Empathetic validity in practitioner research

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of empathetic validity, that is, the potential of practitioner research in its processes and outcomes to transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that greater empathy and regard are created. The paper argues that practitioner research that is high in empathetic validity contributes to positive human relationships and, as such, is an important form of research in an age of increasing violence as well as stress and tension in the workplace. The paper makes a distinction between internal empathetic validity (that which changes the practitioner researcher and research beneficiaries) and external empathetic validity (that which influences audiences with whom the practitioner research is shared).

The argument draws upon three kinds of data: a range of emotional transformations I have experienced as a practitioner researcher myself in a current project; data from colleagues who have reported emotional transformation as a result of their practitioner research; and accounts from published literature. Both positive and negative instances are examined.

The paper concludes that there is enough evidence for the validity of this concept for it to warrant serious consideration by practitioner researchers and by the broader research community.

Introduction

Over the years, my main research interest has had two strands. First, I have been trying to understand the role of the emotional life in practitioner research (e.g. Dadds 1995). Second, I have tried to play a part in re-conceptualising the nature of validity in practitioner research (e.g., Dadds 1991, 2004). In pursing these interests, I have been moved and inspired by many fine examples of benevolent change from practitioner research projects that I have supported and encountered in my own experience and in the literature. An early years teacher, for example, saw more deeply into the emotional experiences of young children in the literacy hour (Hanke 2002), and started viewing her teaching through the child's eyes. The needs of patients with Alzheimer's disease were understood far better than ever before by trainee medics and lay people alike (Naidoo 2005). A teacher's respect for children with physical difficulties in the classroom was changed profoundly (Dadds 1995). Social justice practices in the classroom were enhanced through collaborative practitioner research (Griffiths 1995). These are but a few of a multitude of projects that have engaged my attention and admiration over the years – and I have come to see that they are connected in their success at bringing about positive emotional transformation whilst creating human empathy within the researcher and others beyond the research.

In this paper, therefore, I seek to weave these two strands of validity and emotionality in practitioner research into a more unified, coherent conceptualisation in order to explicate more fully what I mean by empathetic validity. The paper is somewhat exploratory: I would like to see it as an opportunity to open a discussion about the usefulness of this concept and to see if it helps

to draw to our notice an aspect of practitioner research to which we might wish to pay more attention. I have chosen an experiential methodology (Marshall 2001) that extracts data from my own practitioner research. I have also drawn from some associated literature. I have chosen material with which I have relatively close contact in order to optimise, along with my own experience, validity of the interpretations that underpin my argument.

Definition

By empathetic validity, I mean the potential of the research in its processes and outcomes to transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that more positive feelings are created between them in the form of greater empathy. Related to the growth of empathy is the enhancement of interpersonal understanding and compassion. Research that is high in empathetic validity contributes to positive human relationships and well-being. It brings about new personal and interpersonal understanding that touches and changes hearts as well as minds. The discussion will embrace associated positive emotions such as respect, compassion or regard.

I offer two dimensions. I distinguish between internal empathetic validity (that which changes the practitioner researcher and research participants) and external empathetic validity (that which influences audiences with whom the practitioner research is shared).

I take 'empathy' to refer to the human capacity to identify oneself with the feelings, experiences and perspectives of other people such that one tries genuinely to see and feel the world through their eyes, hearts and minds. In this sense, empathy enables people to be 'connected knowers' who 'learn through empathy' (Belenky et al. 1986, 115). Connected knowers 'learn to get out from behind their own eyes and use a different lens … the lens of another person' (ibid., 115). Empathy has two sides to the same coin. First, it may involve a psychological reaching out towards the other person and second, it may involve a psychological act of receiving the spirit of the other person into oneself (Belenky et al. 1986, 122). When we are seeking to empathise with others, therefore, we try to step inside their shoes and we also open our heart and mind to absorbing their reality into our own understanding. Empathy is the opposite of geocentricism, in which we are able only to see and understand the world in a monolithic way – as we ourselves see it.

