. And my own learning will not be opened by defensiveness (not that defensiveness, engaged inquiringly, is inherently degenerative).*

This feedback is congruent with and also expands my appreciation of the meeting. It shows that my behaviour can be interpreted in different ways, and that I must be willing for my intentions to be 'misunderstood'. It reinforces my assumption/assertion that it is not appropriate to seek control in situations, as I experience the complexity, the multi-dimensionality of even this fragment of experience. In this I align with Flood who, also distinguishing systemic thinking from systems thinking, argues that we can take *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) and complexity theory to encourage us to 'operate in conscious recognition' of three paradoxes: 'we will manage within the unmanageable', 'we will organise within the unorganisable', and 'we will know of the unknowable' (Flood, 1999, p. 3).

The feedback suggests I could consider behaving differently in similar situations: perhaps informing expectations about my role in advance (although it only became developed in action), and creating a process for knowing afterwards if there were problems that mattered for people. It also suggests that my behaviour was more 'explicable' to those who knew me and were more familiar with ways of working in CARPP (P, SU, K, MA). This now seems an obvious point, but my notions of *living systemic thinking* had not prioritized person-in-context sensitivity.

Quality note: research cycling: how first person inquiry is enriched through engagement How much can I work reflectively with this experience without it becoming grey like overworked pastry or so mutable that it means everything and nothing? As people tell me their impressions and open up different parts of the picture for consideration, images of the event and its potential meanings shift and shimmer. My musings alone, however self-reflective, are more limited. The engagements with others are like looking through old glass. As I move my gaze, I glimpse aspects not accounted for in my initial account, enhancing my systemic appreciation. I am not seeking an inclusive, stable image. I willingly accept that I cannot know 'everything', mystery always remains, is perhaps primary (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). I am happy, then, to leave images concatenated rather than resolved.

In reflection

In closing this article, I review my learning about *living systemic thinking* and engaging in first-person action research, both of which are continuing inquiry agendas for me.

Living systemic thinking

I have learnt that *living systemic thinking* is a long term, emergent, never-ending activity, with any sense making always open to revision as action, reflection and feedback unfold. Inquiry is key to *living systemic thinking* and takes many forms, being self-reflective but also systemically engaged, and means taking strategic initiatives to learn more and track emerging data, knowing that I will never fully know. So, I need disciplines for interpreting and then acting/inquiring again. There is no 'system' to know. Rather, my use of systemic thinking is fluid, blurred, emergent; a sense of 'organization' appearing in the moment only to dissolve or take on a similar pattern in a different form. There are significant, interesting questions about how to judge effectiveness in *living systemic thinking*, and how imponderable this is; again a matter for active inquiry in each specific situation. I note the dangers, usually, of pursuing closely specified goals, and see control as an incongruent aim from a systemic view, unless it is to seek to control my exposure to harm or affirm my own right to self-care (although these are not straightforward).

First-person action research

Based on my attentional practice in this case, I have suggested above that quality in first-person action research requires paying attention to, at least:

- inquiry intent;
- writing accounts;
- research approaches;
- sense making;
- theorizing;
- saturating inquiry;
- working with feedback;
- representation; and
- research cycling, including engagement with others.

Viewed in summary this is an unremarkable list, as it has, unintentionally, replicated key aspects of action research practice.

Taking my own crafts of inquiry forward, I will continue to explore how I can speak from accounts. This article is experimental in this sense. It seems difficult to capture practice in writing, although feedback suggests this story does communicate. Also, some other draft accounts have been discarded because to develop them would take me into confidential business within my organization which I have no remit or willingness to reveal. Inquiring systemically, I soon cross the boundary from first-person inquiry, which I feel I have a right to speak from, into more interdependencies (and my interpretations of interdependencies) which I am hesitant to write about publicly, or to check with others.

One continuing challenge of first-person action research is how to gain feedback. How people respond might be framed by the relationship I want to explore; asking my PhD students for feedback, for example. Key questions can therefore seem unaskable. Also, making mutual sense is not always appropriate, and seems unlikely to be available in complex, multi-perspectival situations. Often divergent views need to stand. And yet, if agreement is not possible, what forms of validation can I apply to my own systemic sense making? In any inquiry, we need therefore to ask if, when and how seeking feedback is appropriate, for learning and quality monitoring.

Returning to the challenges for first-person action research I noted in the Introduction, I do not think I have implied a stable and coherent self here, but have shown how I work with experiencing. I can only wonder if you consider this attempt to contribute to inquiry practice development a self-indulgent, confessional tale. I have worked with and noted some limits to self-reflection, and know that there are others, some of which I might sometimes glimpse in peripheral vision.

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