

# Cultivating Developmental Reflexivity: ART of Relational Inquiry Methodology for Self and Community Transformation

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**Abstract:** We introduce the paradigm of Action Research for Transformations (ART) as a methodology for developmental reflection and practice within the framework of constructivist adult developmental theory.

We illustrate a relational methodology that inquires how to cultivate self and community so that more of us may live our aspirations for love and power in relationship – including with Earth. This means taking intellectual insight into the realm of practice together.

The relational inquiry of ART invites us to consider the nature of inquiry itself and the need to not just understand but coproduce the kinds of transformations we understand to be necessary for a more sustainable, life enhancing world. Though it has many applications, it is offered here in the context of the cultural struggle to grapple with the transformation of power, especially among women and men, people of color and dominant minorities.

**Keywords:** Action research for transformation (ART), constructivist adult developmental theory, transformative learning praxis, reflexivity, relational power, gender, mutuality, post conventional science.

Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps for it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe, coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul.

Mary Parker Follet, 1924

## The Purpose of Inquiry

This paper argues that the call of our times, with its multiple interwoven social and ecological crises, demands more emphasis on how to coproduce participative change on our way toward a more sustainable, or life enhancing, world. Scholarly descriptions of our problems, abstract and depersonalized, while often helpful for understanding, are not enough to support tangible change in our personal and shared practice. We therefore introduce an orientation to fuller spectrum

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knowledge in the form of an action-oriented methodology for knowledge co-creation and social change. We present it here as working hand in hand with constructivist adult developmental theories. Its goal is to liberate more of us to respond to the call of our social-ecological challenges by practicing more collaboration despite our differences.

Action research is the umbrella term that describes a variety of scholarly practice with a participative orientation to knowledge creation (Bradbury 2015). It contrasts with conventional objectivist scholarship. It is research conducted in the midst of practice with ongoing feedback loops between researcher-participants that foster mutual understanding, design improvement and tangible innovation. As a form of participative constructivism (Gustavsen, 2014), action research brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, with stakeholders to issues of pressing concern (Reason and Bradbury, 2000). Action research contrasts with conventional social research which offers primarily objective descriptions of outer reality and focuses on our problems (Fazey et al, 2018) for which solutions are rarely described.

Action researchers do not bring pre-packaged solutions. They, do however, bring catalytic diagnostic and facilitative tools as they also distill and document notable results. Convening community – relational spaces – is prerequisite. Stakeholders can then articulate their own answers and experiment with providing better outcomes in their own contexts. The repertoire of participative action methods is lengthy and diverse with many known in their own right as popular approaches, e.g., U-labs of Otto Scharmer (2007), appreciative inquiry methodology of David Cooperrider (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999), the World Café process of Juanita Brown (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). Beneath the variety of form, we see across the methodologies that there is a relational, wholistic, and practical approach to knowledge creation (Bradbury, 2015). Further, the knowledge products developed from these methods call for and experiment with a wider variety of data than conventional research methods (Chandler and Torbert, 2003). Through individual and/or group action in the present, action research constructs a richer understanding of the past to help shape the desired future of stakeholders (Gergen, 2015).

Though objectivism is a hallmark of modernist science—with its many enlightened advances over theocratic forces of old—an elemental pitfall of distanced/objectivizing research is that its solutions to problems are prescribed without feedback from the very people involved with, or affected by, the change efforts. Turning the buzz of experience into objects of thought is what conceptual work is all about. Therefore, the turn to practice is post-conceptual, through and beyond it. Action research, anchored in a more relational perspective, includes two critical perspectives that help here. The first acknowledges and integrates subjective awareness of the self in relationship to the research. An action researcher might therefore inquire, *What assumptions or biases (some felt but not well worded) am I bringing that might influence this research?* The second perspective is an interpersonal inquiry that invites feedback from, and with, research participants and stakeholders as an intrinsic part of the process. The inquiry might include some version of *How do we embrace the value of our differences; how can our partial truths and gift accomplish more together?* Action research may be deemed successful to the degree that an inquiry itself is owned and proliferated by more stakeholders.

## Action Research Transformations

Given our interest in transformation, we're also interested in power dynamics, especially those that hold the status quo in place. The inclusion of subjective and interpersonal perspectives in action research allows for a methodology in which power is not only described at a distance, but rather becomes a process in which to engage transformation processes.

Transformation addresses the very values and logics that perpetuate problematic aspects that inhibit well-being among stakeholders to an issue. ART encourages the spirit of the call to "future forming" beyond qualitative description of our problems (Gergen, 2015). It is offered as a timely updating of our notions of knowledge and learning by redirecting the purpose of knowledge toward cocreating a life enhancing world.

ART, as a contemporary form of action research, integrates early insights about power available from the earliest articulation of pragmatism (Addams, 1902; Dewey, 1903; James, 1907), as seen in the opening quote from Mary Parker Follet. Follet understands power also as a creative, not just domineering, capacity that is generated through relationship among integrated, sovereign wholes. Her notion of "power-with" described a conjoining in mutuality. This formulation stands in contrast to ongoing notions of power simplified as coercive "power-over" which assumes either I, or you, have power but not both. The cultivation of "power-with" appears consequential for efforts to transform toward a more sustainable world.

Nearly 100 years later, the need for knowledge forms that are sensitive to understanding and coproducing "power-with" have only increased as society grapples with, and appears often stymied by, inherited coercive power. In the winter of 2017 and the summer of 2020, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements each reached boiling points. A reckoning with how social power is exercised rang across the globe. We found ourselves seeing more clearly how gender, race, (and poverty, mental health, and environmental issues) interweave with inherited (power-over) power structures. The social change movements insist on new standards of behavior to reduce from predatory behaviors. This has also produced confusion, and not a little sanctimony and shunning in the rush to enforce what amounts to a significant interpersonal shift, dare we say, cultural revolution replete with denunciation.

