

## Chapter Six

### *What is third-person inquiry<sup>13</sup>?*

Put your arm around [this Chapter] and draw it in a little closer. (Kasl, Kate's PhD viva, 18/09/04)

In my PhD viva, both of my examiners - Mark Baldwin and Elizabeth Kasl - described the following chapter as less grounded than the rest of my thesis, in the experience of the YoWiM inquiry. Mark suggested the thesis was like winding your way along a road, until you get to Chapter Six, where you 'stop and go off in another direction', coming back to rejoin the journey of the thesis at the Chapter's end. I could see why this Chapter might feel this way as it is focussed at an 'ideas' level and doesn't have the practical groundedness – in terms of examples from practice and their interplay with literature - that characterises the rest of the thesis.

So, by way of responding to their challenge, I want to locate my passion for the following writing (which as you will see, remains largely unchanged) by framing more clearly what my intent in writing this Chapter is, and where my interest in the question 'What is third-person inquiry?' came from. I shall make these additions in this font.

During the twentieth century, there has been an explosion of more or less disciplined and imaginative second-person research/practice dialogue... At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the biggest missing link between now and the vision of large 'Not-for-Prophets' in 2025, is a population of well developed third-person research/practices, based on mutually transforming power, that make adult development through first- and second-person research/practices as common as child development today is. (Torbert, 2001:258)

In writing this Chapter I join the debate about what types of practice might be described as third-person inquiry. My desire to do so is borne of my experience with the YoWiM group as they shifted between inquiry in our group and establishing the 'third-person inquiry' process for other women in their organisation. I was struck, as I have discussed in Chapter

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term 'inquiry' throughout for consistency (except when citing literature), rather than switch between this and 'research/practice' as the literature tends to do.

Five, by what mattered to the YoWiM group as they moved into the role of holding an inquiring space for others: the way they got rid of tables and worked with circles of chairs because they believed through their own experience that this shifted the quality of the space; the way they sought to help others find their own sense of what mattered; the way they held as central a desire to have women leave the workshop with awareness of the skills of inquiry we were working with, how they might use them and why. Seeing this movement - seeing the YoWiM group actively translate their space in to a new space for the benefit of others - deepened and enriched my interest in third-person inquiry practice.

If I look back to the research question I pose in Chapter 1...

**'If we were to have a sense of what practical engagement with action research – inquiry - looks like and feels like, what would it be?'**

...I would frame the contribution I make here, as I discuss various literature, as the voice of a researcher who is engaged in the practicality of doing inquiry, and who is, through this practice, concerned that we attend to how that practice is defined (not only in the sense of what counts as first-, second- or third-person inquiry, but how the inquiry work that holds these definitions mirrors the principles of action research (or not)). So, I have an interest in third-person research, and want to open up some accounts of research practice here so I can better explore issues surrounding third-person inquiry, and invite exploration with others.

In the previous Chapter I have illustrated how the YoWiM group moved from the second-person space of co-operative inquiry, into an inquiry process involving peers and senior women from P&G that we termed 'third-person inquiry'. I am responsible for this 'label' being applied to our work - I used the term to name the shift of our inquiry into the wider system. This naming made sense in our group as we were familiar with talking about the first- and second-person inquiry<sup>14</sup> we had been engaging in, and the 'for me, for us, for them' notion (Reason and Marshall, 1987:112) mapped easily onto our ideas about 'me' being our individual first-person inquiry, 'us' being the second-person inquiry YoWiM group and 'them' being people outside of our inquiry group who were interested in our work, and who we were interested to influence.

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<sup>14</sup> I have discussed first- and second-person inquiry practices in Chapter Three, so I do not cover this here. There is however some very brief refreshing of the ideas.

Therefore, I need to be clear that the question that heads up this Chapter is mine - it emerged some time before I began working with the YoWiM group and was not a question explored in the YoWiM group as it was not of relevance. As such it illustrates 'divergence' (Heron, 1996) in the questions that were raised for us during our inquiry. Perhaps it is not surprising that I, as the 'external researcher', should diverge to explore questions about method whilst the other YoWiM members tended to converge around questions of practical concern in how they experienced their organisation on a day-to-day basis.

Whilst planning for and running the YoWiM third-person inquiry, the attention of the other YoWiM members was, as discussed in Chapter Five, focussed on creating an inquiring space for others and working with each other to test their developing inquiry skills - to use Heron's (1996) term they were attending to exhibiting 'practical knowing'. My attention was focussed on questions of epistemology - questions about what I believed about knowledge and its generation and what qualities of inquiry needed to be in place to enable knowledge to be generated. I wondered about what qualities of inquiry mattered to me when larger groups of people come together.

This inadvertently meant that I continued to question what the qualities of inquiry are, and whether these should be understood as constant or fluid as the number of people involved in inquiry grows. So, whilst I was in the YoWiM group talking about third-person inquiry, I was very aware that I did not know what types of inquiry practice counted as 'third-person'.

### **Why I don't know what third-person inquiry is**

... if critical self-reflection "on our own practices" is a core element in action research (as some of us think), researchers (and others) who don't do this, don't do action research, no matter how much they might call what they do action research, and no matter how much of the paraphernalia of AR they carry around. (Eikland, 2003:266)

When I joined the PhD programme at Bath, one of my earliest tasks was to 'hit the books'. Like any young would-be action researcher, I needed to find out what action research was all about and to gain a sense of having sketched out the territory. A question that arose for me through the reading I was doing and the conversations I was having with people in the CARPP community was:

- Why does no one seem clear on what third-person inquiry is?

It became apparent to me in conversations about first-person inquiry there existed a sense of coherence and agreement about what it was and what forms it took. There was synergy between the literature and the stories of practice related to me - both were saying something about it including tracking your own practice and what you attend to, perhaps through journalling or meditation, for example. There seemed to be agreement that it involved...

... listening through oneself both ways (toward origin and outcome).  
(Torbert, 2001:253)

The same agreement seemed to exist in relation to second-person inquiry practice. Literature and peers seemed to concur that it would involve working in a face-to-face group, with people who most usually had similar inquiry questions. As Torbert puts it:

... speaking-and-listening-with-others (Heron, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge et al, 1999) is the quintessential second-person research/practice. (Torbert, 2001:253)

As a result of this apparent shared understanding, I felt that I could access the conversations about first- and second-person inquiry. When peers were asked about their inquiry practices in these two streams, I noticed that they answered with confidence and authority. I too felt confident - in the sense that we knew and agreed with what each other were talking about - meaning that I could bring stories of my own practice to the discussion.

However, when we talked about third-person inquiry our conversations lost their clarity as people lost their sense of authority and confidence. No one *really* seemed to know what third-person inquiry is and the literature didn't seem to help – for example, there is no neat quotation from Torbert to describe third-person inquiry to match those on first- and second-person I cite from him above (Torbert, 2001). There was a general theme from peers and the literature of third-person inquiry involving 'more' people (maybe thirty, maybe a hundred, maybe many different organisations...). So it seemed that number of participants was what third-person inquiry was about. I was dissatisfied with this idea for lots of reasons:

- Torbert (2001:256) states: 'third-person research/practice... is a leadership practice that presupposes first- and second-person research/practice capacity on the part of leadership'. This leadership then creates organisational conditions in which first- and second-person research/practices are voluntarily adopted by more members of the organisation.
  - So, it seemed that rather than just number of participants being key, third-person inquiry required a degree of inquiry skill amongst those who would lead it. This set it apart from first- and second-person inquiry where it seemed acceptable for like minded, ordinary folk to get together and have a go at doing inquiry with no prior knowledge or skill.
- Accounts of work that matched the description of involving 'more' people were rarer, and tended not to be called third-person inquiry, rather 'dialogue conferences' (Gustavsen, 2001) or 'large group processes' (Martin, 2001). Whilst both the above authors frame their work as Action Research – one assertively: 'the point about these programs is just to approach the problem of scale from an action research perspective' (Gustavsen, 2003:95); the other tentatively; 'A large group process structured for action aimed at 'a better, freer society' (Greenwood and

Levin, 1998:3) can be modelled on action research... but to qualify as action research, learning and the generation of new knowledge should be conscious, if not explicit' (Martin, 2001:200), neither used the third-person inquiry 'label'.