Rogers (1961, 34) also claimed that empathy is a necessary aspect of acceptance of one person 'as a person of unconditional self-worth' by another. Such non-judgmental acceptance is, he claimed, essential for an authentic, respectful relationship to develop between two people, a relationship in which a person can grow. This, as Rogers' work suggested, has profound implications, in particular, for the teacher–learner relationship and for healthy relationships more broadly. Rogers also saw empathy as being fundamental to healing relationships. Empathy can move us to engage more kindly and compassionately with others and to act positively on their behalf. It is the human quality that binds us together. Empathy is, as Boyatzis and McKee (2005, 178) suggest, what 'enables us to connect with people. It helps us get things done'.

In turning to the concept of validity, we step into complex territory where 'the problem of validity bedevils most researchers' (Simons 1985, 25). We know that validity has, in the past, been concerned for some primarily with truth criteria (Altrichter 1986; House 1980), which postpositivist views of knowledge and new approaches to research have problematised (Ford 1975; Guba 1990). In this new era, we may need to support the idea of 'validity pluralism' (Altrichter 1986). In articulating alternative approaches to validity in evaluation, for example, House abandoned a narrow view of validity as 'prediction', which he saw as 'the traditional view of validity' (House 1980, 249), choosing, instead, to talk of the qualities of 'worthwhileness', of which he felt there were many. Simons, too,

drew attention to validity diversity, pointing out that evaluators and researchers have conceptualised validity in many ways. She claimed that nature, purposes and audiences are all relevant determinants, moving the concept beyond the monolithic criterion of 'truth'. In exploring validity, we need to consider relevance, appropriateness and useability (Simons 1985).

To complicate matters, 'quality' and 'validity' are often used as synonymous concepts in theoretical debates about action research (see, for example, Bradbury and Reason 2001; Feldman 2007), usually accompanied by a search for criteria frameworks to guide action researchers and those in need of judging. Most accept, however, that articulating definitive criteria may be 'to fall into (a) totalizing and essentialist trap' since 'each piece of inquiry/practice is its own work of art, articulating its own standards' (Bradbury and Reason 2001, 454). Criteria should not become 'a validation straightjacket, squeezing the breath from development and innovation … to the point where individuality, divergence, creativity and risk taking are crushed' (Dadds 1995, 114). Rather, there seems to be a general desire to seek commonly agreed validity criteria, whilst keeping an open mind and door for new possibilities to enter. So, it is through this door that I shall try to pass.

And, having looked on this somewhat vexing field, I decided that House's definition has become a favourite of mine in its succinctness and clarity. So, I shall adopt it here. He looks on validity as 'worthiness of being recognised' (House 1980, 240).

Research that has empathetic validity and that can bring about these differences of connectedness, growth and healing in human relationships, therefore, has a special contribution to make wherever it takes place – classrooms, hospital wards, communities, organisations, and so on. It is, in these terms alone, worthy of being recognised by researchers and other users alike.

Validity and quality in practitioner research

When set against recent literature in the UK that explores validity and quality criteria in research, the phenomenon of human empathy does not feature. Onacea and Furlong's major study (2004, 2005), for example, whilst seeking to be comprehensive in offering a framework for applied, practice-based and practitioner research, does not speak explicitly about the growth of affect that research is capable of generating. Their fourfold criteria come closest to it in identifying 'capacity building and value for people' (Onacea and Furlong 2004, 16). Here, they recognise the potential of practice-based research 'to promote personal enhancement through participation in the process of the research, as well as the enhancement of implicit knowledge' (ibid., 16). They also acknowledge practitioner research to be 'a potent form of professional development' (ibid., 16), acknowledging that it is a methodology for change. They pose a question about 'who gets changed by the research process, and what is the nature of such changes?'. These are clear acknowledgements of the transformative potential of practice-based research. Yet the changes that they identify within this major criterion in their framework do not reach beyond the cognitive, summed up in the claim that 'Practice-based research can stimulate the practitioners into re-conceptualising their knowing how' (ibid., 16). There is no reference to the affective impact, the links between growth of mind and growth of feeling, or the phenomenon of human connectedness.