What lies beyond unilateral power wielded through manipulation and force? ART offers a response that can harness post-conventional research minds toward the realization and practice of transformative mutuality. It is a practice that calls for reflexivity—asking us to turn the camera on ourselves as we gather data about our world. Leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement call out attention to the depersonalization by law enforcement of the communities they serve and show that it leads to problematic policing that criminalizes poverty and lack of community resources. Historically law enforcement acts on, rather than with. More generally we might say that knowledge creation anchored in reflexivity is best when integrating personal/reflexive *and* interpersonal/relational, *and* impersonal, often anonymous/objective information. The interweaving of first (me; subjective), second (us, inter-subjective), and third person (all of us, objective) perspectives thereby has the potential to grow those involved and empower participants in social change to shape the world of their aspirations (Bradbury & Reason, 2000). Our difficulty is often in weaving the feelings (of discomfort etc) from the subjective realm to the clarity of the

objective. Next, we situate ART as a vehicle for adult constructivist developmental theory. In cultivating our capacity to uncover and work with our own subjectivity, we can access new clarity about the shared inquiry context, and clarity about our own involvement in the research.

## **Inquiry Itself is Developing**

Constructivist adult developmental theory illuminates how we see and make sense of the world and therefore, *inter alia*, how we approach research. The basic proposition, elaborated by scholars such as Michael Commons, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Robert Kegan, Jane Loevinger, Jean Piaget, William R. Torbert and Ken Wilber, is that there is an invariant sequence of stages through which humans' meaning making of experience develops. The developmental stages of meaning making describe a primary worldview, or a center of gravity, from which a person makes sense of, and responds to, the challenges that life brings. Generally, the theory suggests an arc of unimpeded development of increasing flexibility, complexity, self-expression, tolerance, differentiation, and integration between the inner and outer worlds (Cook-Greuter, 2013). Less spoken of, but critical to working with our subjectivity, is that development fosters not new content (say blistering clarity and wisdom), but deepening capacity to confront our earlier, buried or shadow material, located in our own earlier developmental stages. Shadow is Jung's word for the unconscious aspects of the self that, when brought to conscious awareness, may be feared or denied, because they are counter to one's ethics, values, or intentions. Murray (2021) explains that cultural shadow resides in lower strata of the psyche "forgotten" by consciousness, but also connected with our own life force – say capacity to play together and celebrate life, live sustainably within an ecosystem. Inquiry into our own shadow is necessary for living more fully amid deep pluralism. Personal and relational development becomes more tolerably within reach when we can hold perspective about a fuller me and us. Such inquiry can be deeply productive. And there will be inevitable fallback, especially under conditions that threaten our security.

In models of constructivist adult development, it appears that the transformational process of development does not occur by logic or cognitive reflection alone (Torbert et al., 2004), but rather as each person faces conundrums in everyday life that their current approach does not resolve. In this sense, constructivist adult development theories are integrative; people develop in dynamic relationship to self, other, language, culture, and external contexts (Cook-Greuter, 2013). As a person accesses new and more complex inquiries – often with the support of a learning community or guide – it is possible for a new worldview to emerge that interweaves thought, feeling, and action as they never before imagined. At early stages the individual tends to be self-protective whereas at later stages they become quite inclusive and multi-perspectival. Each subsequent action-logic (Torbert's term for developmental stage) is gradually discovered – if at all – through a process of seeing through and thus questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in that action-logic and partially – but not totally – leaving it behind. Thus, each later action-logic includes, but is not limited to, the entire domain of the previous action-logics. As a person progresses through this kind of vertical development the transformation of their worldview reaches a higher vista offering an aerial view of their previous action-logics. Thus, at each new stage, or vista, gaining capacities and choice in the process.

Correspondingly, the types of research, enactments of power, and how we approach others are, to some large extent, shaped by our developmental stage. Torbert explains that earlier action-logics

have us feeling compelled rather than liberated. In Torbert's work in the field of executive management it is shown that the assessment of developmental stages correlates with success for those executives who operate with later developmental stages (Rooke & Torbert, 2005). Their success is explained as an outcome of their capacity to exercise qualities of power that become increasingly mutual in nature, in turn associated with the capacity of the later action-logics to inquire beyond their ego-limits and thus to be able to exercise power on behalf of values beyond their own self-interest. Torbert explains that at later stages, the exercise of mutual power invites both oneself and others to transform. Consider creative industries in which innovation develops as a result of people finding solutions together. This happens not by superiors compelling subordinates to be creative but rather through something more akin to play. With regards to power, the fundamental move is from unilateral, power-over, to mutual, power-with; from hard power to soft power.

Key also in the literature of leadership development is the importance of reflection on experience as a prime route to growing ourselves, an insight that harkens back to the Socratic admonition to live an examined life. Reflection is a process of learning from by being with experience. In this the individual considers, thinks, and responds to a specific problem situation. In retrieving Mary Parker Follett and being intrigued by Torbert's work with executives, we suggest that reflexivity, is a type of conscious self-development that may be particularly enriched by inquiry into conflictual relationship. Reflexivity is a more ambitious and challenging process than cognitive reflecting as it becomes new patterns of relational practice. Reflexivity includes examination of one's own way of thinking, assumptions, and underlying patterns of values and worldviews, that results in new action together. It lies at the heart of the work we present that is experiential and experimental – making real life, beyond lab studies and executive suites, the arena for transformative learning.

