

**WORKING WITH DISASTER:
TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE INTO
A USEFUL PRACTICE**

How I used action research to guide my path while walking it

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is my account of the journey I made through which a challenging experience was transformed into a professional practice in the emerging field of psycho-social disaster response using the emerging practice of action research. My account is a complex interweaving of my personal and practical learning from disaster and my learning about action research as I transformed my first natural attempts into a rigorous practice.

The journey begins with one local disaster, the Hungerford massacre of August 1987, stops on the way to focus in depth on my long-term response to the Omagh bomb of 1998, and ends with another, the Berkshire rail crash, November 2004 calling at many others on the way. This learning from many perspectives also incorporated that of the most personal and profound kind from the death of my daughter in 1993. Using stories from my practice, the thesis explores the development of my original Trauma Process Model and a Crisis Management framework for responding to the human impact of major disaster and other traumatic incidents. Though each contributing event was in the past, their impact on my life and practice continue to be available for re-evaluation in the light of new understandings.

This thesis is a first-person account of cumulative evaluations and re-understandings of this journey through which the embryonic framework I used for my practice at the start of my PhD programme was consolidated and enhanced as my research progressed. I track how my action research philosophy and practice became a powerful approach for practice-based research that ensured my professional work maintained quality and integrity. My enquiries actively generated knowledge as I intertwined personal reflection with collaborative action that broadened out to engage much wider systems at national and international levels. In doing so, my own articulation of action research developed and influenced the disaster response models and strategies I was creating so that they too became useful methods of collaborative action research and social action.

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PART A

THE OPENING STORIES

"It is not for you to finish the task, but you are not free to desist from it"

- Ethics of the Fathers, 2.21

Sections:

1. **The Hungerford Massacre : the story that started it all**
2. **The Research Story: the story that began my thesis**
3. **This Thesis: A map of the dialogue between my practice and research**

I present these stories to show the starting points of this thesis. The first story tells how I suddenly became involved in disaster work after the Hungerford massacre in 1987. The second tells how my journey after the massacre grew into a search for rigour and recognition of the approaches I used in the personal exploration of my experience and in my developing professional disaster work practice. The dialogue that was produced between my experience and research stories produced this thesis, whose structure I map out in the third section.

My stories are printed in italics throughout this thesis. Extracts of longer stories are generally found in 'Story Boxes'.

My synaesthetic tendencies compel me to use the spelling "enquiry", as it has gentler connotations for me that I feel are closer to the intentions of action research than the spelling "inquiry" that suggests inquisition. However, I respect the use of this spelling by others, and use it when referring to their terminology.

A 1

THE HUNGERFORD MASSACRE: THE STORY THAT STARTED IT ALL

“One day in August 1987 in the small town of Hungerford in rural Berkshire, a local man went berserk ...

That day, a day that changed my life, lies vividly in my memory. I should have been in Hungerford at the time, paying a managerial call on John, the Youth Centre Leader before he went on holiday. Instead, I was at home dealing with the aftermath of our first burglary the day before. My three young children and their friend, all on school holidays, were still in a state of fear and excitement about the burglary.

Suddenly, Sarah from next-door dashed in with a message from her Mum who worked at Securicor: ‘A gunman’s on the loose - stay indoors’. Our imaginations went wild – the gunman had to be our burglar who was obviously an escaped prisoner on the run. But here – in safe, quiet Newbury? Impossible! We just carried on, not quite as normal, until Radio 4 announced that this drama was being played out in Hungerford. Hungerford! Sleepy, law abiding Hungerford? That’s really impossible! How? Why?

Once we knew we were safe and free of risk, I took the children to hire pedal boats at the park. While the horror of the worst mass murder in Britain was unfolding nine miles away, we peddled around in final moments of innocence.