Perhaps the most extensive review of quality criteria and validity in practitioner research specifically comes from Zeichner and Noffke (2001). This work surveys the field of theorists who have attempted to define and refashion quality criteria for new paradigm research, practitioner research in particular. From this work, we see that a wide variety of criteria has been offered in the past, that many of these lists and frameworks overlap with some commonality, and that there is general agreement that paradigm-specific criteria are needed. Key emphases seem to lie in valuing

knowledge developments, democratic processes, practitioner reflection and practical changes. In all this surveyed work, however, there seems to be no explicit debate about the potential of practitioner research to bring about significant affective transformations in human relationships. Having said this, Zeichner himself, in earlier work (1993, 203), expressed a value position for action research that assumes affective transformation: 'I am … committed to the joining of action research with the larger issue of building more humane and compassionate societies'.

Nevertheless, we might conclude from these two key studies that there is little in the literature that enables us to understand the potentially high level of emotional relevance that practitioner research offers. I want to propose, therefore, that we may need to name empathetic validity explicitly, lest we overlook its significant part in educational research generally, and practitioner research in particular.

The evidence: internal empathetic validity

Now, I will share some of the substance underpinning the concept. The many examples and sources of evidence I have encountered over the years are rooted in my own experience as a practitioner researcher, as a practitioner research facilitator and in the published work of others. From this wide resource, I will draw three examples that illustrate empathetic validity in action. The first comes from Sandra Hollingsworth's work (1994). This study offers a range of evidence of cognitive and affective transformations experienced by a group of teacher researchers examining aspects of the literacy provision offered to children in their care. Their practitioner research projects brought about a variety of changes to their understanding of curricular, teaching and learning processes, the children and themselves. One instance in particular speaks volumes for the significant affective changes some experienced, changes that brought them closer to the beneficiaries of their action research projects. Mary taught elementary age children who lived in severely socially disadvantaged circumstances: 'vandalism was a regular occurrence … one quarter of her children's parents were jailed … conflict was part of everyday life' (Hollingsworth 1994, 24). Mary told of one encounter with the grandmother of one of her pupils that seems to have challenged her on all levels and completely changed her views of the assessment and reporting practices that were being used by the school. She told how the grandmother:

…took righteous exception to the 'failing marks' I reported for her granddaughter. She said, 'What does this say about my child – that she's a moron, she's stupid and slow? Does it say that I read to her every night? Does it say that her mother's in jail and her daddy died last year? Does it tell you that she's getting her life together, slowly? Does it say that she's learning songs for Sunday school? Does it say she wants to be a doctor? What does this piece of paper say about my baby? I don't want it near her. She needs good things. She's had enough in her life telling her that she's no good. She doesn't need this and I won't have it. If your school can't come up with better ways to show what my child can really do, then I refuse to sign a piece of paper that says my child is no good. (Hollingsworth 1994, 29)

The data generated from this encounter, discussed in the collaborative context of the practitioner research group, became a focus of profound analysis and reflection. The highly emotive encounter caused Mary to understand the need for 'accepting parents' alternative values instead of demanding that parents comply with those of the school'. As a result, she began 'to develop more personally responsive strategies' (29). Essential to Mary's professional transformation was the need to find 'caring and empathetic spaces to discuss and reflect upon competing values' (29), spaces in which she could, effectively, imagine being in the others' shoes, seeing the world through their eyes and life experiences. This single experience, as data, therefore, seems to have brought new levels of

empathetic validity to Mary's project and transformed not only her thoughts and feelings but also her interpersonal and professional practices.

The second illustrative example comes from Susan's Hart's work, in which she researched collaboratively with a group of teachers working in multilingual settings (Hart 2000). Susan's book is rich in project material that validates practitioner research as a process with potential for profound intellectual and affective transformation for teachers, transformations that brought benefit to children who were struggling to make sense of their experiences through an unfamiliar language. Using Susan's suggested five-aspect framework for examining and reinterpreting their judgements about children, teachers reported radical shifts, of a positive nature, in their thinking. Negative judgements of children, based on monolithic, adult-centred views of problems, were transformed in the light of new knowledge and empathetic engagement with the world of the classroom as the child might see it.