## **Reflexivity in Mutual Inquiry**

If knowledge is power, any transformative attempt must recognize the politics of reflexivity in knowledge creation processes. Culture is arguably enriched when reflexivity complements empirical-analytic, denotive knowledge. Our efforts with reflexivity are therefore also subjective, sometimes intuitive – thus bringing our own biases into awareness in a way that gives voice to more intuitive processes. Freinacht (2018) is useful here, suggesting three steps to reflexivity that require clarity about: 1) one's intention - articulated as something I am drawn to, passionate about (e.g., I am a vegan), 2) naming the positive halo of this intention (e.g., because I don't wish to perpetrate violence) 3) and also naming a potential shadow (e.g., because I have been treated as an object myself and don't wish to be complicit in doing this to any sentient beings). Jung, who originally defined and worked with shadow in his psychoanalysis practice, cautions us that unexamined, repressed parts of the psyche limit our capabilities and forge a gap between how we think of ourselves and what we enact (Jung & Hull, 1991). In developmental terms the shadow forms in our early years when, by necessity, we learned to be self-protective. As we develop, we can bring these shadows to the light. Otherwise, we bypass and become complicit in the ego protective nature of the shadow. As scholars, engaged in questions of what constitutes reality, perhaps we must look at shadow. And our turning the camera around on ourselves can continue through our life. Awareness of shadow may be supported by accessing non-conventional ways of knowing, (i.e., intuitive, more creative forms) to enrich our repertoire of rationally accessible

knowledge. This type of knowledge integration may have an added benefit of acknowledging the value of heretofore marginalized forms of knowledge, such as women's ways of knowing, (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 2008), and power of sacred plant medicine (Nicolaidis, 2021).

## Developmental Case Studies

The following cases illustrate key issues of reflexivity that concern power. We will assess the quality of knowledge creation using seven quality choice points that conceptualize quality in action research as an appropriate combination of (1) **Articulation of purpose and objectives** which refers to the clarity of purpose with regard to intended knowledge creation through, and for, action in support of our collective thriving; (2) **Partnership and participation** which refers to the extent to and means by which participative values are evident in the relational component of research; (3) **Contribution to action research theory/practice** which refers to the extent to which the work builds on, and/or creates explicit links with extant knowledge; (4) **Methods and process** which refers to the extent to which the action research process and related methods are clearly articulated; (5) **Actionability** which refers to the extent to which the action research conveyed through the paper provides new ideas that guide action in response to need; (6). **Developmental Reflexivity which** refers to the extent to which self-location is acknowledged and brought to the inquiry; (7). **Significance** refers to the extent to which the insights have meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology.

Before introducing the ART cases, Table 1 simplifies and presents three developmental stages of relational power we use to analyze the cases. The first is unilateral in which relationship is self-centered and self-protective, an orientation developed in our earliest years and to which we may fall back under stress; the second is independent, more associated with the stages of early adult life. The third later interdependent, and rarer, stages—defined here as collaborative—and which allow for authentic co-creativity. Each stage corresponds with a capacity for a particular level of inquiry. The simplest is single-loop inquiry, which occurs at the level of action, a type of “fix it” mode that we use most of the time throughout life. Single loop inquiry is most available in the earliest stage of development and works on externally oriented changes in behavior. As we tend to be fused with our identities when operating from earliest stage (e.g., wife, mother, accountant) inquiry does not turn inward to disrupt these identities but stays external. Double-loop inquiry can occur at the later stages of action-logic, when one's identities, and the strategies that keep them intact, are able to be questioned and experimented. Double-loop inquiry is at play when questioning what needs to be fixed and why. In the formulations of action researcher Chris Argyris, single loop inquiry is like setting the thermometer to fix a room at a comfortable temperature, whereas double loop is asking what the best temperature is. Triple-loop inquiry is the most complex. It includes the first two levels, our behavior, and questions about best practice, and adds to the inquiry the awareness of cultural narratives, the larger context. Torbert et al, (2004) see it as the most reflexive level of inquiry because it involves attending to own attention and becoming able to see thoughts, behaviors, and intentions in the present moment and to experiment with changes as needed. To complete the metaphor of the thermometer, triple loop inquiry may involve enacting concern for climate change by accepting a less than comfortable temperature or deciding to devote a next stage of life to supporting a development of an entirely different form of energy. Working with these broad-brush outlines of developmental movements of power and relational

wholeness we now offer illustrations of ART in the context of power dynamics in work contexts with an eye toward gender relations. Three cases follow, each serving to illustrate the complex implications for methodology as issues of reflexivity become salient.

**Table 1: Developmental Levels of Inquiry and Power**

| Mode of Power  | Stage of Development                      | Inquiry  | Power orientation  |
|----------------|---|--|--|
| Unilateral     | Self<br>(as separate and self-protective) | Zero inquiry   | “It’s all about my power over you or yours over me.”   |
| Independent    | Relational                                | Fix it, transactional, single loop opening to double loop.     | How do we help/mutually exploit each other?<br>“It’s all about each of us living up to our side of our (implicit or explicit) contract.” |
| Interdependent | Collaborative                             | Curious, Creative. Double loop inquiry opening to triple loop. | How do we collaboratively envision and manifest something truly creative together?   |

### Case I: From Unilateral (non) Inquiry to Independent Relational Inquiry

Research suggests that in the earliest stages of development women’s self-protection is expressed more often as silence (Belenky et al. 2008), while men’s is expressed as aggressive, what Cook-Greuter and Torbert (2004) labeled “opportunistic.” A self-protective ego renders inquiry invisible and unnecessary to its aims. Key to note from a relational reflexivity lens then is that at the earliest stages of development, there is simply *no inquiry*. In the human sphere this means that there is very little possibility for meeting among people as “subjects,” but rather as self-protective objects.