- So, why was the third-person inquiry 'label' not being used to describe such processes? Is it an unhelpful way of thinking about inquiry?
  - What was different about their work that made it 'not count' as third-person inquiry?
  - Were these projects third-person inquiry, but just not called so due to the lack of understanding of how third-person inquiry is defined?
- Bradbury and Reason (2001) suggest that third-person inquiry correlates well with idea of 'enduring consequence' (2001:453), stating:

... because we are participating in work of enduring consequence, we must attend to the question of viability in the longer term (third-person research/practice). We must therefore ask whether the work was seeded in such a way that participation could be sustained in the absence of the initiating researcher? (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:449)

They cite the work of Barrett as an example of how the integration of first-, second- and third- person inquiry can leave behind it 're-patterned institutional infrastructures' (2001:453) which seems to mirror the above idea of enduring consequence they refer to as third-person inquiry:

Beginning from her own experience, as captured in a journal [first-person], she moves to action with a group of new mothers [second-person], eventually leaving behind the 'Mothers Action Research

Group' [MARG] after she has moved on [third-person]' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:453).

- However, if third-person inquiry is related to issues of scale as suggested above, we have no sense of the number of people involved in the 'third-person' element of Barrett's work. Does scale not matter then?
- If the second-person inquiry group in some way interacts with or shifts institutional patterns of behaviour - has 'enduring consequence' - is this 'what counts' as third-person inquiry?
- Does it matter what type of 'enduring consequences' there are? Is the creation of new relationships (between people or organisations) enough of an institutional shift to enable the work to count as third-person inquiry?
- A key question for me, as indicated at the beginning of this Chapter, is for work to 'count' as third-person inquiry, should there be evidence of shifts in the qualities of practice of the participants instead of/as well as creation of new relationships? If we refer to the opinion offered by Eikland (2003) at the opening of this chapter, then the work undertaken does not even count as action research, never mind third-person inquiry, if there is no evidence of 'critical self-reflection on our own practice'. So this would indicate that there are qualities of practice that need to be evident.
- If scale is not part of 'what makes inquiry count as third-person research practice', a further question is raised: How is work of enduring consequence (third-person inquiry) different from second-person inquiry? If second-person is about working in small face-to-face groups, how, to continue with the above

example, is the continued work of MARG not second-person inquiry?

- Is first- and second-person inquiry not recognised as having enduring consequence? Who/what does not recognise this? Why?
- Martin (2001) and Bradbury and Reason (2001) seem to concur that there should be an awareness of the creation of new knowledge in action research work, and that this enables new ways of being:
  - An important question to ask, therefore, is whether the research is 'validated' by participants' new ways of acting in light of the work? In the simplest sense people should be able to say 'that was useful - I am using what I learned' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451).
  - If scale is an issue in third-person inquiry, are the possibilities of skill-building compromised due to the sheer number of people involved?

I could go on. But as is evident, there are many questions raised without even looking very broadly into the field of practice. At the nub of it all remains the question:

- Do we, as a community of people engaged in the practice of action research, have an understanding of what third-person inquiry is?

I think the answer is 'no' and that this contrasts to our understanding of first- and second-person inquiry.



*The issue of scale*

The current debate in Concepts and Transformations begins to consider the issue of scale in action research. The central motivation for the discussion it seems is one of validity in research practice and the limitation of the single case. On this point, Dick (2003) argues:

...single case action research has a useful contribution to make...In my view so does action research on the smallest scale: applied to improving the practice of a single practitioner. (Dick, 2003:256)

In addition, Gustavsen (2003) argues:

Even small scale examples can be of interest and good examples well presented are quite clearly of more interest than diffuse examples that are buried in discussions of what the actors concerned did, rather than what came out of it. (Gustavsen, 2003:95)

His suggestion echoes that, earlier, of Bradbury and Reason:

...knowledge in action research often derives from deep knowledge of one case. (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451)

I wonder though what we mean by the 'single case' (Dick, 2003; Greenwood, 2003) or the 'local case' (Gustavsen, 2003). Gustavsen describes such as:

...the answers provided by action research are generally based on "local cases". The cases are, furthermore, not only local; they tend to be very local in the sense that the great majority of action research studies pertain to processes between one or a few action researchers and very small groups of other people, often even during fairly short periods of time. Can, however, questions of concern to other actors than those directly involved in the project be answered on the basis of cases of this kind? (Gustavsen, 2003:94)

If we take the above in the context of the discussion on scale, Gustavsen suggests that the number of action researchers, the number of 'others' (participants) and also the amount of time spent are salient issues that matter when considering how to scale-up the research done under the umbrella of action research. His main concern in this seems to be one of the extent to which questions held by people not involved in the research can be answered. From his discussion earlier in the above paper, this seems to matter because questions and concerns posed in 'general terms' about society level issues are responded to by the action research community with ideas generated by very small groups (Gustavsen, 2003).

This seems to be something of a double bind. By implication, it seems that action research conducted in small groups, responding to questions of interest to that small group, is an effective approach. When such groups or researchers involved in these groups offer up accounts of the inquiry to the world, what they offer is not seen as valid by way of response to 'society level questions' because not enough people were involved in generating the account. But there seems to be little acknowledgement in the current debate that perhaps work conducted in a 'single case' does not seek to ultimately *answer* society level questions – rather to 'see as if' and 'illuminate the situations' of others in the knowledge that 'what we know is only a hypothesis about reality' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451).

If we can map the above ideas of scale onto the question central to this chapter regarding what counts as third-person inquiry, it seems that whilst the actual terms are not used, the above seems to be about the learnings gained from second-person inquiry (the single case, small group) as being considered an inadequate response to societal level question and concerns. If we consider this to be so, we can look at the debate as one that calls for a matching of scale – society scale questions being responded to with answers formulated by 'society' scale (or what might be called third-person) research.

In light of this suggestion we might further suggest that this makes Bradbury and Reason's assertion that 'deep knowledge of one case... can be used by fellow inquirers with similar concerns to 'see as if' ' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451)

one that matches scale in how the research proposes to be useful (I would suggest: second-person inquiry ideas/questions/answers, being used to 'illuminate' the second-person inquiry of others).

And perhaps a more important point to make is that single cases are concerned with the questions that matter to the participants, rather than questions that matter to the research team/society. This for me is the nub of what counts in considering the validity of the research undertaken – did the inquiry participants play a full and continued role in negotiating the questions they sought to answer? I might suggest this too is a question of scale in action research, albeit of a different type: To what *extent* do the inquiry questions matter to the inquiry participants?