The story for me might have finished there, but instead I found myself becoming engaged in my first disaster response:

I returned home to hear John speaking on the 6 pm BBC radio news about the horror of seeing a gunman pass by his office window and into the school buildings. I was the District Youth and Community Officer, this was my ‘patch’ and I was his Manager. So I phoned him. He told me his story and how he escaped by driving his car over the rose bushes as fast as he could, only to be confronted by a scene of carnage in the streets. My first disaster response had begun.

As the impact unfolded through the evening – 16 dead, 15 injured and a community held under siege for 3 hours or so – it dawned on me that I might

have a role. I must go to Hungerford to support John and his team and discuss a response. The next morning, I called first at the District office to up-date my co-Officer before he went on leave that day and to contact the only Senior Youth Officer at Shire Hall who was not on holiday. I was startled by the reactions I received. The Shire Hall Officer seemed disengaged and my co-Officer told me bluntly that I shouldn't visit as 'John could manage by himself'. I felt puzzled, suspicious and more determined that I should go.

As I drove down the lanes to Hungerford, I felt strange - a strangeness of not knowing what to expect or what I would see and hear. I was acutely aware that this event, this place, would become part of history and what I chose to do could change the course of my career. As I drove, I noticed the feeling of importance, the tinge of excitement and then guilt for feeling these things. I questioned my motives – Why was I going? What would I find? Would I feel awkward? What would I do? Should I, an outsider, be there at all? Was my co-Officer right? But I had a duty to be there – it was my job to manage and support my staff, and my co-Officer, not for the first time, had challenged my role and my territory.

The policeman at the school entrance checked my credentials. I was struck by the silence and the absence of people around. I went into the Centre and sat for a long time while John poured out his story and memories of past deaths and re-stimulated experiences. He recounted his memories of the 1974 Birmingham IRA pub bomb near his first place of work. I listened again while his secretary poured out her stories. They still did not know that the last, and youngest person to be killed, had been on her way to visit John. She had been a member and helper at the Youth Centre.

It seemed an unreal situation – the day before, the man who had committed the worst act of mass murder known in the UK had shot himself dead in a room two floors above us. The unreality was broken by a Police Officer coming in to evacuate the building because of reports of unexploded grenades. By the evening, I knew I had to act – John was badly shaken and about to go on holiday. It was our duty, my duty if John was away, as the representatives of the Local Authority service for young people and the community. I phoned The Director of Social Services to offer our services.

Then I went back home to the mundane duties of family life and a 'Victim Support' volunteer offering support after our burglary. Our roles reversed as I listened to her trauma story – of being held hostage in a supermarket. Two trauma stories in one day - I'd never heard any so directly before."

Opening this thesis abruptly with this story mirrors the abruptness of becoming involved in disaster. The whole Hungerford story is made up of many individual stories, some of which I have heard directly, some indirectly. Many will never be heard. My Hungerford story is but a small part of the whole, but it forms the starting point for unforeseen repercussions which produced the personal and professional stories from which I created a path of survival out of my own chaos. The Hungerford shootings marked my entry into the field of major disaster and many smaller-scale traumatic incidents. I have concerned myself with the human aspects of the impact of disaster, as a consultant, responder, trainer, educator and activist. I have aimed to pass on the learning from my path-making so that others can make their own paths from disaster with more choice and greater awareness than I did at first. It is a journey they can only make themselves, but by daring to shine the torch of my experience into their darkness they will know they are not alone.

But first I want to present another story, the one without which this thesis would not have been given form – the story of how I began the process of this doctoral thesis.

A 2

THE RESEARCH STORY: THE STORY THAT BEGAN MY THESIS

This is the story of how I came to do my thesis:

"I graduated in 1969 when PhDs were undertaken mainly by those pursuing academic careers. I began a career with three threads – paid work, motherhood and voluntary work, all involving service to others in school or community settings. By the 1990's, the professional world seemed less accommodating of a person whose strength was in the breadth of skills drawn from several professions and many life experiences. I felt that a PhD might provide validation for what I had done in my work.