The second author first documents her own journey from self-protective in the context of reflexive developmental inquiry. She then offers an illustration of how reflexivity can become a useful foundation for subsequent work with other stakeholders in the inquiry/practice of transforming how she relates with power.

**Lara writes:** On my professional journey I have seen that there are ways in which gender plays into particular power dynamics. With women that I admire I can project my disowned (golden) shadow in the forms of embodied confidence and intelligence. While evoking a feeling of admiration, this particular projection can create feelings of competition and distrust, while activating shame. I will contrast an early example with a later one to indicate how this has played out at different times along my developmental journey.

At the start of my professional life in my mid-twenties, I had a female colleague that I both loved and respected and yet also felt triggered by. I perceived that when we were facilitating together, she tried to outshine me and did not give me as much opportunity to contribute. In response, I would enter a space of silent frustration, either shrinking away into the background or making efforts to assert myself that felt untimely and inauthentic. Aware enough of what I was struggling with, I suggested that we find a way to have a regular debrief together, as I knew that I needed a structure to be able to address and unpack what had come up in our class. However, my colleague never seemed to remember this agreement and, feeling defeated, I never reminded her, much less insisted. Even though I didn't think any of this was necessarily conscious on the part of my colleague, I started to build up resentment. I never overtly addressed the feelings that I was having and it fed into a diminished sense of self. While this dynamic did not present obvious rifts in our relationship, I believe that it affected our synergy on a subtle level and eventually our work together waned. We drifted apart.

I continued to inquire into this dynamic – also present with other colleagues. I saw that one of my primary shame triggers is being perceived as unintelligent, or as if I do not have anything of value to offer. (Isn't life interesting – I have been, in the role of educator, easily exposed to this trigger. We teach what we need to learn!)

Fast forward 10 years, and I find myself co-facilitating with another female colleague and this time working with a group of professional educators, all of whom I had great respect for. At one point one of the student educators voiced a feeling of not being comfortable with some of the group dynamics at a time when I was the lead facilitator. While on an intellectual level I was grateful for this student's feedback, my shame trigger got activated. I was aware of many layers of shame and of being triggered, and my inner dialogue went something like this: "Wow, she just revealed something very important about our container. I see other students responding/reacting to this. I feel heat rising from my solar plexus – shame is here. I feel concern for this student. I have an impulse to try to fix something but also an awareness that things are unfolding in an essential way that does not need to be interrupted. We are a group that can tolerate the heat of discomfort and even benefit from it." Aware of many contributing factors and being kind to myself (after all, what educator has not had negative feedback?), I still felt the discomfort of shame and questioned what I could have done better.

When my co-facilitator found the opportunity to debrief with me, she listened compassionately, mirroring me and sharing her own (more positive) experience of what had happened. Talking through it and sharing the insecurity and shame I was feeling helped me to digest the strong emotional aspects. From here we moved forward in our planning and facilitation from a clear and integrated place. My vulnerability created more trust and strength in our collaboration. We drifted together rather than apart.

**Developmental Reflection (both authors reflect together):** In the first example, Lara was exercising unilateral power, but in the guise of silent self-protection (which is an inverted form of power at the earliest stage of development). It is unilateral in that neither Lara nor her colleague could dialogue, much less share power. Lara has since realized she had an either/or orientation: If her colleague was shining, she was not. Her strategy was to avoid conflict which prevented



learning. As is natural when younger – and a key obstacle to growth if we remain immersed in early action-logics – Lara did not have enough perspective to see her projection. She was subconsciously comparing herself with her colleague, projecting discomfort outward making it mostly about her colleague's behavior.

In continuing over a decade and more in the practice of relational reflexivity, Lara has gained the ability to see herself in action and thus more capacity for relational reflexivity. This perseverance in inquiry, with self and others, is a key developmental move. It brings the capacity to engage with others as human beings (rather than as fantasy objects who are better or worse than the fantasy of the isolated me). We get to see she's now able, in the moment, to "make object" (we use Kegan's term for developing awareness of key developmental experiences) both the emotions at play and her own thoughts and feelings in the space between self and other. This is holding me and us together, while embracing single and double loop inquiry, leaning into triple loop. More critical than rational insight is the ability to make space for the ego's self-protection which is anchored in undiscussable emotions, such as shame. Lara was aware that she felt shame yet was not entirely shut down by the experience. Instead, she was able to have perspective on the somatic sensations of shame and the way that thoughts can "spin" themselves to stay comfortable. This capacity for stepping into discomfort – something that is helped by meditation and self-inquiry practices – allowed Lara to remain rooted in her center and present as a facilitator. Lara moved from repressing what was upsetting her to creating conditions for co-creativity. Shame may be one of the greatest teachers of all, but only if we can turn to it for its wisdom.

**Independent Relational Practice:** Relational research is first a process of noticing and transforming inner experience. It is the act of applying reflexive practice to oneself. In the developmental reflection above, we see how first-person reflexive practice can be developed to the extent that it is applied in the moment as a way to assess if one is congruent in their stated values, intentions, and actions (Chandler & Torbert 2003). The point of reflexivity is not to decide what's right and wrong, but to notice the degree of distance and closeness available, by choice, to the one in inquiry. We might say that this accordion capacity is a prerequisite for becoming a practitioner of ARTful developmental inquiry.