Questions of scale obviously relate to the ideas around what third-person inquiry is. But, I am no clearer on how we might define it. When I begin to try to write, read or speak about third-person inquiry I get stuck. I get less clear on 'what counts', unsure about what values underlie the practice, confused about how action research as a movement is nourished by it, and frustrated by feeling that in pursuing and promoting large scale events in which many different organisation and community practices are networked together (in some work on a one-off basis), we are perhaps beginning to value size of inquiry over quality of inquiry practice. This is not to say that all large scale work takes place in one-off events, as Martin states hers does (Martin, 2001). Indeed Gustavsen (2003) clearly states;

... the idea is not to replace the single case with a number of cases, but to create or support social movements. A social movement is a series of events that are linked to each other and where the meaning and construction of each event is part of a broader stream of events and not a self-sufficient element in an aggregate. There is little point in replacing the single case with a number of disconnected cases. What is here called a social movement can emanate from many sources and pertain to a wide range of themes; in the case of this author the core concern has been democracy and participation with a main focus on the role and significance of the work (Gustavsen, 2000). (Gustavsen, 2003:96)

However, neither is it to say that one-off events are less rich in the generation of knowledge or inquiry skill than 'social movements' or small scale single cases. Again, as Martin clearly states, she has key criteria that need to be met in order for large group processes to 'count' as action research (2001) - she gives a much fuller account of the qualities of inquiry that make her work count as action research than any I have seen in relation to the 'social movements' Gustavsen (2001; 2003) describes. Of course this depends on how we define quality - whilst I would look to the individual participant to see if they are being educated in inquiry skills ('really listening', 'really talking', ownership of their behaviour and so on), Gustavsen arguably looks to the quality of having people engaged in new networks of conversation.

Questioning what third-person inquiry is *in practice* feels important. I wonder though 'what do I mean when I talk about quality of inquiry?' or 'what I am looking for when I consider in what ways action research as a movement is nourished by accounts (that might be referred to as) third-person inquiry?'. The thing that seems to be missing for me is the interplay between first- second- and third-person inquiry. I am aware of my bias. Through my own inquiry work I have seen how stabilising (how necessary?) first- and second-person inquiry have been by way of building up to working in the third-person space (as discussed in Chapter Five). I don't think networked events are the answer to the question of scale in action research.

At the core of what I understand action research to offer is something I refer to as the *educative edge* of action research that sets it apart from research that is 'done on' people, leaving them untouched, never honouring them as knowers. This links to Freire's notion of conscientization (1972): 'the learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality'. It moves toward a place where people respect each other, learn together through each other, and build skills with each other to enable their experience of themselves, each other and the wider community to be more worthwhile. This movement comes about through deepened engagement with their experience and a re-understanding of that experience as valuable and

important. I believe these are learned abilities and the process of such learning - the 'educative edge' I refer to - one of the gifts action research methodology, in all its shapes and sizes, offers forward.

I feel it does this particularly through the interpenetration of first-, second- and third-person inquiry practice, as Torbert suggests:

First-, second- and third-person research/practice mutually generate, require and reinforce one another because each is the preparation to welcome rather than to resist timely transformation, at the personal, relational and organisational scale respectively. (Torbert 2001:256)

Torbert suggests, as detailed earlier, that third-person inquiry as leadership skill requires, on the part of the leaders, ability in the areas of first- and second-person inquiry. Through my own experience of inquiry I have seen that each nourishes the other - I discuss this in some depth in Chapter Five. So, if engagement in these three inquiry tracks simultaneously means that each track is nourished more fully, I question whether third-person inquiry might be called inquiry if no first- or second-person inquiry skills are developed within it.

This is where the 'educative edge' of action research as I refer to it, and the interpenetration of first-, second- and third-person inquiry bump up against each other. For me, for research to 'count' as action research there has, at least, to be evidence of some development of inquiry skill amongst the participants (I include the 'initiating researcher', should there be one, in this) that builds through the process of inquiry and is evident after it - skill building that has 'enduring consequence'. This has mattered in the YoWiM inquiry and has become a quality criteria of our work - something we sought to enable in each other. This is the educative edge piece. To enable inquiry work to build such skill in a grounded, rigorous way, I would argue that each of the three inquiry streams needs to be attended to by all involved in the inquiry (though different people may well focus more on perhaps one or two of these, depending where their energy lies). This is the interpenetration bit. And as I write I realise that I

am a long way off deciding what third person research is, whilst here I am saying we need to engage in it...

How might we engage in inquiry in grounded and worthwhile ways without such skills? Indeed what is inquiry without them? If, as Reason and Bradbury state, the primary purpose of action research is 'to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better freer world' (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 2), there *is* an explicit learning agenda at the heart of action research.

I feel myself getting unsettled when I read accounts that seem entirely lacking in this intent or outcome. I wonder whether large scale events without this educative edge should cease to be contemplated as 'counting' as third-person 'inquiry'.

I want to explore this unsettledness here. My aim in doing so is to share my ideas (and confusion...) on this, rather than to offer any 'solutions'. However, I notice my own bias and I feel it important to share it with you early on, as I have above. I consider this bias comes from my lack of interest in establishing research projects that actively respond to the 'size = validity' thinking present in the field of academic research. I care little whether findings are considered to be generalisable, mainly because I think generalisability is something of a myth anyway.

During my viva, Mark challenged me on the above statement about generalisability, saying:

Mark: Well, I may very well agree with you on that, but I would like to hear some more explanation from you now. Why don't you care about it?

This felt, in the moment, like a challenge to do some very important clarification on my meaning. Below is my (edited) response to Mark in my viva. Though it remains after editing a longish extract, I have chosen to include it as it conveys a sense of my passion around questions of generalisability in research practice that I fear would be lost if I were to 'write it out'.

Kate: ...I stand beside it – I think it might be more clearly written but I stand beside it for lots of different reasons. I think that the practice of engaging in inquiry for me is about

seeking to understand the issues which are of local, if not individual, concern because I do think that if we seek to engage in research that enables people to make their working context or their personal lives or whatever, more generative [and as] offering more of a sense of richness of experience to people, that we need to keep that knowledge local and generated 'here' [at the local level] which I think is what happened in the YoWiM group. So, creating space whereby we can generate knowledge that matters to us.

And then I think there are questions about how we can take that wider, which is onto the generalisability thing. But I think there are different degrees or different scales of generalisability. And I would suggest that if we are working in a face-to-face group, when the women in the [YoWiM] group were, lets say, including other people in the organisation in their inquiry practice – particularly in running the third person inquiry as we called it, for other women - they themselves were seeking a sense of 'to what degree is what we are talking about here [YoWiM] generalisable? To what extent does it make sense to other people? I think that's important, because as I've discussed, re-visioning the self as a site of knowledge is all very well and good, but first person inquiry can't stand alone.

So we checked that out [our first-person inquiry] with each other - which was still only seven people, [then] in order that this research practice could hold itself in the context of P&G, it needed to have more validity than that, so that we didn't create this kind of ghetto whereby '[only] we [YoWiM] know what's knowledge here [in YoWiM]' and we either can't talk about it outside [YoWiM] or it means nothing outside of this space [YoWiM].

They [the YoWiM group] needed to have that sense of being able to generalise what it was they could talk about, and so to that extent, I think generalisability is a good thing. But I would say that's still quite a local context.

I don't think I can say – I don't want to necessarily say, from this thesis, that I think a salient issue for young women managers in the UK is one of voicing, and I don't necessarily want to say that in facilitation practice these are the key things to look out for, or when we're thinking about third person inquiry I've got it in the bag and therefore 'this is true' - because I think that stops being inquiry.

What I would like to say in terms of generalisability is that there are the things we found interesting and I would be interested to generalise the question, [meaning] we could take [our questions, informed by our experience of what matters to women in YoWiM and ask] 'is 'this' of interest?' or 'does 'this' resonate with the experiences of other young women?'

