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CULTURES OF COOPERATION

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Caption



A key element of new paradigm personal and professional development is breaking away from the old paradigm of needing to have ‘experts’, ‘bosses’, ‘gurus’, ‘leaders’, ‘controllers’, ‘directors’, or ‘senior people’ to interpret reality for us, or tell us what to do. What we do then requires some nourishment. If we don’t have an expert on hand to advise, adjudicate, or diagnose, or direct—how do any of us know whether what we are doing is relevant or valid? This question applies to decision-making in any group or individual situation—particularly in the health and social services, government and corporate sector, where decisions about people and their lives are being made by other people. It applies to all areas of research and development where there is a desire to move away from old paradigm, expert dominance, toward participation, collaboration and co-operation. It requires that we invent, develop, or adopt a *culture of cooperation*.

Easy to say—you may respond—and yet the tools for realizing it are to hand, if we were to run with them. One such toolkit with which I have been involved for two decades, is the cooperative inquiry method outlined across the next few screens. I am aware that it comes in many varieties—variously called experiential enquiry, grounded theory, and naturalistic enquiry each of them share the same basis—learning from experience. The recipe for cooperative inquiry detailed on the next few screen is very adaptable—in lighter, deeper, longer, or shorter forms it can be used to inquire into any topic, or task for which people have need and energy. For details of recent and current applications see [Resources](#).

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### Cooperative inquiry: A new basis for organizing projects

One of the fruits of the **humanistic psychology** tradition, co-operative inquiry is a research method that acknowledges individual intelligences, creativity and responsibility. It can be used to structure almost any kind of project and it has demonstrated that we can both learn about ourselves and organize ourselves without resorting to experts, coercion, manipulation, or deception—that a culture of cooperation is possible.

What does a culture of cooperation look like in practice? In the cooperative inquiry process, everyone who is to be involved contributes to the choice of project, or the topic of research. Everyone internalizes the ground rules of the project and is expected to contribute to, and be engaged in, its development. Unlike conventional research where a published report is usually the aim, the outcomes of cooperative inquiry are likely to result in a change of mind, new skills, a change of direction, new priorities, different working procedures, or improved effectiveness for all concerned.

Cooperative inquiry research methods can be of great value in any situation where a group wants to develop skills, organize work, or learn about themselves, and in varying forms are likely to be in place in all sophisticated quality assurance procedures.

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## Cooperative inquiry: guidelines

On the following screens I present some guidelines for conducting a new paradigm co-operative inquiry which I have personally found to work extremely well. They begin with three basic lines of questioning that may affect your whole approach—ethical, theoretical and practical.

[more](#)

### Setting up a cooperative inquiry:

Before you start, and throughout your enquiries, keep returning to these three sets of guidelines

#### Ethical

Does what we are doing:

Really matter to us and/or other people?

Contribute to improving the quality of human life?

Contribute to personal or social change or liberation?

Involve manipulating, deceiving, or oppressing other people?

Result either directly or indirectly in the denial of other people's rights?

#### Theoretical

Are the ideas and concepts we are using helping to organize and make sense of what we are doing?

Are they:

Logically coherent?

Emotionally congruent

Relevant to our needs?

Comprehensive enough?

Well enough grounded in existing knowledge?

Imaginative enough?

Broad enough in scope?

Sufficiently self-critical?

#### Practical

Do the conclusions of the research or development:

Match our own experience and actions?

Reflect everybody's views about the findings?

Accurately reflect the information from findings?

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## Cooperative inquiry: truth and illusion

Parallel with these queries is one that asks: how do we distinguish between truth and illusion? The new paradigm research answer to this question is a set of procedures that constantly reviews the project's process, so that accuracy, validity, relevance and coherence are always under scrutiny. Here are two components that have proved very useful:

[more](#)

### 1. Research Cycle

### 2. Validity Checks

## 1. The research cycle

This involves setting up a sequence in which we propose a course of action, plunge into the action, review the action, then go round the cycle several times. The research cycle has numerous virtues. We can start with just the germ of an idea and elaborate on it, or we can begin with a grand concept that we then simplify and modify through repeated actions and reviews. The whole point of the cycle is that it encourages a progressive movement toward greater accuracy and validity. If it drifts away from its original aims, the direction of the whole project can be simplified or corrected, and confused first intuitions can be clarified. Use the **more** buttons to step through the sequence.