## **Case II: Relational Developmental Inquiry Across Genders.**

Interpersonal ART may be defined as the ability to know ourselves in and through relationship, as opposed to personal inquiry, in such a way that degrees of distance and closeness can become more available, by choice, to the ones in explicit inquiry together. From an evolutionary perspective, our conditioning as primates is to remain deeply concerned about remaining part of our troupe. Thus, the relational and gendered aspects of life, experienced up close in work situations for example, can be profoundly anxiety inducing. From a gender perspective we might say the troupe (or today's workspace) remains insistently patriarchal. The legacy of invisible male domination serves neither women nor men in our increasingly complex, knowledge-based democracies. In this power is taken for granted without being consensually chosen or consciously wielded. It is in this territory that Hilary engaged her mentor. What follows is a relational reflexive inquiry with all the parties involved. The case is excerpted from a longer, published transformative dialogue (Bradbury & Torbert, 2015) which seeks a restorative outcome through mutual exploration between a woman and a man working together in a research context. She as the

assistant, he as the research director, in a pattern of power distance that is typical of many modernist institutions.

**Hilary writes:** I arrived to work one humid summer's day wearing a favorite skirt. Quickly I became aware of how he was not listening to my words but was only noticing the way my skirt had fallen open to reveal my legs. Instead of feeling beautiful in a beautiful skirt, as I had started out on my day, I now felt awkward. I tried to "cover up." I kept my hands on my covered knees as though auditioning for guidance in an Amish community. I had a feeling I had done something wrong but what, I was just not sure.

Another day, soon after, I felt awkward. And, again, I said nothing – this time, as I left our meeting the research leader licked me from the V of my t-shirt along the face to the side of my forehead. A great lick. Yikes. As I disengaged, I was a bit shell shocked. What had just happened. Some 20 years later I returned to invite the research leader, Bill, to talk (and then write together) about what had happened between us. The intention was to restore our capacity to work together with someone I respected but whose behavior confused me. At first, we sought the help of a mutual friend.

**Bill writes:** When we first exchanged our (different!) written stories about our early relationship, we both gave "OUCH" cries by e-mail and Skype, and asked to have a face-to-face talk, including a third person we both trusted to facilitate our listening, our hearing, the clarity of our speaking, and our self-questioning of our own premises. What I did not yet understand, in spite of our writing to one another, were two facts: first, the simple fact of your not being at all physically attracted to me in spite of your ostensibly flirtatious actions; and second, the more complicated fact that my being physically attracted to you, as a minor aspect of my overall attraction and assessment, had made you feel so awkward, unconsciously self-protective and, then, (this refers to a part of the story omitted from this retelling) destructive in our shared classroom.

Gradually, though, I have digested the notion that I tend to develop a generalized crush on some women who, like my mother, I find delightful intellectual companions and conversationalists. In such cases, I presume the generalized erotic attraction between us to naturally include a sexual element, when that aspect may very well be only an aspect of my own "crush," yet whose potential for 'disappearing' the feminine voice, especially when I hold greater institutional power, had not been so apparent to me as it has now become. Or at the least it's all a much more complex experience for a young woman juggling historic powerlessness and newfound freedoms for which she has not received mentorship.

**Hilary responds:** I am deeply touched by this truth speaking between us. You were an older, more powerful man whom I wanted to flatter. At the same time, I deeply desired to be seen by you, without realizing that it was in the eyes of teachers that I could best intuit my own capacities. Now I see my access to power in our relationship originated with a mix of flirtation and self-protection. These interactions were themselves to a large degree shaped by the powerful social structuration of patriarchy in which junior women accommodate senior men. The difficult work of noticing, exploring and changing these norms falls on the one least empowered to change them. This difficulty is exacerbated when I notice that any

exploration risks embracing a paradox: I don't want to lose good mentorship/friendship and I do wish to emancipate myself from patriarchal structures while simultaneously protecting you (or any man) from the consequences of your own behavior, which I (and most women) learn because we are socialized in patriarchy. Most difficult then is displacing male discomfort onto a self-forgetting feminine self. This is hard!

The intervening years have allowed me to make an invitation to you, which I believed would land well because of your own deep commitment to self-inquiry. The idea is that both of us might notice and distance ourselves from all-too-common norms of non-inquiry. The invitation is motivated by a growing awareness that men too suffer inside patriarchy. And more importantly, that democracy itself will be enhanced, a bit when women and men work better together. There's opportunity here for the previously unempowered to learn how to enter into co-creative structures that work better for all. There's even opportunity here for the previously powerful.

**Developmental Reflection:** Something innovative, and in this case, restorative happens when two persons can discuss a shared problematic experience. Later stages – supported by the privilege of good education, time to reflect – do not mean that there are no problems, merely that problems are more likely to become mutual, trust-building inquiries about what has happened. It is important to mention, at least as an aside, that there is obviously more to a relational context than can be mentioned in a short case. The simpler narrative of transformation here is that together they made space for relational inquiry. At first it allowed for simply “managing to get along.” Later, building on sage experiments and small successes, it allowed for the eventual and deeper reconciliation sketched here. What had been initially unilateral power gone awry in a dyad was “composted” toward a profound healing experience. And importantly it may illustrate a dialogue practice useful for others stuck in mutual criticism with its implications for co-creating better forms of democracy.

**Inter-independent Collaborative Practice:** In the case above, we see a move – over a decade – from independent, individualistic to more mutual relational practice as Hilary and Bill dialogue through writing inquiring into the space between them. It interweaves single, double, and triple loop inquiries by necessity. The suffering is followed all the way down to how cultural and biological scripts (flirtation and seduction) must be looked at, made objects of inquiry until more ease is reached together. Transformation begins as they address the deeper values and action-logics that keep problematic gendered behaviors in place in the form of both cultural and personal scripts. The relational reflexivity of both parties together opened an inquiry into increased relational well-being. As a research methodology, such a relational approach between researchers and research participants (stakeholders) generates real-time data about the efficacy of our initiatives while tending to the often hidden and undiscussable conflicts that arise around interest and power (Chandler & Torbert, 2003). In this way, we develop our own escape route from the dungeon of self and community repression, a bit more liberated for creative expression and authentic connection. Benefit redounds to me, us and all of us as deep scripts are liberated from a unilateral stage of unknown, undiscussable to shared inquiry and more relational creativity together.