[So,] I could generalise the question but I would never want to generalise the content [to say that the YoWiM groups 'findings' were generalisable]. At the heart of [generalising the content] is a separation of the people who know things from what's known and I think that's the opposite of what I seek to do.

Mark: I think that's a very good account. So you do care about generalisability.

Kate: I care about not generalising. I do passionately care.

Elizabeth: That was a marvellous sentence. I would put that sentence in here [your thesis]. 'I can generalise the question but not the content'. To my ears what I hear is an articulation of learning theory about how people learn from their experience. It's an articulation of the [extended epistemology], you know, how knowing needs to be based in felt encountered experience.

I think...its related to when you are talking about skill building in inquiry...what the YoWiM women did was bring their questions and one thing they did generalise was they tried to create the same conditions for the larger group [third-person inquiry participants] that you had created for them - or that you had helped them create for themselves...They were trying to replicate a learning opportunity as it had been created for them. So they bought the questions but they knew they couldn't report out on the content because they are acting on the assumptions that are in the [extended epistemology], and the way you just captured that, 'I can generalise the question not the content, not the answer, people have to generate the content themselves. Yeah. It's very well put.

Reading this through now, I would add two further elements of my thinking to the above illustration of what generalisability means to me.

Firstly, I feel it matters that research outcomes be congruent with the underpinning philosophy of the research practice itself, and that ideally there should be further congruence between the underpinning assumptions about knowledge generation held by the researcher and their research practice. If we link these three together here – me, action research and inquiry outcomes – there would be something incongruent in my suggesting that findings were generalisable at a content level. It would be about actively not living my values in my work, about being co-opted into a different paradigmatic stance.

Secondly, I want to link the above ideas about 'generalising the question, not the content' and 'congruence between researcher, research approach and research outcome', back to my earlier



discussion of the *educative edge* of action research. I want to assert that if action research work can be characterised by having an 'educative edge', as action researchers we are by definition not *aspiring* to do research from which we can generalise at a content level. If action is to be meaningful it needs to be a response to, or a result of, coming to know our own lived experience. If we generalise at a content level we problematise our own experience in the way *someone else* would, and this is not about enabling our experience of ourselves, each other and the wider community to become more worthwhile. In fact I would go as far as to say it strips it of meaning.

I am interested in the detail of inquiry practice and in creating spaces where people can learn and grow. The understanding I have of large scale 'third-person' inquiry deeply challenges what I see as the core values of action research. It therefore deeply challenges both my practice and the sense I make of whether my voice is a valuable one in our action research community. I notice that I do want some kind of shared meaning around what third-person research is. And I notice too how polarising and perhaps unhelpful this could be.

So, holding all of this, this chapter seeks to explore the following question:

*Is framing first-, second-, and third- person inquiry as 'mutually generating, requiring and reinforcing of each other' a useful and worthwhile way of thinking and talking about third-person inquiry?*

To enable me to address this question I shall begin by sketching out where my ideas about 'what third-person inquiry is' have come from, and summarise the key ideas around this from the YoWiM group (as detailed in Chapter Five). I shall then consider in more detail the work of Gustavsen (2001, 2003) and Martin (2001) who work predominantly with events on a much larger scale, drawing out the differences and similarities with my own work where they are apparent. I shall close this chapter with a response to my above question, grounded in the accounts I have explored.

*The development of my ideas on third-person inquiry*

Throughout the time I have worked on my PhD inquiry, I have engaged with Torbert's ideas about third-person inquiry - inquiry on a larger scale that seeks to build networks between groups of people and within and between organisations. I therefore developed an understanding that this type of inquiry goes wider than the deeply self-exploratory processes of first-person inquiry, or the space to share inquiry with others as afforded by the small face-to-face groups that characterise second-person inquiry (Reason and Torbert, 2001; Torbert, 1999, 2001).

So, this understanding of third-person inquiry appealed as a way of engaging (with) the wider system, in stressing the interconnectedness between inquiry 'about me', (my own experience and behaviour), 'between us' (our immediate co-workers) and 'with them' (the wider system). I intended to ground inquiry in each of the three streams in the skills and practices developed through the experience of all three streams - I considered that experience of first-person inquiry would enable us to conduct our second- and third- person inquiry with, for example, more awareness.

So, this was the initial understanding of inquiry practice that I developed and was basically engaged with the notion of each stream generating the other and becoming a richer inquiry stream as a result. Whilst calling others to join me in the second-person inquiry stream of co-operative inquiry, I *expected* that we would be continually attending to first-person inquiry and that we would always consider the choices of interacting with the wider system, if for no other reason than, in Torbert's terms, they would generate each other. It made sense to me that in establishing an inquiry group within an organisation we would have need to check in with the organisation for lots of reasons, that we would need time alone to process and make sense of what was happening, that we would need to share our stories with each other. As Reason and Marshall (1987) state, we need to address all three audiences in any research work we undertake, exploring our inquiry, as Reason and Bradbury suggest:

[from] the perspective of your first-person research and practice, attending to what draws your attention, excites you and meets your developmental needs; your second person research and practice, attending to what will work for and liberate your co-researchers and others with whom you work; attending always to the wider third-person cultural, intellectual and political concerns which frame your work and call for attention. (Reason and Bradbury 2001:xxviii)

I envisaged that our boundaries would be both clearly 'fixed', to enable a safety of space to develop in which we could come to make first- and second-person inquiry 'our own', and when appropriate, 'permeable' to enable us to work with others in the wider system in other second- or third-person inquiries. I carried these expectations into my inquiry group work. With hindsight I notice that I judge my self and the quality of inquiry I have part in generating by assessing to what extent the three streams are evident and in what ways I can see each stream feeding from, being nourished by, the others.

In Chapter Five I discussed the process of third-person inquiry in the YoWiM group. Below, I offer a summary of how this practice was shaped by the above ideas of first-, second, and third- person inquiry being 'mutually generating, requiring and reinforcing of each other'.

- The inquiry group, through methodological choice, was a second-person inquiry. This necessitated the integration of first- and second-person inquiry through attending to issues of individual interest in our action phases and sharing these in the second-person space of the reflection phases.
- Financial sponsorship by P&G, the fact that the inquiry group always met 'on-site', and the focus of the inquiry of 'exploring how I make sense of my experience of P&G' meant that the inquiry was visible to and intimately connected with the wider organisation in process and content.

- The developing awareness of voice and issues around knowledge generation that emerged through the interrogation of our first- and second-person inquiry raised questions about whether others in the wider system held such questions, and what they could help the YoWiM group to learn about these questions – ‘does what we are talking about matter to anyone else?’, ‘I wonder if P&G managers know we are thinking about this stuff?’ Making sense of our inquiry meant that we wanted to engage with the wider system.
- Questions of how we would engage in ways that honoured the processes that the group was coming to value (helping each other to find our stories, building on them, really listening, knowing we each had valuable things to say) meant that the inquiry group bided their time before ‘going public’, until they felt sufficiently skilled in the practice of inquiry. Having confidence in their ability *to hold* a wider *inquiring* space meant that they felt their intentions would not get co-opted and the process would not shift back to ‘the normal [P&G] way of doing things’.
- In running the third person inquiry, the YoWiM group engaged the system in inquiring ways:
  - People were invited to join in if they were interested to explore how they understood their experience of P&G. This honoured an intention to indicate to people that they were all bringing something, rather than being given something.
  - The YoWiM group opened the session by talking about the kinds of ideas they had been exploring with the intention of illustrating the importance of ‘exploring what matters to each of us’ rather than being invited to ‘respond to a preset question’.
  - Issues around power and authority were met directly – the YoWiM group, in welcoming all participants, suggested that although there was hierarchy in the room, we didn’t need to ‘do’ it. They asked the question: ‘If we drop the hierarchy and think

of each other as women we might learn from, how might our conversations be different? Let's do those conversations.'