In one example, a teacher, Deb, (Hart 2000, 48) spoke of her frustration at a child who seemed not to obey her instruction, during a PE lesson, to 'Stop and sit up'. The child continued to stand, and then bent halfway down only to stand up and look confused. Deb tried to put aside her frustration at the lesson being held up and started to think through what the language problem might be for a child for whom English was not his first language. Of course, she could see that 'up' meant to the child that he should stand, just as 'down' meant that he should sit. 'Sit up' were contradictory words to the child. No wonder that he hovered and looked confused. On reflection, Deb could see not only the difficulties her language presented to the child, but the efforts classroom language demanded of a child trying to make sense of its complexities in a foreign tongue. After the event, Deb told how 'The incident served to heighten both her awareness of the complexities confronting learners new to English that are inherent in such everyday linguistic routines, and her appreciation of the child's efforts and accomplishments' (ibid., 48). The project was full of small, but very significant, encounters such as these. When teachers in the project were able to transform their thinking in this way, through the structured practitioner research process central to the project, they also transformed negative feelings towards children. Susan Hart claims that:

Trying to move out of our own frames of reference and view the situation through the child's eyes can help us to see connections that would not otherwise have been visible and to find alternative ways of interpreting the meaning of the child's activity that we might otherwise have overlooked. (Hart 2000, 14)

Consequently, children can be, and were, better served by teachers whose empathy and understanding were enhanced by structured self-study practitioner research.

I draw the third example from my own experience within a collaborative action research project, Emotional intelligence in the workplace, in which I have been participating with six colleagues. In this, we have been researching our own workplace practices in Higher Education, usually with a critical incident analysis method, to understand our own emotional practices better and, hopefully, to develop them in the light of new self-knowledge. The critical incidents usually focused on negative experiences and encounters with colleagues and students – conflict, aggression, disappointment, injustice, confrontation. We researched how we experienced these and how we tried to learn about our ways of dealing with them.

Needless to say, this has been a high-risk and highly challenging confrontation of self with self under the supportive gaze of critical friends. Colleagues on this project have talked about multifaceted emotional transformations. There have been many experiences of negative workplace emotions towards others being transformed, often through a process of hard emotional labour, into more

compassionate feelings. Critical incident analysis has shown the nature of some of these emotional transformations: how they happen, in what circumstances, and to what effect.

In my own archive of critical incidents, for example, are several recordings of situations that I have been unable to handle as well as I would have liked because my negative emotions towards another have initially disabled successful interpersonal communication. The research has shown that, usually, my ego perspective has been blocking my capacity to decentre and imagine the situation from the other's perspective and experience. By analysing and interpreting the incidents collaboratively with critical friends in the research group, and by developing practices that do the emotional work of self-transformation, I have found ways of moving from these spaces in which I am inhabited by negative feelings of anger, frustration, betrayal, disappointment, to spaces of greater relative calm and compassionate understanding of the other(s) in the incidents. My brain undergoes what Goleman (1998, 4) calls 'neural re-setting'. The research has shown that, in these more compassionate spaces, problems can be worked through more effectively with the others involved in the incidents.

Reflections on internal empathetic validity examples

In all three illustrative cases, we can see evidence of some of the qualities of empathy. In each case, the practitioner researcher became a more 'connected knower', in Belenky's terms (1986), to the other or others in the situation. This seemed to have been achieved by the researchers decentring, either through conscious design or through shock, from their own perspectives in order to research the responses, experience or perspective of the other and take that into their understanding. They were able 'to get out from behind their own eyes and use a different lens' (ibid., 47), absorbing the new perspective they encountered into their old world view and then moving to a place of new resolution. In this process, their interpersonal frames of reference were extended from self to others as they engaged seriously with others' realities. When this happened, the researchers seemed better able to engage more kindly and compassionately with others, as Rogers suggested. This positive change of emotions in turn led to improved action by the researcher on behalf of the other or others, thus offering evidence, in Boyatizis and McKee's terms, that empathy 'helps us get things done' (2005, 11).