In the above cases we show the interplay of reflexivity with development through our own reflexive practice on our work as action researchers. Both cases demonstrate how without reflexive awareness, power is experienced as an external force. Enacting unilateral power is commonplace,

either in its expression of “say nothing” or mindlessly dominate. Although this power dynamic continues to show up in life, over time it can also be transformed through accessing power-within – a combination of self-regulation (within discomfort) and choice (of how to respond). When dependence and independence become integrated, we can move beyond the power struggle of he said/she said toward a mutual power that holds within its frame the needs and preferences of others (Commons and Ross 2008). Together the cases illustrate an arc from unilateral self-interested power to shared-power-to-do. In sharing them the cycle of learning may be shortened.

We now turn to complete the presentation of a relational transformative methodology with a discussion of validity – our preferred term is quality – appropriate to it.

## Assessing Quality with Seven Choice Points

Validity measures in conventional science and inquiry relate only to internal and external validity. And, while that is always relevant in knowledge creation, from the point of view of ART it is rather too narrow a bandwidth of concern. Contemporary qualitative research began to offer new pathways to enrich our notions of what counts as valuable knowledge (e.g., Lather, 2008). These notions, briefly introduced earlier in the paper, have informed the seven choice points which originated with Bradbury and Reason (2000) and have since been developed over the past twenty years for use in evaluating and developing publications and research designs, now codified by the associate editors of the journal *Action Research* in Bradbury et al., (2020). In addition to assessing the quality of work, the choice points themselves serve as a tool to elicit reflexivity. The seven choice points follow, with discussion of their presence in the two cases presented. As “taking action” is a critical part of action research, we also include illustrations of how relational and collaborative practice has emerged from the work described earlier and which serves a next generation of efforts. The following examples expand on the above cases to include collaborative learning initiatives developed from the first author’s work within the Action Research Plus (AR+) Foundation and the second author’s work within The Artemis School for Women’s Sexual Sovereignty.

**1. Articulation of purpose and objectives** refers to the clarity of purpose with regard to intended knowledge creation through, and for, action in support of our collective thriving on this planet.

In the first and second cases we see a conjoining of knowledge of mind and heart (Belenky et al., 2008) or heart, hand, and reason (Bradbury and Torbert, 2016) that describes a developmental shift in the direction of mutual power. Mutual power implies not only care for our own thriving but for that of our partners and communities.

**2. Partnership and participation** refers to the extent to and means by which participative values are evident in the relational component of research, on a continuum from consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers, including multiple ways of knowing-for-action and room for explicit concern for questions of “whose knowledge counts?”

In both cases those involved are both participants and co-creators. The participants develop personal empowerment through the primacy of their first-person inquiry which leads to an expanded worldview alongside a deeper ability to recognize desires and feelings.

**3. Contribution to action research theory/practice** refers to the extent to which the work builds on, and/or creates explicit links with, and or contributes to a wider body of practice knowledge and or theory, that clearly contributes meaningful new action research knowledge and insights in the action research literature.

The type of relational inquiry described here has since been developed and implemented with others, in collaborative learning programs. The practice, called Relational Action Inquiry Research (RAIR), was developed as a way to teach/learn about how to better transfer the ownership of an inquiry from researcher to stakeholder in the field of action research. As a result, a dedicated program has since been developed by the ActionResearchPlus Foundation to support universities and think tanks who practice action research. One stakeholder-participant reflects, having learned about and begun to use some of the RAIR tools in her own endeavors:

I realize that in each of the two coLAB cohorts that I have joined, something big has happened for me. Each has led to something quite transformative. For example, my former [work] group has now been dissolved, helped a lot by coLAB conversations, and we are starting a renewed and refreshed artistic/social-justice exploration.

Another reflected also on the cultural diversity of global both and south practitioners working together amid their own power dynamics, a global south practitioner reflects:

I think that, coming from such diverse places, from such different contexts, naming issues of power and staying in conversation will allow us to complete a puzzle that never ends, but grows and expands. Understanding the role of shared facilitation and our concern for "caring" will allow for much more humane changes, also in policy making. What we learn in this coLAB will, yes or yes, generate a positive change in whatever we set out to do.

Additionally, the second author developed a program called The Artemis School for Women's Sexual Sovereignty, a year-long practitioner training program for women. The action-oriented curriculum of The Artemis School strove to create a learner-centered and self-actualizing vessel that interwove first-, second-, and third-person inquiry-practice. Issues of power in sexuality education are fraught in a culture that has primarily dealt with sexuality through shame and repression. Therefore, to create an integrative, healing approach to sex education it becomes essential for practitioners to reflexively uncover their own internalized issues of sex and power. That is to say that the work of becoming a sexuality educator requires one's ongoing development and reflexive participation (as shared in the illustrations above). The transformative nature of The Artemis School's praxis was anchored in the premise that creative/erotic energy, can be engaged as a sacred, transformative agent. Thus, the curriculum was designed to support what we understood to be pre-requisites for becoming a sexuality educator namely: 1. Inquiring into one's own sexual shadow and shame, 2. understanding one's own erotic development as a line of adult development, and 3. embodied practice in a group learning field.