I had observed others going through the traditional PhD route and could not imagine myself doing the same, regarding their endless analyses of questionnaires as having little relevance to my world of unique events with unique people. I needed a programme that valued process as well as outcomes, and which was congruent with my values and inclusive of my ways of knowing and being. Above all, considering my age and stage of my career, it had to be of practical use to myself and my work. I had known about the New Paradigm Research group at Bath University since 1985 and the subsequent creation of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP), so I knew it would suit my needs, but a particular moment influenced my decision to apply.

The precipitating factor was a paper published in the British Medical Journal in 1995 (Raphael, Meldrum and McFarlane, 1995), whose authors I had met in Australia in 1992. I realised that the paper was based on research to which I had contributed. They were challenging a popular group post-trauma method called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), developed by an American, Jeffrey Mitchell, and designed to bring emergency staff teams together to process their experiences after major incidents (Mitchell, 1983, 1988). The BMJ paper started a research controversy which still continues and which I have researched as a by-product of this thesis (Capewell, 2004). Suffice to say here, critics of the method had based their assertions on research that did not use the method correctly and applied it to situations for which it was not

designed. It seemed to me that the traditional quantitative scientific approach to a profoundly human experience in unique circumstances could never measure what was important.

I felt angry about the controversy and felt other ways of research were needed. I took more notice of the next CARPP brochure I received. Knowing people leading the programme was an important consideration as I was still vulnerable after the death of my daughter. I was concerned especially about the impact of bereavement on my short-term memory and concentration, but I reasoned that if action research was for all, then there had to be room for someone really in need of researching themselves and their subject while going through a difficult time. The prospect of belonging to a community attracted me as I worked so much on my own.

The final decision to apply to CARPP came after I faxed one of the authors of the BMJ article about my concerns. This resulted in an invitation to be a Keynote speaker at a Conference in Australia in 1996. I came to see Peter Reason at CARPP to find out more about action research before writing my paper. In the paper, "Critical Incident Stress Debriefing: Practice, Pitfalls and Proposals" (Capewell, 1996a), I argued for a more inclusive paradigm for generating knowledge about post-trauma support strategies. Having given the lecture, I thought it was time to show my commitment to my convictions and pursue my studies at Bath. I applied and I was accepted for the 1997 CARPP 4 intake".

A 3

A MAP OF THIS THESIS AND THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN MY PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The dialogue between these two stories began formally in 1997. The research process helped me make sense of my disaster story, then to view it from other perspectives. It helped affirm my existing ways of generating practice-based knowledge before helping me to discover new approaches. These informed future disaster work which in turn provided new opportunities for research. This whirling around of different stories affecting each other and operating on different time sequences has been a complex process, though the living of these stories has felt like a flowing river of interconnected and synchronistic journeys, far richer than I could have planned myself. In 1987 I could not have predicted how my life and career would develop and, when I joined CARPP in 1997, I could not have planned the route my action research would take. I have been willing to trust the process, suspend pre-conceptions, and live with unpredictability, using my core questions as guides.

How best to present this complex mix of interdependent and interactive strands has been a major challenge since all feel important to understanding the whole. This comment accurately reflects my experience:

"... just as movie makers leave most of their film takes on the editing room floor, so researchers have often the gut-wrenching job of selecting far fewer data pieces to write about, write with, and then leave out...all this while simultaneously working to create a final report that communicates the wholeness of their vision"

- Ely et al, 1997: 52

In telling my story, I blur the lines between me as a lay person and me as a professional. It is not a thesis about a professional testing out a method or theory just to further my professional knowledge or status. It is the thesis of a human being making sense of experiences that previous life and professional training could not immediately equip me to handle. It illustrates the process by which I mobilised and created resources to deal with, and go beyond, a distressing experience and then turn it into a professional practice, enriching myself in the process. I want my story to demonstrate that it is possible, through using the approaches of action research, for someone to find

their own path to recovery and practice from a point of being a professional, but not a disaster specialist, and a professional in a vulnerable state, often feeling hopeless and helpless with no future prospects.