There is, it seems, an identifiable and progressive journey that professional reflection, through practitioner research, generates, moving from the emotional changes that reflection can bring about, the new understanding and perspectives that follow and the improved professional actions that emerge. The links between new knowing, new feeling and new action are strong; even, we might suggest, inevitable. In the cases cited, we cannot understand the cognitive and practical outcomes of practitioner research without understanding the emotional. Where practical outcomes were positive, these were founded on positive transformation of emotions in the direction of improved empathy. Empathy was, in turn, crucial to the new benign actions, improved interpersonal understanding and enhanced relationships. These transformations led to the learning through empathy, about self and others, of which Rogers spoke.

It is also worth noting that a critical collaborative research group offered a context, in all three cases, for the analysis of experience that led to transformation of perspectives, understanding and feelings. The learning through empathy grew from these social structures embedded in the research methodology.

The evidence: external empathetic validity

It is probably the case that certain methodological approaches such as narrative, anecdote, drama and video recording are more likely to touch and transform emotions, and therefore enhance empathetic validity, than more detached approaches that keep people apart and disengaged, such as quantitative methods, clinical interview or questionnaire. This may be the case during the processes of research, and is also likely to be so at the point of sharing and dissemination. On the issue of narrative in research process and reporting, for example, Clough (2002, 8) suggests that this approach allows in-depth penetration into life in a way that more traditional methods do not, that 'it opens up to its audiences a deeper view of life in familiar contexts'. A story approach, be it adopted as method or report, can reveal what more detached approaches cannot access, providing 'a means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, are uncovered' (8).

Of two illustrative examples I now offer, a project I undertook with Susan Hart (Dadds and Hart 2001) is especially relevant. The research drew together practitioner researchers who chose consciously to use innovative methods of doing and reporting their research. Some of these researchers chose differently in order to optimise their readers' empathy for the purposes of deeper understanding. Jo Geraci, for example, adopted a narrative enquiry approach in his research about children with autism. The experience of engaging in the children's life stories moved him irrevocably, such that he took a change of direction in his career in order to work with children with learning disabilities, including autism (Dadds and Hart 2001, 67). Further, Jo 'came to care so much for the people with whom he had worked (during his research) that he sought a mode of representation that would be capable of engaging his audience, along with him, in understanding, and identifying with, people with autism' (ibid., 66). Jo could not reconcile traditional forms of reporting with his empathetic intention. Such traditional forms, he felt, 'suck the life out of the research… [and] eliminate the reader from responding to the work' (67). He deliberately chose a narrative approach 'that would engage the reader emotionally' (67).

I have used Jo's narrative research report for teaching purposes with other practitioner researchers. Some of their reader responses have, indeed, validated Jo's empathetic intentions, for the text has had a powerful influence on many others. One primary teacher, for example, reported being so moved and enlightened by Jo's work that she offered the text to her classroom learning assistant. Resistant at first, the classroom assistant took the text home and reported staying up until two o'clock in the morning to finish it, as, she claimed, it drew her in, both mind and heart, to the experiences of autistic people. She learned from it and empathised, albeit vicariously, as a result.