**more**

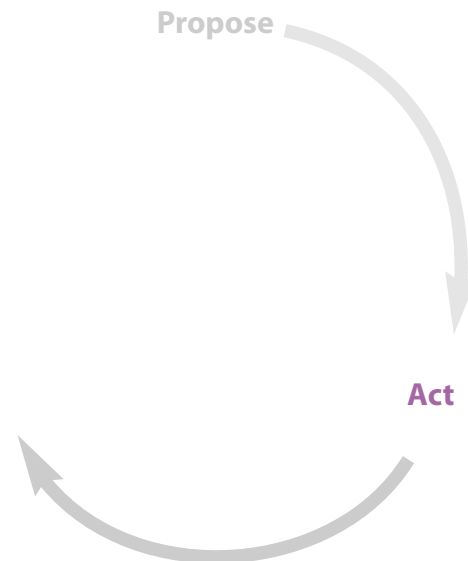
**Propose**



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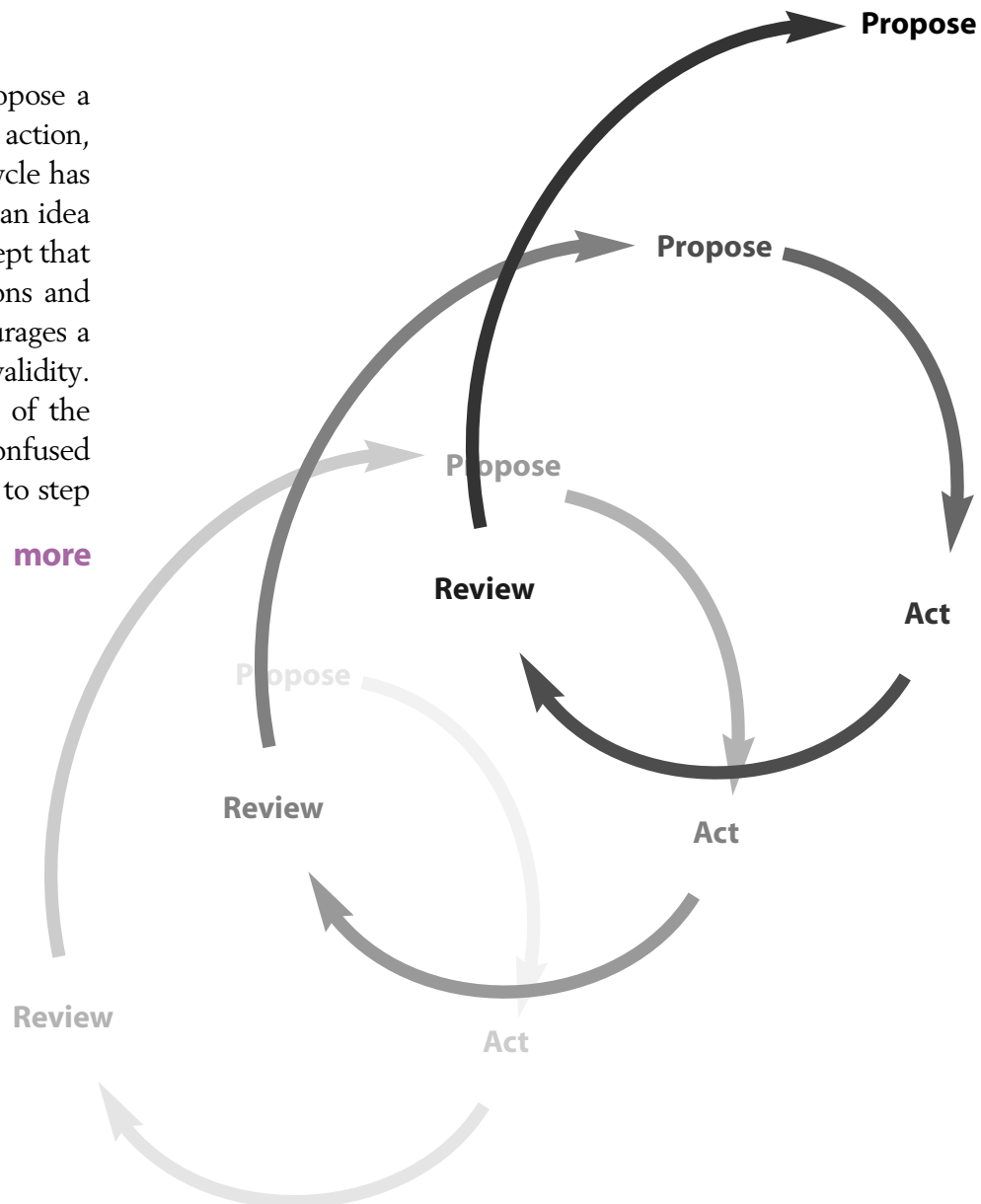
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## 2. Validity checks