This thesis is my living, never-ending enquiry, not a fixed and final conclusion. I am at a stage where I am ready to invite others to share in my enquiry journey and see how I have interwoven my practice and research into a path of professional practice. This path is an interweaving of four main strands:

- ⇒ First, the experience and repercussions of the Hungerford massacre (Part B)
- ⇒ Second, discovering how to survive personally and make sense of the experience (Part C).
- ⇒ Third, creating and disseminating a practice starting at a time when little was known or written about the subject of disaster impact and management (Part D)
- ⇒ Fourth, how to research what I did and do to develop my practice with enough quality and rigour to demonstrate its worth to others (Part E)

Such a list suggests an ordered construction. It was not. Many other experiences were interwoven along the way and what I was learning became part of my practice as well as my survival. For example, my process of survival had not ended before I left my job in Berkshire County Council and began my practice as an independent consultant. The methods I used for my survival developed to become an integral part of my practice and my practice contributed to my survival. Further experiences, such as the illness and death of Ann, my 16 year old daughter, cut across and threatened both my survival and practice, but also deepened and developed my professional work. Then the story was made more complex by my decision to undertake a PhD within an action research frame. This decision has undoubtedly influenced the path I have taken, through focusing my concerns, motivating action I might otherwise have not done (Capewell, 1998c, 2004a), re-working the experiences and deepening my practice. My enquiry methods matched the view of Marx and Vygotsky (Newman & Holzman, 1993) that they should 'be practised, not applied, neither a means to an end nor tools for achieving results' but 'simultaneously, prerequisite and product' (Vygotsky, 1978). I remain at heart a practitioner, an ACTION researcher, rather than an academic. Many times academic, 'laboratory' style research seemed irrelevant to my practice. Instead, I have built up a secondary 'dynamic, context dependent' knowledge that is 'mainly oral, fragmented and constructed' (Polkinghorne, 1999: 146; Kvale, 1999: 5). Academic depth has been a luxury in a time-hungry practice and has to remain its servant rather

than be pursued just for its own sake. I also know, because my colleagues tell me, that the essence of how I work has to be experienced and its reality is difficult to capture on paper.

This is the map of the journey I invite you to share. You have already read the two stories in Part A that were my starting point. In Part B, I identify aspects of myself that are dominant in my current work and look back to their roots in my history to help you understand the nature of the 'I' at the centre of my action and reflection. This is not the objective research of positivist science with claims to be value-free; the subjectivity and values of my work must be exposed.

I had to choose whether to continue the narrative of my Hungerford story, before the initial stories recounted at the start of this thesis had been forgotten, or move into the more technical aspects of my research story. I chose the latter so you could make better sense of how I developed my professional path. However, readers may wish to leave the technical sections until later. In these sections, I offer my own interpretation of the philosophy and principles of action research, including how I have sought to understand questions of quality and integrity. However, the practice and research stories, can never be fully separated and will continue to be interwoven throughout the rest of the thesis.

Parts C to E concern the development of my professional practice in real-life disaster situations (Table 1, overleaf). I had to make choices about which aspects of my whole story to tell. Dealing in depth with one small aspect of my practice would have been simpler, but I realised I was not yet ready to do this. The development of my practice has occurred alongside the development of disaster work in this country, and, partly because of my action research approach, I have trodden a slightly different route to the mainstream. I therefore need to articulate the central core of this whole before I can dissect it into parts. But I could not tell it all, so I decided to tell enough of the whole to illustrate the breadth of my work while choosing at certain points to demonstrate that depth is not ignored. I have also concentrated on the post-disaster response aspect of my work and have left out parts of my work such as training and dissemination, which, though vital, rely on my firm understanding and framing of my action after a disaster. I begin in Part C with my on-going enquiry into my own journey out of crisis, from which I produced my Trauma Process Map. I explain how this was developed from experiential enquiry and how it subsequently took a central role in the content and process of my professional practice, as well as in my own survival.