My second illustration introduces Marian Naidoo's doctoral thesis (2005), a fine example of practitioner research that is rich in both internal and external empathetic validity. Marian drew upon video-recorded exchanges with Alzheimer's patients to increase her own understanding about their communication and to develop interpersonal empathy with those close to them. Some of this included, for example, live video footage of an elderly woman with Alzheimer's relating to her husband, a loving companion (all ethically negotiated and agreed). The video material brings the viewer close to the realities of the disease and to the interpersonal circumstances that are affected. There is also video material, for example, of a dramatised, but very believable, scene between an aging patient and her doctor, the patient being unknowingly in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

All of this narrative, visual material, as research data, was drawn upon as illustrative text for Marian's formal research report. Beyond this presented text, Marian also used the material for educational and training purposes with communities of professionals and policymakers in the field in order to develop their understanding of, and empathy towards, Alzheimer's patients. The video data, therefore, served multiple purposes and affected empathy and understanding in different

contexts, as Marian evidences. In this sense, the work was rich in both internal and external empathetic validity, video material being a rich resource for deepening and positively influencing many people's understandings and feelings.

Reflections on external empathetic validity examples

In these two cases, there is evidence of both the narrative research process and narrative textual outcomes leading to deeper connected knowing for the researchers and for many beyond the research. The internal narrative methodologies brought the practitioner researchers closer to, and deeper into, the lived realities of the research participants, changing their understanding of autism and Alzheimer's disease. This generated new empathy for, and identification with, others and enhanced the respect, regard and compassion of the researcher towards those for whom they were researching.

As this empathy deepened, it brought a new motivation from both practitioner researchers to use their research for the wider benefit of those with autism and Alzheimer's disease. They wanted to offer audiences the chance to know autism and Alzheimer's as they had come to know them. To this end, Jo and Marian gave serious thought to the text types that might best serve these ends. They both adopted narrative texts that enabled them to convey this deeper view of life, of which Clough (2002) speaks, texts that enhanced the possibility of informed empathy emerging for the audiences.

In these processes of doing and reporting the research, therefore, we see yet again the almost inevitable connection between growth of knowledge, understanding, empathy and consequent action. In these two cases, however, the growth of empathy spilled over into a wider world beyond the boundaries of the initial research field. The carefully chosen forms of reporting extended the field of impact of the research.

We can see, therefore, how, by their very nature, such narrative methods of doing and reporting research that connect people to people through words, audio images or visual images, have the potential to bring us closer to each other and, therefore, provide richer opportunities for growth of human understanding, empathy and action. Text types that allow the researcher to see into human minds, hearts and experiences of those represented in the research thus have a head start in empathetic validity.1

Lest we mistake empathetically intelligent texts with straight persuasive writing, we need to acknowledge the necessary engagement of the cognitive with the affective in practitioner research. Empathetically valid texts do not set out to move the readers' emotions in a superficial, sentimental way – to colonise emotions in mindlessness. Rather, they seek to share clear arguments from the research – to offer epistemologically valid texts (Dadds 1991), but in such a way that knowledge is also revealed about the emotional dimensions and depths of the human experience upon which the research focuses. Affective 'knowing' is symbiotically linked to cognitive knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). Data, analysis, biases, subjectivities and processes will be transparent, as in other forms of research. So, too, will be the affective, human dimensions of the project, for an epistemology that does not make the affective basis of knowledge transparent is lacking in authenticity (Roberts 1981). Persuasive writing, on the other hand, usually seeks to coax the reader to a particular position in a comparatively uncritical way. At its worst, persuasion can sweep people into highly emotive acts that have little critical basis, as dictators and advertisers know all too well. Empathetically valid texts are, by contrast, scholarly affairs.

Of course, text type alone will not determine whether or not a shared research project will engage audiences empathetically. No text has a single reading. Meaning and response are created in the space where reader meets text – and we all read differently from each other. So, empathetic outcomes from a project reported in whatever form are not guaranteed, even though the researcher may have empathetic intentions when choosing text types mindfully. Suffice it to say that the researcher can make emotionally intelligent choices, with the conscious intention of engaging audiences empathetically in the world of the research. Where practitioner researchers aspire to make a positive difference to others' lives with their research, making such choices could be seen to be an essential part of empathetically intelligent methodology. One sad paradox lies, however, in the fact that these forms of image-based research may be viewed with some scepticism by the wider research community, that they have 'a disproportionately low status' (Prosser 1998, 108). Yet these forms may be the very ones that optimise the chances of research having high impact and, therefore, making a difference to people's lives.

