

**WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF GENDER, WORK PRACTICES  
AND EDUCATION LEADERSHIP: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Ceinwyn Elleway<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** In this article I position the use of co-operative inquiry as a participatory research method which can bring together Northern and Southern research and theory spaces for the purpose of shared knowledge production. This method is set within a group process that engages in an action-reflection-action research cycle. The principle feature of this method is the co-researcher and co-subject status of all group members where the inquiry process explores an area of shared interest among the co-inquirers. The shared area of interest amongst the inquiry groups is the intersection of gender, work practices and leadership.

This inquiry is set in the context of a PhD student from an Australian university undertaking the research component of their PhD in Vietnam, with the support of an Australian Government, Endeavour scholarship. I am hosted by the National Academy of Education Management which comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam. The inquiry process is being carried out across two groups; one group comprises academic and professional staff from the National Academy of Education Management, and the other group comprises former Australian Awards scholarship recipients who work across a range of education institutions and NGOs in Hanoi. All co-inquirers are women.

**Keywords:** *Women, leadership, reflection, challenges.*

## **1. Context and purpose for research method**

As a higher education worker, I increasingly find my work orientated toward the international space. The internationalisation of education continues to grow in focus for the higher education sector in Northern (Dados & Connell, 2012) countries such as Australia, the U.S and U.K (Knight, 2013; Welch, 2012). As I travel and work across Asia, I see an appetite for collaboration across Northern and Southern contexts. As these collaborations are developed it is important that the methods and processes that are used for engagement allow for all voices to be heard and valued equally. However, Northern theory continues to dominate knowledge production with very little evidence of Northern scholarship engagement with Southern theory (Connell, 2018; Welch, 2010). I am interested in contributing to this scholarship engagement in a way that values the contribution to and process of knowledge production equally across the North and South. Connell (2007) makes clear that, "methods for cooperative intellectual work across regions and across traditions of thought are not yet well established" (p. 232).

The internationalisation of education takes many forms (Taylor, 2015) and as a researcher and educator, I participate in at least three of these forms; offshore teaching via a dual program,

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<sup>1</sup>Lecturer Education Leadership and Management;

Lecturer Curriculum Specialisation;

College of Education, Psychology & Social Work;

e-mail: [ceinwyn.elleway@flinders.edu.au](mailto:ceinwyn.elleway@flinders.edu.au).

onshore teaching of international students and, more recently, researching in a foreign context. My initial motivation in employing a research method that brought North and South together was my onshore teaching of international students. In June 2018, there were 565,975 international students in Australia with fifty percent of these students in the higher education sector (Department of Education and Training, 2018). In taking a Northern epistemological standpoint, teaching inside these institutions largely excludes voices from the South (Cousin, 2011; Devos, 2003; Patel, 2013). Internationalising the curriculum or, as Connell(2018) more aptly refers to it, decolonising the curriculum, became a focus of my teaching practice in response to the international diversity in my higher education classroom. While this interest began with onshore teaching of international students it soon became a focus of my offshore teaching as well; my concern with delivering de-contextualised curriculum growing. I decided to respond to Connell's (2018) call to rethink our conceptual approaches to international curriculum, not just its content. My response to this call led me beyond the boundaries of the classroom to the international research space.

It is within this space that the primary purpose of my research, which is to open a global dialogic space through which ways of sharing knowing and experiences can contribute to sociological understandings, will be conducted. The declaration of this intent is inspired by the work of Connell (2007, 2014, 2015; 2012) and aspires to show that the production of knowledges and understandings from the global South may enhance, contribute to or even replace commonly held, and largely unchallenged Northern sociological understandings. To explore the possibilities held in this purpose I chose to use co-operative inquiry as my method. The co-operative inquiry method offers possibilities for the dialogic space to be opened through establishing a participatory inquiry based on the principle that all participants are both co-researchers and co-subjects(Heron & Reason, 2002).

In honouring Connell's(2015) proposition that a 'solidarity-based epistemology' where theory from all contexts can contribute to an epistemology that neither favours nor essentialises particular contributors, it was vital to identify a method that would enable all inquiry members, including the initiating researcher to hold an equal place in the research process. Specifically, she describes this epistemology as engendering a "...context of respect for intellectual traditions from the global periphery"(Connell, 2007, p. viii). In attending to Connell's proposition, it is my intention to gather a rich mosaic of lived experience that can develop a shared but not essentialised notion of the intersection between gender, work practices and leadership. The perception that Northern epistemologies and their sociological theories provide causal reasoning for all societies and cultures is one that needs to be challenged (Connell, 2007). The valuing of new ways of knowing lies in the appreciating of the cultural and historical contexts out of which they arise, and the methodologies that give voice to them (Weinberg, 2014). Participatory research and co-operative inquiry, in particular, offer a method where research is done with people not on people (Heron & Reason, 2002).