**4. Methods and process** refers to the extent to which the action research process and related methods are clearly articulated and illustrated “show,” and not just “tell,” by including analysis of data along with the voices of participants in the research. Knowledge creation includes and transcends rationalist empiricism to acknowledge whole persons as relational beings.

In the illustrations above, journaling, dialogue and reflection, including somatic focusing were the key methods. The participants were empowered to explore with different relational formats, including inviting a third mutual friend to facilitate. In this we can say that classic methods of qualitative research are refreshed in a more relational approach, so that field notes (journaling) and interviews (reflective dialogue) became more deeply interactive and transformative.

The relational pedagogy is practice based. It’s successful when ideas are embodied and come alive in practice. For The Artemis School and AR+ Foundation this means intentionally weaving theory with experiential practice such that participant inquiry is deepened, and mirrored through, attention to intersubjectivity. This learning evokes multiple ways of knowing in any subject area. The breadth of ways of knowing can be understood through The Artemis School’s general tapestry of practices: Embodiment, Contemplative, Narrative, Expressive, Relational, and Analytic/Dialogic. There is time for silent, contemplation, for example with paint as a way to further metabolize learning (expressive). When comes time to learn about challenges (analytic), each participant’s, first-person accounts as well as a socio-cultural backdrop from which to work toward solutions is happening within a holistic/integrative model of knowledge, that some call metamodernist (Andersen, 2017; Rowson and Pascal, 2021).

**5. Actionability** refers to the extent to which the action research conveyed through the paper provides new ideas clear enough to guide action in response to need.

Participants in all cases developed experiments that enriched their own professional context from which there is a ripple out effect both formal (as publications and workshops) and informal. For example, a stakeholder-practitioner of The Artemis School delivered her learning in a program for youth:

It's affected my teaching. For example, when I spoke to an intimate group of high school-aged females, I spoke with more authority and lived experience about body autonomy, knowing our anatomy, and claiming what is ours. This led to a discussion about why this is important and the implications of this in our current society. It felt like I could speak to it from a place of body knowing rather than mental knowing.

**6. Reflexivity** refers to the extent to which self-location is acknowledged. By self-location we mean that authors take a personal, involved, and self-critical stance as reflected in clarity about their role in the action research process, clarity about the context in which the research takes place, and clarity about what led to their involvement in this research. That the knowledge creation integrates personal/reflexive, interpersonal/relational and impersonal knowledge, thereby growing those involved and empowering participants in social change to shape the world of their aspirations.

While other ART might highlight different choice points, reflexivity is an especially key choice point in the cases presented. Two of its signatures are turning to power dynamics and making self-discovery a prerequisite. Power, in the form of ‘power-within,’ then becomes available as a conscious choice in the pursuit of a more embodied, developmental path which includes deeper shadow work and radical self-responsibility for enacting ‘power-with’.

As noted above, self-discovery involves shadow work, i.e., making not quite conscious aspects of the self, more explicit and seeing how they are culturally shaped not so personal at all. When brought to conscious awareness, what one fears or denies, may become available and integrated with our intentions. We thereby embody clearer expressions of thinking and action – albeit likely with hiccups along the way, which provide more grist for learning.

In the second case above we see how initial reflection on the past by Hilary and Bill could become an ongoing, emergent, reflexive relationship as each party reflects then intentionally practices a more generous way of relating. Reflexivity spurs development of the individuals, the relationship, and in the work that each do individually.

**7. Significance** refers to the extent to which the insights are significant in content and process. By significant content we mean having meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology (i.e., generates both local and public knowledge). By process we mean involvement of stakeholders through strategies and methods that connect people and knowledges in ways that help them develop a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the transformation of the situations in which they practice.

This may be best expressed not through the authors but the voice of a representative stakeholder to show rather than tell what significance was experienced. Artemis school participant, Delia, shares how her learning wove between herself, interpersonal relationships, and the culture of her work:

I developed the ability to talk about myself and the inner working of my mind/body and the world using real language that resonated. I was able to help others find this language for themselves and feel heard/seen . . . I was also able to hone the capability of holding space for others as a facilitator and mentor, which has positively impacted my professional and personal life.

## Limitations

ARTful inquiry, as with any scientific and knowledge creating endeavor, concerns learning from and improving upon one’s experiments. Rather than providing a definitive expert answer to a manifest problem, action research as ART outlines a path of inquiry that connects outward work with inner work. ART also provides seven quality choice points by which to assess and reshape the value of the inquiry.

As action researchers for transformation (ARTists), we aim to work at our developmental edge and to discover what might be possible in our development together. In addition to highlighting

what is experienced by participants as valuable, these cases may also reveal what does not work or, at least, what can be improved upon in a next cycle of inquiry. From a conventional scientific standpoint, we recognize that replication or generalizations are not easy. But that is not the point of ART. The process is to be replicated, which means it will look different. An ongoing inquiry, and challenge, is how we might work more effectively across developmental difference to support every stakeholder to engage at their own developmental edge. Facilitating a context that is safe enough to allow discomfort is key and worth of its own lengthy treatise. We learn here that while development can be scaffolded, it cannot be forced. Development is a process with its own timing. Within a workshop setting participants might receive a conceptual map to help start the inquiry but the actual shift in action-logic may occur later after much personal experimentation. For this we need more learning spaces with sophistication about facilitation. This is not to suggest that relational action inquiry sometimes fails to go far enough and that some participants may become mired in reactivity (Bradbury, 2021), but that we work with an assumption – checked and reaffirmed – that consensual agreement is better than violent disagreement; and that mutual power-with creates more generative outcomes than unilateral power-over.