Alongside and threaded through the enquiry cycle, a series of validity checks allow for a deeper, closer or more extensive compliance with the initial aims of the research.

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**Is there a balance between  
experience and reflection?**

[more](#)

### **Is there a balance between experience and reflection?**

Constant vigilance is needed to keep the action phase and the reviewing phase in balance. The right proportion depends on the project, but it is important that one does not swamp the other.

[more](#)

**Is the work distorted by emotional distress?**

[more](#)

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The validity of any work is most likely to be undermined by **re-stimulation**—caused by unresolved distress from the past. Typical ways in which unconscious projection can distort the process might include: picking situations or behaviour to pieces, so as to ‘understand’ them; pursuing trivial topics; treating people as objects; manipulation; breaches of confidentiality; and obstinately drawing conclusions that ignore others’ wishes or findings.

[more](#)





**Have we all internalized the procedure?**

[more](#)

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If we are working at changing our minds using a new paradigm approach, the value of what we do will depend on sharing the work of constantly questioning and reviewing equally between us. If some people are 'carrying' others, the enquiry is likely to have a lifeless quality, because some people are surreptitiously following the others. It's essential that everyone fully internalizes the whole procedure.

[more](#)

**Is there enough variety in our approach?**

[more](#)

### **Is there enough variety in our approach?**

Have we tried enough different activities or enough different explanations to account for what we are doing, and enough different ways of recording, recalling or collating our methods of doing it.

[more](#)

**Has there been enough chaos?**

[more](#)

### **Has there been enough chaos?**

The project and the inquiry will be greatly influenced by the extent to which imagination, creativity, exploration and innovation are pushed to their limits. In my experience, this means tolerating occasional episodes of chaos, confusion and ambiguity. If this disorder is shut off due to past distress, creativity will be truncated, because new discoveries often lie on the other side of chaos.

[more](#)

**What are we avoiding?**

[more](#)

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New paradigm methods of inquiry put every idea and process to the test of experience. But 'my experience' risks inviting 'my history' to participate. As a group we are likely to ignore information that contradicts our pet assumptions. It is useful to challenge the inquiry process by playing devil's advocate and taking a detached view.

[more](#)



**Are we beginning to make sense or reach a conclusion?**

[more](#)

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There is a danger that once we reach the final stage of making sense of what has been done, our conclusions may be too painful to accept or may point to action none dares take. The devil's advocate approach is once again useful to ensure that we are moving toward simplicity, understanding and effectiveness, not simply to a palatable result.

[more](#)



**Can the procedure be repeated or continued?**

[more](#)

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If the project makes public statements about what should or should not be done, they need to be well documented for future use.

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## Cooperative inquiry: DIY science?

Historically, learning about our minds has been primarily a matter of religious faith and in many parts of the planet it still is. More recently in the West, secular art, painting, plays, and literature, for the few, and storytelling for the many, have opened up a wider range of windows into the mind.

In the last 150 years science has seemed to promise greater certainties about how the mind works. Yet almost all of scientific mind research takes the form of research *on* people, unawarely reflecting the folk theory of the ‘naturalness’ of **dominance** that continues to be in the grain of the times. Not surprisingly, what is discovered about the human mind in this way often seems unhelpfully technical, or theoretical, or too aligned with the the vested interests of corporations selling pharmaceuticals and their medical allies.

It need not be so. The procedures outlined on the previous screens can be applied to organizing how we live and work together. They provide a rigorous basis for pretty much any project, whether it’s changing your mind, changing your life or managing a shoe shop. If you belong to a group or an organization that is moving away from authoritarian, expert management toward a more cooperative organization, it could work for you too. Why not try it?

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See also ▾

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