## **2. Positioning the researcher**

In a co-operative inquiry there are two concurrent areas of focus; the process of the inquiry itself, and the inquiry into a shared area of interest to the inquiry group. As an initiating researcher I brought to the inquiry groups, an interest in the intersection of gender, work practices and leadership. The area of gender and leadership has held personal significance for me. As a consequence of my work and study in leadership, I have made a commitment to contribute to the progression of gender equity in leadership. I have listened to the leadership experiences of women from diverse contexts, and I realised that there were many intersections in our experiences of organisations and leadership. Specifically, through my higher education teaching, I have seen a keen interest in gender and leadership from my international students. However, a paucity of

literature from the contexts of my students in the area of gender and leadership has, on many occasions, thwarted their endeavours to validate Southern perspectives in their study. By using co-operative inquiry to co-research with women from another context into our shared, lived experiences of the intersection of gender, work practices and leadership, I hope to initiate a democratising of the processes of knowledge sharing, and to endeavour not to privilege Northern theory in this pursuit. The co-operative inquiry method offers an opportunity to be true to this endeavour.

### **3. Co-operative inquiry design**

Co-operative inquiry is a participatory inquiry process that enables two or more people to inquire into any aspect of the human condition as co-researchers and co-subjects (Heron & Reason, 2002). The approach uses a reflection-action-reflection research cycle which repeats this cycle a number of times. Heron's (1996) seminal text on co-operative inquiry, *Co-operative inquiry: research into the human condition*, is the most comprehensive text on the process of conducting a co-operative inquiry. Principally, it is this text that has been used to guide the design of my study, with a range of other co-operative inquiries, particularly in the area of gender, used to support the use of this inquiry process (Maguire, 2002; McArdle, 2002; Nedungat, 2015). This inquiry process complements the relational constructionist research perspective of this thesis through its attention to the relational processes that will be the focus of the inquiry inside organisations, relating to gender, and through the relational processes that play out between the co-researchers, and co-subjects during the inquiry phases.

The design of the inquiry is one that is done by all co-inquirers. There are choices and possibilities within the inquiry process that will define the parameters of the inquiry (Reason, 2006); some of these choices will be made by me, as the initiating researcher, and some will be made by the co-researchers inside the inquiry process. These choices are related to the design of the inquiry process and are dictated by the position of the initiating researcher, the roles of the participants, and particular aspects of the design process that would best facilitate the research focus and context. In selecting a method where the design of the inquiry is done by all co-inquirers, it is hoped that the inquiry process will contribute to the shaping of a, 'participatory world view' (Hosking, n.d; Meacham, 2011; Reason, 1998b); one that is relational and democratic in its pursuit of knowledge production. In selecting co-operative inquiry as the research process, I have identified a method that most closely adheres to what I see as the principles of participatory research (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2002; Reason, 1998a) and contributing to the growth of a participatory world view movement. The inquiry process achieves this through, as far as is possible, the democratisation of method and content (Heron, 1996).

### **4. Co-operative inquiry groups**

I have initiated two inquiry groups in Hanoi, Vietnam. The process of coming to Vietnam and establishing these inquiry groups provides great insight into the complexities of cross-cultural collaboration. The two inquiry groups were both established in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam which is located in the North of the country. One of the inquiry groups includes women who were recipients of Australia Awards (AA) scholarships and had completed masters or PhD qualifications at an Australian university. My initial invite to co-inquirers had gone out through the Australia Awards alumni network in Vietnam. There were two reasons for using this network; it was a network that I had access to which included women, many of whom would be working in organisations in professional capacities. The second reason was that, given the complexity of the method in terms of requiring equal input from the co-researchers and co-subjects, and being a first time inquirer (McArdle, 2002), I wanted to invite women who would have some understanding of research processes. My initial invitation suggested that working in the education sector would be

preferable but I accepted co-inquirers from other sectors such as NGOs based on their research experience through their post graduate study.

The second group was established at my host organisation, the National Academy of Education Management (NAEM). Initially, I intended to include women from both the AA alumni group and NAEM in the same inquiry group. However, it became clear to me after meeting with individual participants in an introductory capacity that there were differences between the organisational cultures that the two groups worked across. It also meant that I would work with two smaller groups rather than one very large one. Both of these factors meant that separate inquiry groups would allow for deeper exploration of the shared area of interest rather than spreading the inquiry process too thinly across different professional cultures (Godden, 2015; McArdle, 2004). As this article is being written, the two groups have only just begun the inquiry process. The establishment phase of the groups and the initial meetings are important to the relational dynamic of the group and the ongoing success of the inquiry process.

## 5. Research Integrity

As an external initiating researcher (Heron, 1996), I was confronted with making my way in a foreign culture. Every step in setting up the inquiry groups required a reflexivity from me, in responding to nuances in language and culture. As the initiating researcher and co-researcher, I was conscious that I brought particular conceptual framings to even the initial stages of setting up the inquiry. Emergent biases are being attended to through the ongoing dialogue of the reflexive process (Hosking & Pluut, 2010) and via a journaling process kept, by me, the initiating researcher. Additionally, this inquiry will use the series of aids to validity or integrity offered by Reason (1998a); research cycling, a balance between reflection and experience, a balance between divergence and convergence, and authentic collaboration. These integrity measures will be employed throughout the inquiries.

## 6. Conclusion

It is my hope that a significant benefit of using co-operative inquiry as a research method will demonstrate possibilities for educators to work more collaboratively and equally across contexts. The relational nature of these collaborations and the shared production of knowledge from within them, can then lay a strong foundational base for better informing the decolonising of the curriculum and thus challenging Northern theoretical hegemony. I anticipate that the reflexive processes being employed to protect the integrity of the inquiries will subsequently reveal much about the nature of cross-cultural collaborations that hold equity as a core principle.

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