TABLE 1: DISASTER WORK EXPERIENCES:**CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT CYCLES OF ACTION RESEARCH****The Key Incidents that formed the raw material of my enquiries:**

1987	The Hungerford shootings: responding as a local professional
1989	Lockerbie disaster: secondment, disaster staff training
1989	Hillsborough Disaster immediate and medium-term responses: seconded to work with local authorities on Merseyside; later as a consultant for disaster team development
1991	Channel Rail Link – training local authority staff working with communities blighted by the proposed rail line.
1991	Visited Community Stress Prevention Centre and other specialists in Israel
1991	Gulf War 1: consultancy and training
1992	Churchill Fellowship to Australia, New Zealand and Los Angeles. assisted in a CIM training programme for New York City School Board
1993	Unexpected illness and death of my younger daughter
1994	Northern Ireland: invitation to run seminars for teachers and social workers.
1995	Croatia: Work with an Israeli team training psychologists from Former Yugoslavia
1996-1998	Derry, Northern Ireland: work in Primary schools including in the 'Bogside'
1996	London: first of nearly 60 work-place trauma response for a national company
1996	London Docklands bomb: co-ordinated response for Tower Hamlets LEA and London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) in a school and the community
1996	Dunblane school shootings: work with the Social Services Support Centre team and Community Service staff, volunteers and elected councillors
1996	Manchester bomb: response work for a retail Company
1996-1997	Newbury: Community epidemiology study (leukaemias and radiation)
1998-2000	Northern Ireland & Co. Donegal: Omagh bomb response with several Education Authorities and many schools
1998-2001	Irish National Teacher's Union, development of CIM Guidelines and spin-off training
1999	Paddington train crash: consultancy and response work for Reading Borough Council Social Services and Chief Executives Department
2000	Bahrain: Gulf Air plane crash response (Bahraini Department of Civil Aviation Affairs)
2001	September 11th attacks on America – small-scale response work in Ireland with US tourists; information dissemination by e-mail
2001	Namibia: fatal incident response involving an international youth organisation special group drawn mainly from Northern Ireland
2002	Potters Bar train crash: (a) work with young people and schools as a member of a team employed by the Police and WAGN train company; (b) response to a Company staff team who were witnesses and lay rescuers
2004	Ufton Nervet, Berkshire rail crash – community outreach initiatives as a member of the local area affected by the crash and post-disaster counselling.

Part D tells how I created cycles of action and reflection from my post-Hungerford disasters and trauma experiences to develop my principles and practice of the management of the human impact of disaster. I describe the models, maps and methods that I used, adapted and created to help me construct my path as I walked it.

I conclude in Part E with an account of how the strands of my learning came together in my involvement in the aftermath of the Omagh bomb. I reflect on the work as a whole in sections E1 and E2, before offering in E3 a detailed account of one part of the work that I believe is a synthesis of many strands of my thesis. A brief reflection of my thesis journey is given as a Post-script with signposts and dreams for how my path might continue.

I have tried to re-cycle the pain of distressing events and complex situations by communicating the learning gained in simple presentational forms. This is a deep simplicity born of my hard work and active learning, from the in-side as well as reflective-practice from many external angles. I ask the reader to imagine the whole as a fountain fed by deep and well fed springs with water spurting up and falling at different heights, cascading down and feeding back enriched water into the source to be re-cycled again to feed the fountain with enriched water. When I began the PhD programme at Bath, the fountain was small and rather shy of showing its full power to the world. It often retreated underground, not quite knowing how it fitted and not quite believing that something different could claim its place. Now, at the end of the PhD journey, it can be different and claim its place, knowing where it stands in relation to others, neither better nor worse, just different and with its own value. It spurts with confidence and cascades with many patterns, collecting new energy to re-new its sources. Alongside, other fountains have been encouraged to break out to claim their own place and to play their own patterns.