We recognize that we have offered a primarily binary formulation (unilateral egotistical versus relational collaborative) that deserves nuance. Here the work of Frimer and Walker's (2009) account of the development of moral character may help. They suggest a three-step sequence in which (1) early in development, in different contexts, children can be either self-interested or concerned with others; (2) over time, self-interest comes into conflict with concern for others; over time, the individual's moral self can develop in the direction of self-interest, concern for others, or it can undergo a transformation in which (c) self-interest and concern for other are coordinated and reconciled – I make it part of my interest to be concerned for you. The point here is at the early levels, the child is not entirely self-interested in the sense that there is access to (separate) care for others. One might suggest that something similar goes on in the development of power relations. One might seek dominance and power in some contexts but act out of care in others. Such a notion however complexifies the developmental model of power relations. We are pointing to the type of power that is problematic, especially when practiced well beyond childhood. Nonetheless this nuance allows us to know that we have innate capacity from the start, which can be developed. And there is always a need to continue the inquiry.

We keep with a broadminded vision of science as an inquiring temperament animated by an appetite for self-correction and, personal development. As such we hope that the selected interactions will be useful, or at least not too scary, for others' experiments in reflexivity and awareness of power relations. We even hope that the quoted material might have applicability beyond us. We have offered not a formula but a spirit of inquiry and some brushstrokes for how to proceed. The interested reader might consider their own engagement in the ageless work of cooperation, thus moving from a self-centered (either/or) worldview to a relational and, eventually, collaborative (both/and) worldview of relationship with others.

## **Conclusion: Developmental Relational Inquiry in Practicing as ARTists**

We have illustrated a methodology that responds to the increasing complexity of our postmodern world without being mired in deconstructive criticism. It offers a way to listen in new



and exciting ways to self (as inquirer) and other (the stakeholders or co-researchers). In this period of postmodern inquiry, there is now a proliferation of qualitative (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), and participative methods (Burns et al., 2021). Not all such approaches to methodology share the pragmatists' concern with making the world better; not all enable collaborative action as does participative action research. Our choice of methodology is determined by the purpose of the work. In this case namely a commitment to share/transfer an inquiry so as to liberate new lived praxis among stakeholders, i.e., using methods that engage increasing choice and flexibility in responsiveness to the call of the times; to (re)make the relational world with one another.

Our relational methodology does not conform to the requirements of the Scientific Method, whose power aims to describe not change reality. Our work is in the tradition of Pragmatism (Dewey, 1929; Addams, [1902] 2002, Habermas, 1987), informed by social construction (Berger and Luckman, 1968; Gergen, 2015) and standing on the shoulders of action researchers (Lewin, 1947; Bradbury and associates 2015; 2019). Action researching brings dynamism to the task of knowledge creation because we work with the *dialectical, or back and forth, movement between* 1) individual change agents and stakeholders needs; 2) personal experience and concepts; 3) experiment and reflection, and 4) external world with the internal world of the learners' emotions and intentions. This "both/and" dialectical learning scaffolds developmental growth for those involved. It invites us beyond the autonomous expert mind of "yes *or* no" thinking (what current school systems are designed to produce) to redefining; an embrace of complexity to collaboratively produce (*yes and*) a world worthy of our aspirations.

The power of action research transformations stems from its ability to bring the best of scientific temperament – a concern with self-correction and reflexivity – to intersubjective dialogue (and other sensemaking processes involving multiple perspectives). Its goal is creating and leveraging conditions for dialogue that increase consensual action for the collective good. We believe that the work can be replicated, albeit in different circumstances and with different actors, informed by the experiments illustrated above.

ARTists can transformatively grapple with the issues of power that keep the current unsustainable system in place. We have illustrated power dynamics among and between gender. The same dynamics are applicable when looking at power in ostensibly different contexts, e.g., in executive powers exercised in a democracy or within a household. Importantly, we suggest, the power between humans and the greater than human world of flora and fauna is also relevant. The latter is a world granted no power (with notable exceptions, such as in new laws of Ecuador and New Zealand that grant rights to nonhuman living systems such as rivers).

Regardless of where it's exercised, practicing consciously with mutually transforming power involves a shift from zero inquiry unilaterality to collaborative creativity. The good news, even for an anxious ego, is that there is even more power (as collective empowerment) beyond unenlightened self-interest, beyond tribalism and specism. It's a power that manifests the intention of co-creating a more beautiful world. It works by involving key stakeholders in linking our personal and interpersonal development to realize our intentions. As action researching ARTists, then, this kind of personal and interpersonal practice allows for development in inquiry so that transformation through big and small experiments can replace the structures that impede our better aspirations. Truth joins hands and hearts with beauty and goodness.

We find that few scholars practice with transparency around issues of reflexivity, beyond offering a litany of identities that labels the self who inquires. Knowing the labels does not, in itself, usher in transformative inquiry. In ART reflexivity is cultivated as a developmental praxis—helping to clarify where scholars/ARTists are with regard to our developmental reflexive edge. Knowledge co-created with stakeholders invites room at the table for other, typically silenced or marginalized, voices. Through our case studies we introduced how this kind of transformative, developmental praxis can support us in re-imagining relationships and social systems that hinge on unilateral power. Specifically, we suggest that ART offers a pathway forward for cultural creatives that is anchored in our day-to-day lived experiences (action) and forms a future with a new kind of relating and logic of power between us. An action orientation to knowledge creation, therefore, has major implications for how education and scholarship could be structured, and how communities learn together, whether about power or climate change, or within universities, or places of work. It echoes Kant’s Enlightenment call to “sapere aude” (“dare to know”) and beckons a reweaving of humanities and natural sciences, on a journey that integrates development of self, relationship, and community.

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