

What is Co-operative Inquiry?

Excerpted from the web sites of the original author, [John Heron](#) and a major contributor to the development of the fields of action research, participatory research, collaborative inquiry and co-operative inquiry, [Peter Reason](#) . Compiled and edited by [Nancy Peden](#) for the [National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation](#).

What is the basic intention of Co-operative Inquiry?

By John Heron, [Overview, One page introduction to Co-operative Inquiry](#)

“In traditional research on people, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive. The researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied. In co-operative inquiry these exclusive roles are replaced by a co-operative relationship of bilateral initiative and control, so that all those involved work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects. They *both* design, manage and draw conclusions from the inquiry, and they undergo the experience and action that is being explored. This is not research on people, but research *with* people.”

What are the basic steps in a Co-operative Inquiry?

By John Heron, [One page introduction to Co-operative Inquiry](#)

“Co-operative inquiry can be seen as cycling through four phases of reflection and action. In Phase 1 a group of co-researchers come together to explore an agreed area of human activity. They may be professionals who wish to inquire into a particular area of practice; couples or families who wish to explore new styles of life; people who wish to examine in depth certain states of consciousness; members of an organization who want to research restructuring it; ill people who want to assess the impact of particular healing practices; and so on. In the first part of Phase 1, they agree on the focus of their inquiry, and develop together a set of questions or propositions they wish to investigate. Then they plan a method for exploring this focal idea in action, through practical experience. Finally, in Phase 1, they devise and agree a set of procedures for gathering and recording data from this experience.

In Phase 2 the co-researchers now also become co-subjects: they engage in actions agreed; and observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other's experience. In particular, they are careful to notice the subtleties of experience, to hold lightly the conceptual frame from which they started so that they are able to see how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas.

Phase 3 is in some ways the touchstone of the inquiry method. It is a stage in which the co-subjects become full immersed in and engaged with their experience. They may develop a degree of openness to what is going on so free of preconceptions that they see it in a new way. They may deepen into the experience so that superficial understandings are elaborated and developed. Or it may lead them away from the original ideas into new

fields, unpredicted action and creative insights. It is also possible that they may get so involved in what they are doing that they lose the awareness that they are part of an inquiry group: there may be a practical crisis, they may become enthralled, they may simply forget.

In Phase 4, after an agreed period in Phases 2 and 3, the co-researchers re-assemble to share the experiential data from these Phases, and to consider their original ideas in the light of it. As a result they may develop or reframe these ideas; or reject them and pose new questions. They may choose, for the next cycle of action, to focus on the same or on different aspects of the overall inquiry. The group may also choose to amend or develop its inquiry procedures - forms of action, ways of gathering data - in the light of experience.

This cycle between reflection and action is then repeated several times. Ideas and discoveries tentatively reached in early phases can be checked and developed; investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration of other parts; new skills can be acquired and monitored; experiential competences are realized; the group itself becomes more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work.

Repeat cycling enhances the validity of the findings. Additional validity procedures are used during the inquiry: some of these counter unaware projection and consensus collusion; others monitor authentic collaboration, the balance between reflection and action, and between chaos and order.

For more details see John Heron, *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, London, Sage, 1996; Peter Reason (ed), *Human Inquiry in Action*, London, Sage, 1988; Peter Reason (ed), *Participation in Human Inquiry*, London, Sage, 1994.

(For more online documents on how to do co-operative inquiry, see <http://www.human-inquiry.com/doculist.htm>)

What are the objectives of the larger field of participatory research?

By Peter Reason, [*Doing Co-operative Inquiry*](#)

“Participative forms of inquiry start with concerns for power and powerlessness, and aim to confront the way in which the established and power-holding elements of societies worldwide are favoured because they hold a monopoly on the definition and employment of knowledge:

This political form of participation affirms people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a: 9)

So participatory research has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people - through research, adult education and socio-political action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: they 'see through' the ways in which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members. This is the meaning of consciousness-raising, or conscientização, a term popularized by Paulo Freire (1970) for a 'process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection' (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991: 16)."

For further information on co-operative inquiry, participatory research and the participatory worldview, you may contact [John Heron](#) and/or [Peter Reason](#).

For a free brief guidebook of *Doing Co-operative Inquiry* go here:
<http://www.livedlearning.net/cibook.pdf>