The force that fed my first fountain and kept it going as it found its current form has been constant throughout my PhD enquiry. It is in the form of a core question that emerged as a result of my Hungerford experiences. The pursuit of this question gave me purpose and helped my initial survival when I fell personally and professionally into a deep pit of despair:

“How can the gap be bridged between the disaster community and those with experience and expertise?” This stimulated subsidiary questions about the nature of the impact of disaster on human individual and social systems; the nature of the

gap that divides the two sides; and the nature and methods of construction of the bridges. I posed the questions:

- ☞ *“How can the people in the wider ‘ripples’ of the disaster impact be reached and supported, especially children, young people and other marginalised groups, and how can the stigma of accepting help be broken down?”*
- ☞ *“How can the human impact of disaster be managed in a way that does not create further trauma and stress to the community and disaster workers?”*
- ☞ *“How can I make sense of my seemingly illogical reactions as a worker, not a direct victim, and how do these compare with others caught up in disaster?”*

Though the pages that follow show that I have found some possible solutions, the questions continue and need to be reviewed for each new situation, for nothing is ever quite the same again in each disaster and affected community. It is this realisation that motivated the construction of my Site-Specific model of disaster assessment described in Section D3 and diagram 12. Thus these questions need to be asked as if for the first time with every incident, especially so that the new community or individual can be involved in their asking, often as a motivator to their own question making, and solution making.

My core question has resonated with the concerns of other professionals in other parts of the worlds who have had to face premature closure of their response efforts because managers and gatekeepers of resources with little knowledge and experience of disaster impact and response judged the needs of the situation using their own coping styles and needs as a yard-stick for the needs of others. They simply would not believe what needed to be done to reduce future problems because they could not envision unknown consequences before they had experienced them, or before the impact of the disaster had not yet been manifested in observable ways on the affected community. As shown in Section E2, this concern arose again for me very powerfully during the immediate response to the Omagh bomb when I thought I had taken adequate steps to ensure the problem would be solved. By the time the consequences were understood it was too late to take preventative action and the problems were far more entrenched and difficult to solve. Such experiences have kept my enquiry going and made me return to previous cycles of action and previous reflections to re-understand and search for more subtle clues about alternative approaches.

Since the Omagh bomb, I have pursued my enquiry question with more vigour, working on simple ways to communicate community and collaborative styles of assessment that also begin the work of recovery. This enquiry produced the further development of the 'Bridging the Gap' diagram and the creation of the 'Fishing Nets and Stepping Stones' models described in Section D3 (diagrams 7-9) for training events in 2003 and a more deliberate use of stories (for an example, see Story Box 15) to illustrate a style of work that I had taken for granted and mistakenly assumed was common practice.

This then has been the essence of my enquiry, from the Hungerford shootings in 1987 to the Berkshire rail crash in 2004. My latest experience shows that it must continue. Even though I have always felt that the answer lies in pre-disaster preparation and planning, even this cannot always provide the solution. I discovered after the Berkshire rail crash that the Local Authority crisis response team I had trained five years before had virtually disappeared in re-structuring and staff changes. The minimal response offered to survivors following the immediate rescue was mechanistic and untimely with little assessment of needs or pro-active outreach (see section F2). Offers of local specialist consultancy were not taken up even though the manager responsible for the response, as they revealed later to local journalists, had not known what to do and admitted to being unsure about what to do in the future to support survivors. My answer in this case, because I was part of the local community, was to fill the gap and produce the solution by my own voluntary outreach efforts because it was possible to do so in my own local area. In this way we reached many who felt isolated and forgotten.

I offer this contribution both to the subject of my professional practice and the paradigm of my research. The solutions I have found so far to my enquiry questions are to be found in this thesis in my attempt to consolidate, articulate and present the underlying philosophies and beliefs informing my practice, the methods and strategies I use. I have lived these enquiries and the subsidiary questions they have spawned for 17 years, gaining in the last eight years at CARPP more rigorous methods for pursuing them. Their articulation in this written form will enable me to pursue them in the future with more credibility and confidence.