- Attention to 'doing' these types of conversations was encouraged by each YoWiM member throughout the inquiry process, with the intention of encouraging people to learn in different ways from each other.
- The closing 'round', in response to the question 'What have you learnt today' was intended as a way of getting people to articulate the benefit of working together in ways that were enabling, with the hope that they might remember this and shift their practice as a result.

### *Large scale (third-person?) inquiry*

My above discussion set the scene and discussed some of my key questions around third-person inquiry and the current debate on scale. I now look at the work of Gustavsen (2001, 2003) and Martin (2001) in more detail, as it is their work that has taught me the most about the questions I hold – I focus particularly on Gustavsen's suggestions of how he sees this work as setting the priorities for the inquiry agenda. Throughout this discussion, I introduce the questions that I feel are important to hold, whilst not necessarily knowing how I might go about answering them.

Gustavsen argues that when compared to the 'original focus' of action research, the type of conference he organises with 'the main focus on relationships is quite radical'. I would like to offer a view that at the very core of all action research work is a deeply relational practice – a practice that seeks in some way to bring people into spaces where they can work together, with each other. Alongside this I feel it also important that we engage with terms, such as 'relationships' with care. Gustavsen's descriptions of the purposes and processes of the conferences give me a strong sense that they are places to 'network'. As he states:

In so far as there is an order, it is an *order of relationships*; an order that can be described in terms of who knows who, what work relationships exist, what joint arenas are available, and the like. (Gustavsen, 2001:23)

He states that the conferences function as places to meet over a day-long period, have three one-hour discussions in groups and seek a basis for future co-operation. Furthermore, given the one hour discussion limit, 'each participant has a limited 'window' through which to present their interests' leaving 'no room for long stories' (Gustavsen, 2001:21). Compared to the way in which other action research methodologies build relationships between people - over time with good quality of attention to creating spaces where people might come to understand each other as equals and deepen their inquiry skills through learning together - Gustavsen's conferences could perhaps more usefully be described as having a 'networking' rather than 'relationship' focus. As Gustavsen himself later states:

The focus is on the dimensions of social organisation that decide the *capacity* for initiating, developing and putting ideas into effect. (Gustavsen, 2001:23)

With 'capacity' being understood as linked to scale:

[referring] to the number of actors and relationships...the complexities and qualities of these relationships, and... the ability to develop and make real a broad range of ideas in parallel... [guided by] the idea of being able to maximise the number and quality of ideas that can be created and made real. (Gustavsen, 2001:23-24)

I feel the current framing of these accounts cloud and perhaps, without careful reading and interpretation in the context of other accounts of action research, devalue the interpersonal aspects of relationship building between people so prevalent in, and so central to, much of the action research work engaged in. I feel he puts forward a valuable approach for people who wish to meet with

similarly interested others, who might find value in working together in the future, as Gustavsen himself explains:

What emerges out of the event is an improved capacity for developing ideas, pursuing them into action and generally creating a rich landscape of different institutions, organizations and activities that can enter into fruitful and complementary relationships to each other. (Gustavsen, 2001:22)

It seems to me, from my reading of Gustavsen's work, that he and I make clearly different choices in our approach to inquiry – choices that probably stem from different ideas about where attention should be focussed in work that 'counts' as action research. His focus seems to be much more on institution building – the scale of the inquiry. Mine tends much more toward the building of inquiry skills in the groups that I work with, and in order for this to be possible, I feel I need to work with much smaller, face-to-face groups. However, I do feel such groups need to stay linked into the wider system – otherwise we might ask whether a difference might be made to the lives of participants if there is not a third-person research movement to provide a wider context for second- and first-person work.

So, a limitation of my approach on what we should be striving for in doing Action Research, is that change may well happen at the very localised level, and political support (from corporate host institutions, employer, and funding bodies) may therefore be more difficult to gain due to lack of visibility of the research (and generalisability of 'findings' – a criticism often levelled at work of this nature). A benefit of my approach, as I see it, is that there is an intention that the people engaged in the inquiry work will develop skills of inquiry that are applicable in their working lives. As a result, the host organisation should benefit from having skilled inquirers embedded in their organisation, who can then aid the learning and development of others.

A limitation of Gustavsen's approach however, seems to be that there is little (no?) skill-building engaged in. In addition, though the emphasis on creating the

possibility for future relationships is core, there is no discussion of how an action research ethos might underpin how those relationships operate – from my reading, people may leave such an event with no tools or frameworks to help them think about and work through this. This lack of enabling for a different future is arguably also true of the Working Whole Systems approach (Pratt, Gordon and Plamping, 1999).

I have written (in Chapter Seven) about my feeling that it is important to consider both ‘what am I intending?’ and ‘what effect am I having?’ as I work (as I live). I consider, within an Action Research frame, that it is useful to think about the appropriateness of the context we create for the outcome we envisage. My suggestion is that when inviting people into a space with the intention of them building links with other people, or other organisations, we should think about the nature of those links and what responsibility we should take in helping people to have a sense of agency when those links are made. As I said above, Gustavsen and I make different choices, emphasising different things, neither is necessarily ‘more right’ than the other. However, I know it is important to me to work with the intention of creating awareness of lived experience, a sense of choice in how we engage in and create that experience, and a belief that change is possible. And for me, this is what action research is about and is what I believe leads to our being able to ‘flourish’, as Reason and Bradbury put it:

... action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view... [seeking] to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1)

Whilst Reason and Bradbury make clear that the above is a working definition of Action Research, expanded upon by the contributors to their text (Reason and Bradbury 2001:1) it is nonetheless a useful point of reference from which we



might ask our selves whether our work evidences the core values and practices of action research, as they define it.

Putting these concerns to one side, I believe that exploring the potential of action research in ways that look beyond the single case is a valuable practice for our field. Issues of 'limited' scale and influence have been key criticisms of action research, with suggestions that the small scale and contextually bounded nature of the learning action research projects can produce, weakens the value of the practice, as discussed earlier. Toulmin and Gustavsen call for a movement that broadens action research practice from the typical small scale 'case' to enable a broadened definition of "political events" to be applied to action research work (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996:11). More recently Gustavsen has suggested that the influence of action research can be broadened by the creation of multiple, larger scale, interconnected events - what he refers to as creating social 'movements' (Gustavsen, 2001:23) and furthermore, that we might begin to think about action research as a process of building social capital (Gustavsen, 2003).

Whilst I am unclear from his accounts on his meaning of 'social movements' and 'capital', I believe that work on a larger, network building scale is important to advance our understanding of the potential of what action research practice has to offer. As suggested, we might consider work such as Gustavsen's to be third-person inquiry, indeed Torbert states that 'many approaches to third-person research/practice [are] currently being invented' (Torbert, 2001:256-7), and cites Gustavsen's networking conferences as one such approach. However, Torbert precedes this in his discussion by characterising successful third-person research as a practice that 'pre-supposes first- and second-person research/practice capacity on the part of leadership' as discussed above.