Seeking negative instances

In my exploration, I have been looking consciously for negative instances in order to ask critical questions about the potential influence of my own biases and subjectivity in exploring empathetic validity.

I sought negative instances, first, in my own experiences, though over the past 26 years these have been few and far between. I also considered accounts in some relevant literature. By 'negative' instances, I mean those occasions and experiences within practitioner research that have had a harmful influence on the empathetic disposition of the researcher or others associated with the research; where regard, respect and empathy in relationships have been affected adversely.

I can cite only one example from my own experience of negative internal empathetic validity – that is, a case in which doing a project has left the practitioner researcher with bad, negative feelings towards herself and the people of the research (Dadds 1993). The teacher undertook a practitioner research study in a situation in which relationships between herself and a colleague were strained because of different philosophical outlooks as well as by something of a personality clash. The teacher's hope was that better understanding would develop as the research drew them together into deeper exchange of ideas about practice. This, she hoped, would improve the situation. In the event, the research process had the opposite effect. Differences became even more pronounced and this caused an even greater strain on the relationship, strain that the two of them were unable to dissolve. The escalation of the problem left the practitioner researcher feeling bad towards herself and even more negative towards her colleague than before. These negative emotions towards herself were overcome only some long time after the completed project was laid aside. They were rekindled when I unwittingly engaged in discussions with her, two years later, about the project as part of my own research (Dadds 1993), for she had not shared her bad experiences with me until that point.

There were two key lessons in all of this. The first was about the need to understand carefully the emotional climate in which one situates a project. A toxic climate might not be readily healed by a small-scale study. Indeed, it might be made more controversial. The second lesson teaches that we are entering into others' emotional worlds when we invite them into our research to share information about their experiences, as I had done by inviting the teacher to participate in an interview. This, too, might be far from a positive encounter for the invited participant. We may be running the risk of reigniting unhelpful and unwanted personal histories.

Whilst the latter is the only case I am able to cite of negative internal validity, I also offer two examples of projects that had negative consequences for relationships outside the focus and content of the project. In the first case, a research project generated new and dysfunctional institutional politics in a secondary school (James and Ebbutt 1981). The teacher researchers were members of a nationally funded project, but they were only a small group within a large school. This created a research subculture – some might say, élite. Some teachers outside this subculture, and therefore outside the research, felt threatened by a process of enquiry that focused on pupils' perspectives, generating information and knowledge of which they were not part. This caused suspicion and some hostility, an outcome that is probably replicated in many institutional contexts where there is only partial staff engagement in the research process.

In another case, a marriage breakdown was expedited as a result of the new sense of 'self' that the practitioner researcher experienced during her self-study (Dadds 1995, 5). Jo began to find new dimensions in herself through self-study that led to fairly rapid growth and selfexpression. This propelled her into a passionate love affair and the permanent breakdown of a marriage that had, up to this point, seemed stable and secure. High levels of emotional turbulence therefore took their toll on her and her husband.

Thus, these negative instances show clearly that emotional transformation in and beyond practitioner research projects is a complex and ambiguous matter. Practitioner research is not a panacea for generating 'right' relationships, though there is an extremely strong balance in favour of positive instances in my own experience, as well as in the literature. Nevertheless, no universal claim is being made here for the positive emotional and spiritual benefits of doing and sharing practitioner research. Institutional and interpersonal politics can complicate what might otherwise be more productive human transformation.

Indeed, our experiences on the project Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace bear witness to the often turbulent and rocky journey from our negative to more positive dispositions towards others, journeys that are often made more arduous by the pressures and problems surrounding the critical incidents. Reaching a state of compassionate understanding, kindness and respect in the most challenging of situations has often taken a good deal of time, and there have been pitfalls on the way caused by forces external, as well as internal, to the project. Nor is there a guarantee that when we arrive where we want to be, our spirits and good practices will be sustained. Often, we have found ourselves home and dry in a compassionate space, only to be dislodged from it when a further harsh critical incident blows in from a new crisis. Good relationships, once achieved through empathetically productive research, can easily be lost in the face of more destructive circumstances.