Again I struggle to see evidence of this in Gustavsen's work. Perhaps this is because Gustavsen himself does not make any mention of his work being 'third-person research', whilst I consider how I might frame his work in this way. Or perhaps what I see as the apparent lack of clarity of what third-person research is (the above example where Torbert's definition seems not to fit what Gustavsen's work illustrates) comes from, to use Torbert's phrase above, the fact that 'many

approaches to third-person research/practice [are] *currently being invented*'. Perhaps we just haven't explored the potential for doing action research on a wider scale to the extent where we enable ourselves to be confident in defining it. Perhaps this lack of exploration makes us less likely (yet) to say what third-person research isn't. Are, for example, Future Search, Whole Systems work and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, all examples of third-person inquiry?

This all reinforces the importance of Gustavsen's work, and that of others, in testing the boundaries of what larger scale (third-person?) inquiry is, as well as the importance of all of us, as action researchers, continuing to interrogate these accounts through our own understanding of what inquiry practice is/could be. Only through this continual, rigorously inquiring approach can any sense of coherence in understanding become apparent.

Another point of Gustavsen's work that interests me, as touched upon above, is his suggestion that action research needs to be used in a 'distributive way' if it is to become a social movement (Gustavsen, 2003). Such distribution, he argues would see a shift away from the traditional notion of a single case where resources are used to enable in-depth inquiry, toward the 'more important' creation of...

... many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries... [spreading resources] over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible. (Gustavsen, 2003:96-97)

Whilst, as mentioned above, I excitedly support the exploration of what action research on a wider scale may be, I notice that I become dissatisfied with and resistant to the above agenda. I feel that an either/or approach is not helpful. I don't think we need to be considering agendas that take us down the path of a particular inquiry stream being 'more important' than any other. Rather I feel the most creative and necessary way forward is to develop (more fully) the interconnected qualities of first-, second- and third-person inquiry referred to in

Torbert's earlier point. The necessity of interconnectedness is something that seems important and underexplored.

I agree with Gustavsen that if all action research work was focussed on small cases, then the opportunity to make significant large scale change would be lost. However, I feel we do our community of inquiry a disservice if we suggest that large scale networks can function anywhere near effectively when their constituent members and groups of members are acting without the critical inquiring competence that first- and second-person inquiry develop. We need both the places - 'networks', and the people - 'inquirers' if action research is to fully occupy a space in which democratic societal change may come about. I feel this mainly because, through my very brief forays into the field of inquiry so far, the ability of action research practices to invite people to engage in a shift of consciousness is one of its greatest gifts. Though perhaps sounding rather grand, 'consciousness shifting' to me means things such as:

- An overall sense of raised awareness
- People coming to (re)value themselves as knowing things and (re)understanding these things as relevant and valuable knowledge for the system in which they work
- Developing a (renewed) awareness of how they act and the impacts of this
- (Re)understanding themselves as people who may act choicefully
- Honouring bodily knowing and attending to the 'more-than-propositional' ways we respond to our lived experience.

These shifts seem to me to be unlikely to come about unless we attend to the development of first- and second-person inquiry skills prior to, or whilst in the midst of, third-person inquiry.

Furthermore, I don't feel it helpful to ghettoise first- and second-person inquiry as only being useful or relevant to their immediate context and those within it, as Gustavsen suggests when he writes that the 'single case' uses 'much resources in a single spot to pursue things in a continuously higher degree of detail in this

spot' (Gustavsen, 2003:96-97). As well as developing skills that enable third-person inquiry to happen most fruitfully - indeed perhaps to enable it to be called 'inquiry' at all - second-person inquiry particularly is frequently the basis for much wider systems influence. A good example of this type of inquiry is that of a colleague, Geoff Mead. Geoff's learning from a co-operative inquiry into leadership within the police force (Mead, 2001) fed directly into his creation of a nation wide, cabinet office funded, leadership training programme. So, far from being redundant, knowledge generated in second-person inquiry can more than adequately speak to much wider systems and have considerable influence.

However, inquiring with others is arguably empty without our focussed attention to first-person inquiry. How might we bring ourselves to the critical exploration of our experience with others if we don't have the skills to explore it for ourselves, on- or off-line? (Rudolph, Taylor, and Foldy, 2001). Voice seems central to inquiry practice here. To 'bring ourselves' means to bring our voice (either literally or through presentational forms). To not honour the development of first-person inquiry practices is, I believe, to not honour the development of voice. I believe voice should be a central element to all action research practices and to propose a move away from the practices that enable the development of this, and into spaces in which...

When presenting his or her interests and experiences each participant has a limited 'window' through which to do it. There is consequently no room for long stories. (Gustavsen, 2001:21)

...suggests to me the possibility of a considerably silencing agenda, though on reading, it seems that the above is suggested to be illustrative of the construction of dialogue. It is apparent that Gustavsen and I differ in our ideas about the construction of dialogue and voice. There is no doubt that his work brings a wide range of 'voices to the table', but the design means that they have space to be much less fully expressed than I would wish. As discussed in Chapter Five, just finding out what it matters to talk about, and then finding ways to talk about what matters, took quite some time in the YoWiM group, so I guess I am a little wary of voices being squashed into 'limited windows'. In contrast, my work

brought very few voices to the table and may well count as what Gustavsen describes as 'very local' (2003:94). However, 'very local' inquiry does, it seems, create space for voice, and this is important when considering the earlier discussion on feminist approaches to research and action research (Chapter Two).

Learning to 'listen through' ourselves in first-person inquiry helps us to acknowledge and listen to our own inner voice, and 'speaking-and-listening-with-others' (Torbert, 2001:253) in second-person inquiry helps us to learn how we might bring that voice to inquiry with others and how we might hear their voices. Barrett (1998) illustrates this, examining her work with a group of midwives known as MARG (Midwives Action Research Group), as below:

Throughout these early months of MARG's existence, participants spent a great deal of time talking about midwifery practice with a focus on mothers' realities and needs, while reflecting on their own experience as women and midwives. After about three meetings together, participants had established a level of trust and were openly sharing thoughts and insights about their lives and relationships...participants identified their priorities and proceeded with decision-making for the primary action plan through spontaneous talking, listening, reflecting and learning with each other. (Barrett, 2001:296)

This experimental cycling between inquiry streams warms our voices up and (hopefully) provides them with safe spaces, or what Kemmis (2001) would refer to as 'communicative spaces' in which to experiment with how they 'sound'. So, alongside being 'practices of inquiry' that we might write about, practical engagement with first- and second-person inquiry has shown me that they are also confidence-building, exploratory tools, that give us the opportunity to negotiate meaning with others. A reflection from one of the YoWiM inquiry group members illustrates how the movement between first- and second-person inquiry streams is, to use Torbert's phrase, an indication of how the inquiry streams mutually generate and reinforce each other:

[We developed a pattern of having] a huge data dump at the beginning [of our sessions]... we'd come together to meet and we'd each tell our stories. It was amazing because it kept on happening again and again and everyone had something to say about almost everything. We had all these themes in common that we needed to talk about, like 'my boss called me such and such'... It was great to consolidate and think 'yeah, these things are happening'... but they only emerged because we could just talk about what ever was important'. (YoWiM, October 2001)

This experience seems a long way detached from the type of space created in the network conferences Gustavsen speaks of:

... the issue is not to be original but to be understood. The understanding must, furthermore, be created within the framework of narrow 'windows'. (Gustavsen, 2001:23)

'Understanding' is surely negotiated meaning, and Gustavsen writes clearly that the tight time frame leaves no room for long stories or conversation (and hence no room for negotiation of meaning?). So, I am left wondering what 'understanding' in this context might mean and how mutual that understanding might be. In thinking about this I am reminded of Torbert's warning:

No conversation is occurring if any of the partners interprets what others say and acts on that interpretation without testing his or her interpretation publicly with the original speaker(s). (Torbert, 2001:255)

Torbert goes on to suggest that the second-person inquiry practice of publicly testing the interpretations we make helps us to realize 'how much error, conflict, and harm are generated by not doing so' (Torbert 2001:255). This reinforces my suggestion that to enter into third-person inquiry without knowledge of first- and second-person inquiry skills, is an ungrounded (not to mention perhaps scary and damaging) practice. However, as Gustavsen (2003) states, his 'core

concern has been democracy and participation', and having not participated in his work, I cannot hypothesise whether development of inquiry skills at a first- and second-person level would shift the degree of safety experienced in the larger space.