Why do we need this concept?

The concept of empathetic validity is relevant for understanding that practitioner research can make a welcome difference to the way people feel and act towards one another. Of course, there are exceptions; but in an age of increasing national and global violence, as well as stress and tension in the workplace, practitioner research can, if better understood in its processes, contribute to developing empathetic understanding, kindness, respect and compassion. As such it can, in its small way, counteract human negativity on a localised or wider scale.

Also, it hardly needs stating that positive, healthy relationships underpin, indeed are at the heart of, good education, good nursing, good management, good community work, successful family life, and so on. Indeed, new approaches to management in business and industry are foregrounding compassion and empathy as essential to organisational success and survival (Boyatzis and McKee

2005). So, empathetically strong practitioner research that can contribute to the growth of more positive human relationships has a crucial part to play. It must not be overlooked or sidelined as a less important form of research. Educational research in England has been under scrutiny and critique for many years now, with raised expectations that it will make a difference and bring about good change (Whitty 2006). A national research portfolio that minimises both the status and funding of practitioner research is neglectful, wasteful and unjust.

Also, the traditional reverence for neutrality, objectivity and detachment may be out of place in forms of research that seek, or manage, to enhance human relationships. Distance from the people for whom the research is being conducted can be seen, in this light, as dysfunctional, even dangerous. Beresford (2006, 166) argues, for example, that when 'values associated with research and the development of knowledge about people and how they live prioritise distance and separation from the subject under consideration, it raises major concerns for the people who are the subject of such research'. He also suggests that research users are now 'beginning to challenge this assumption that the greater the distance between direct experience and its interpretation, the more reliable that interpretation' (167). Rather, he hypothesises that 'the shorter the distance there is between direct experience and its interpretation … then the less distorted, inaccurate and damaging the resulting knowledge is likely to be' (167). Thus, closing the gap of communication between the researcher and the people of the research is likely to benefit knowledge validity, as well as benefiting the participants.

This is not to suggest that practitioner researchers should let emotions develop in a cognitively uninformed way. The affairs of the head are a necessary complement to the affairs of the heart in creation of new knowledge and morally informed practical changes. A certain detachment of a Buddhist nature can be extremely helpful in the reflective process, where the researcher develops an internal observing eye in self-study – the self observing, and reflecting on, the self. But this kind of detachment is not a cold, unfeeling detachment. It is a form of detachment allowing clear thinking that can lead to more considered and deeper human action (Nhat Hanh 2001).

Final thoughts

I am not claiming that practitioner research is the only methodological approach with the potential for enhancing positive human, interpersonal attitudes and emotions. It is simply the case that practitioner research is the field of experience from which this conceptualisation has arisen for me, and in which it is grounded. This argument may, of course, hold good in other fields.

Also, one might argue that this evidence alone, in its selectivity, is not enough to make a robust case for adopting empathetic validity as a workable concept for acclaiming the value of practitioner research. Yet I would like to suggest that there is enough here to cause us to take the concept seriously, acknowledging the part that practitioner research can play in our nation's research portfolio of methodologies that make a benign difference in these troubled, turbulent times. The selected illustrative examples suggest that positive emotional transformation that enhances relationships can be a vital dimension of some, but not necessarily all, practitioner research. As such, the notion of empathetic validity may deserve further exploration. The evidence certainly suggests that, on this count of empathy alone, practitioner research has, in House's terms (1980), qualities that are 'worthy of being recognised'.

Notes

1. Jack Whitehead's work is relevant here and links to a tradition developed and explored by others (e.g. Prosser 1998; Walker 1985). For many years, he has been advancing the use of multi-visual, multiaudio forms of research presentation in practitioner research. In particular, he has developed video recording as a form of data-gathering and -reporting that takes the audience deeply into the lived experience of the research participants. Our attention is guided to several examples on the website that show his, and others', work in action (www.bath.ac.uk/∼edsajw).

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