Whilst my experience of inquiry on a scale beyond small second-person inquiry groups is as yet limited, I have experienced through the YoWiM inquiry group how attention to first- and second-person inquiry skill development can positively affect the third-person space. As I have written elsewhere:

... Because they had developed a second-person community of inquiry over a ten-month period, YoWiM group members were able to create and hold a wider *inquiring space*. They were careful not to re-create the hierarchy that existed 'in normal workshops' in the company, in which people were rewarded for 'knowing the right answers', but through quite simple means, such as arranging chairs in a circle without tables, sharing some of their own experience of inquiry, inviting other young women to tell their stories and really listen to each other, helping them to explore their experience, they countered the prevailing organisational culture and created a quite unusual experience for their peers. (Reason and McArdle, 2004)

This brings us back to the point I made earlier with reference to Geoff Mead's work (2001). Rather than Gustavsen suggesting that second-person inquiry only uses resources in depth, in service of the particular inquiry group (2003), the above illustrates how second-person inquiries can spawn inquiries of a third-person nature that do speak with value to a much wider system, as was the case with Heron and Reason's Holistic Medicine Group (Heron and Reason 1985; Reason 1988). The above further illustrates that members of the original group who have inquiry skills, developed through the intimacy of the second-person space, can sustain this shift. Shifting between different types of inquiry practice is another challenge to action researchers, and from my reading, not something that is well documented. As new faces, new spaces and new agendas enter into

the field of inquiry all manner of questions are raised, and all manner of differences made apparent.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference when this shift occurs is a change of boundary definition. Heron (1996) discusses how we negotiate boundary issues in co-operative inquiry groups – who should be involved, how might ‘data’ gained from those outside of the group be inquired into and so on, and these types of questions remain important in the shift from second-person to third-person inquiry. What may have been a very rigidly fixed boundary around a known group becomes a boundary around a much larger group of people who are not known to each other, and most of whom will not have begun to develop inquiry skills in a conscious manner. The clear definition of boundary is something that I believe can be a strength of inquiry practice if we imagine it, at its best, being a mid point on a scale. At one end there is the boundary that is so fixed that the inquiry practice exists in a vacuum, losing any sense of the context in which it is set, falling in on itself through the untested beliefs the inquiry group generates. This group may feel incredibly predictable and perhaps incredibly safe.

At the other end of the scale there is the group whose members never get to have a sense of a boundary around them and therefore perhaps never see themselves as members, people can opt in and out any time meaning that the level of inquiry skill held by each individual will be very different, and, I would suggest, the level of inquiry might constantly exist at the superficial – held there by the lack of trust characteristic of groups with a constant flux of new faces.

The mid-point group would, I suggest, be the group who experiences the safety of a boundary around its membership during the time of inquiry skill building and the generation of trust amongst the group. This group would, always having one eye on the wider system, share discussion of the wider system and ask them selves if ‘now’ feels like a time when they could take their inquiry wider – as an invitation to them selves to broaden their practice, rather than as a constant threat of ‘something someone will make us do’. The group members would be able, individually and collectively, to decide when the time felt



appropriate to move out, supporting each other in doing so. This group might feel challenging – but the edge to this would be the possibility of personal growth and development.

So, I propose an approach in which inquiry at a third-person level, a network, a large scale event, would be pre-empted by skill development through first- and second-person inquiry. Again, my bias here is for the process we used in the YoWiM group, but this process could go in reverse – a large scale inquiry, followed by the creation of more intimate face-to-face groups where skill building can take place. There is logic to this reverse process too, and suggesting it here seems like a logical thing to do. But I don't feel it sits well with what I believe about action research practice. Through my experience of planning for the YoWiM third-person inquiry, I have seen that knowledge generation, when involving people from different hierarchical layers of a system, can feel deeply politicised and weighed down with expectations of 'normal' patterns of behaviour. I wonder how previously excluded voices, or voices which are perceived in organisations as being less valuable, might find space in large scale inquiry if they have not had the grounding of first- and second-person inquiry practice, through which they might 'revision' themselves as knowers, people whose voices are 'valuable'?

Gustavsen's suggestion that the type of inquiry we need to be placing more importance is that with 'diffuse boundaries'. Again, our focus is different as Gustavsen sees small scale face-to-face groups that operate over time as requiring unsustainable quantities of 'researcher' time. I however feel that such diffuse boundaries from the very beginning of inquiry, could be stressful for the participants, inhibit voice, and possibly compromise the value participants gain from the research. As one of the YoWiM group members commented:

It was so much more comfortable once we closed the group [membership]... it was really weird with people ducking in and out... it was hard to maintain continuity... I was really conscious of that coming and going. (YoWiM, October 2001)

Furthermore, it matters to me that in enabling small face-to-face groups to develop a critical inquiring attention, they become able to understand notions of boundary and to choice-fully decide how their boundary should operate, with the fullest possible awareness of how their choices might affect and challenge the inquiry practice. As Reason and Bradbury suggest:

One might say the primary 'rule' in action research practice is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:xxvii)

It is arguable that if, instead of this 'awareness' applying to the inquiry group participants which is where my bias lies, we apply it to an initiating researcher with first- and second-person inquiry skills, then inviting others into a large scale inquiry with diffuse boundaries does correspond with the above 'rule'. For example I, as initiating researcher, would be very aware of the choices of group design I was making and the possible consequences of this design for participants. However, the passion I have for embedding first- and second-person skills in to the centre of inquiry practice, means that this kind of awareness, isolated as it would be in the initiating researcher, feels manipulative and takes us back to the notion of doing research 'on' people rather than 'with' them. Establishing inquiries that enable the nourishing of each inquiry stream through the others, I believe, sharpens the educative edge that action research needs to have – that is self-education, education by and of others, and education by and of the organisation/wider social context. When speaking about the third-person inquiry group the YoWiM group members organised, one of them commented:

It was so energising to think 'okay, yeah, we are not just being mad people, other women are thinking about this stuff too, we've heard their stories'. So we know we have this back-up, this support from other P&G women. (YoWiM, October 2001)

This illustrates for me how important it is that the three inquiry streams are used together to help to benefit the inquiry as a whole.

Martin's (2001) discussion of her work goes a long way to addressing the concerns I have expressed above in relation to the intertwining of the three streams of inquiry, issues of boundary and voice and clarification over how large scale processes might be framed as action research. I shall outline her work, pointing out how she addresses these concerns.

Martin (2001) states explicitly how her own 'large group processes' as she refers to them, which range in size from 30 to 170 participants, can be modelled on action research. She states clearly that they are designed to engage representatives of an entire system, and differentiates the process from other large meetings by the fact that they allow participants to play a part in planning the event and that the events seek to generate 'new knowledge'. This echoes to me the collaborative intent of any endeavour seeking to come under the umbrella of action research, particularly as Martin states that she designs the events as 'triggers for social action'. Furthermore, she has developed four conditions under which any one-off large group process can evolve as action research. Martin (2001) argues that:

- All participants should be engaged in the 'Conceptualisation' of the event - doing the planning, getting clear on the purpose and desired outcomes;
- The 'Framing' of the event is crucial - consideration to establishing learning as an explicit objective and carefully deciding who to invite supports the 'capacity building that characterises action research';
- Careful attention to 'Designing the event' enables the facilitation of people being heard by making space for all to feel equally valued in speaking and encouraging people to consciously listen to them selves and others;

- Any one-off event based on action research principles should involve participants in spiralling off into their own cycles of action and reflection as a result of the change brought about by the group processes. It therefore becomes 'critical' to plan for a follow-up, by skilling participants up to work with their ensuing cycles of inquiry in their local contexts. Martin argues that the skilling of participants to engage with their own learning in cycles of inquiry differentiates her large group processes from other 'everyday' meetings in organisations, in that they are specifically designed to 'generate learning and social change' (Martin, 2001:200).

Martin's criteria enable me to see what I referred to earlier as the educative edge of action research practice – that after the event participants are differently skilled in their ability take inquiry into their own lives, that they have a sense of action and reflection and how to use these as capacities for learning and change. Furthermore, the attention to who might best be invited, coupled with their participation in planning, goes some way to address issues of boundary and the creation of a safe space that I have concerns over from my reading of Gustavsen's accounts. The encouragement of 'conscious listening to themselves' (first-person inquiry) 'and others' (second-person inquiry) in the large scale space (third-person inquiry?) shows attention not only to voice and how it might be enabled – something I feel is hugely important – but also to her encouragement to participants to develop critical attention to the three streams on inquiry 'on-line'.

As Rudolph et al (2001) argue, developing the capacity for on-line inquiry is not easy, but given that Martin's groups are not preceded by smaller scale second-person inquiry where they might be introduced and practiced, I welcome and applaud her apparent desire to act in the moment that she has to help educate people in their practice. There is something refreshing about 'just having a go' at doing something that, sitting here writing, sounds so challenging – a skill to be honed over time in a second-person space. Sometimes however, just sowing the seed – which is a quality I feel Martins account has – is all we have time for, but this in no way devalues doing it. She reinforces the practice of sowing these seeds by her emphasis on planning for a follow up session, where the attentions and practices introduced in the session might be further attended to.

However, Martin does not refer to her work as third-person inquiry, focussing instead on helping us to understand how large scale work counts as action research. Even so, I feel it does have the qualities that Torbert refers to when 'defining' third-person research - qualities I can see a lot more clearly in Martin's account than I can in Gustavsen's.

### Summary

After the above explorations, what response do I have to the question I introduced earlier in this Chapter?

*Is framing first- second- and third-person inquiry as 'mutually generating, requiring and reinforcing of each other' a useful and worthwhile way of thinking and talking about third-person inquiry?*

I respond with a very passionate 'yes!' Alongside this I question my right to respond given my lack of experience of large scale inquiry. Why do I feel that formulating a response, from my position of inexperience, is an okay thing for me to do?

If action research is best understood as a way of being and doing in the world (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:xxvii), accessing each other's accounts of action research work is one of the few ways we may come to understand each other's 'ways of being and doing'. It is often only through these accounts that we might explore what meaning we, as individuals in a wider action research community, are ascribing to our practice and how this compares with the meaning ascribed by others. I therefore believe that making a focussed exploration of large-scale (third-person?) inquiry via secondary data is a sufficiently substantial place from which to comment on the practice of such inquiry and how it links with the action research field more generally, whilst undoubtedly being limited in many ways.

Indeed, if we see our accounts of inquiry as being stories we offer to a wider group for comment (as I see this entire thesis), the very process of our writing and commenting becomes many nested inquiry cycles – and this is no bad thing. Knowledge is always incomplete, always partial. Acknowledging this, then commenting from this position, feels more important to me than silencing our opinions until we ‘know more’. So, whilst perhaps I feel dissatisfied with the form (secondary data) of large scale inquiry on which I have developed thoughts about such practice, I feel the discussion presented here throws up some important points, in response to my above question:

- I don't find it helpful to suggest that we develop a hierarchical approach to our understanding of the value of different types of action research approaches. I feel that if we come to believe that it is ‘more important’ to pursue one particular approach, then other approaches will suffer, becoming stagnant. As a ‘family of approaches’ (Reason and Bradbury 2001: xxiv) I feel all action research approaches have something useful to teach each other. Not keeping this potential for learning alive seems wasteful.
- In working with inquiry in the three streams discussed, at this time in my practice I am very passionate in my belief that clear boundary definition in all three streams (particularly fixed boundaries in the early stages of a groups development) is hugely important. With careful attention this can form a creative responsive space from which participants might make decisions over when and how their boundary may become more, or less, permeable.
- Rather than only producing knowing that is relevant to the immediate context, each inquiry stream has the potential to influence systems of both a smaller and bigger scale. I feel it is important to be explicit in stating that third-person inquiry can inform the practice of both second- and first-person streams – that it is not just a case of first- and second-person inquiry enabling ‘better’ third-person inquiry. As seen in the YoWiM

inquiry (Chapter Five), whilst experience of first- and second-person inquiry did help group members to create and hold a wider inquiring third-person space, the experience of the third-person inquiry fed directly back to inform their first- and second-person inquiry practice. This, furthermore, is evidence of how the 'capacity' of action research as a social movement is generated within and between the three streams of inquiry, rather than only in the third-person space, through the ability of small groups and individuals becoming skilled inquirers.

- Core to this discussion is the notion of voice. Feminist scholarship has a lot to teach action research about what voice is and what knowledge of this can add to the practice of action research. This is beginning to happen in accounts from feminist action researchers – rather than from feminist scholarship per se (see Chapter Five; Barrett 1998, 2001; Coleman 2001).
- If action research is a way of being and doing in the world, how can one-off events that apparently do not endeavour to 'skill people up' with inquiry skills, enable or exhibit a way of being and doing in the world that could be likened to action research? In what ways might we distinguish an opportunity to work with similarly interested others in a large meeting, from third-person inquiry practice? How might we work to re-define Torbert's 'definition' of third-person inquiry in light of the emerging accounts of third-person inquiry that don't seem to fit his definition?
- I therefore believe that framing first- second- and third-person inquiry as 'mutually generating, requiring and reinforcing of each other' is a useful and worthwhile way of thinking and talking about third-person inquiry. I want to emphasise the 'requiring' element of this in the context of the educative edge I spoke of earlier. Furthermore, I want to encourage more discussion of how individual practitioners define third-person inquiry. I would enjoy hearing more accounts of large scale inquiry that evidences attention to the first- and second-person streams, so we might come to

better understand this practice. I would also enjoy discussion, particularly about the work of Gustavsen as cited here, around what large scale inquiry that does not evidence this attention might usefully be called.

One of the key learnings for me through establishing the YoWiM inquiry and working with inquiry methodologies both within and outside of this inquiry is that I felt that if I did it all again (!) I would be better skilled in enabling the interconnectedness between first-, second- and third- person streams of inquiry that I feel is so important. I feel through the experience of the YoWiM inquiry group, I have developed my own sense of what this interconnectedness is and why it is vital – I feel very grounded in my suggestion that this is so. I put my thesis forward as a testimony to my noticing of the processes of inquiry through my experience of that inquiry, not as an example of how it ‘should be done’. It is through the incompleteness of my own practice that I present my above ideas.