

# John Rowan

**Peter Reason**

John and I worked together in the late 1970s to put together *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research* (Reason and Rowan, 1981; 'retro-reviewed' in this issue). I first met John shortly after I returned to England from the USA in 1976, having completed a Ph.D. in organizational behaviour, bringing with me what seemed like a whole new sense of the nature of knowledge and how to conduct research. I had studied Thomas Kuhn's then relatively new writing on paradigms in research, and in my coursework written strong critiques of what I called the 'scientism' of much social research, how it treated human 'subjects' as 'objects' and created a chasm between the 'production of knowledge' and the everyday life of people. I had trained in T-group facilitation, groups which in those days were still sometimes called 'labs', analogous to scientific laboratories – places where people could study their own behaviour as the group emerged. I based my dissertation research on an experiential workshop in which participants were explicitly invited and expected to be researchers into their own feelings and actions.

But back in England I was cut off from the community in which I had developed these ideas. UK social science seemed either very quantitatively sociological or experimentally psychological, and the kind of humanistic inquiry process I was developing seemed completely out of place. So I was delighted to find that at an Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) conference in London in 1977, someone called John Rowan was running an event on humanistic research practice.

John was at this stage developing what became his model for a dialectical paradigm for research. He presented this in the meeting, and invited several others, including John Heron and myself, to talk about their work. There was a buzz of excitement in the room: the presentations and discussion were hitting the spot. It felt liberating, as if we were developing a new language to describe the nature of human inquiry. And as so often happens at events like this, several of us wanted to carry on the discussion. On this occasion we actually did so.

About ten of us met a few weeks later in a rather bare room at what is now the University of Westminster, near

Baker Street tube station. Tentatively we explored our interests, and agreed to continue meeting as the New Paradigm Research Group. Core members included John Rowan, John Heron, Jo May, Richard Stevens, Michaela von Britzke and James Kilty; there were other, more occasional members. At each meeting we started from one member's thinking about their research, and from that thrashed out together the kinds of principles and practices for the new paradigm. I think the group met for a couple of years, towards the end of which we drafted the New Paradigm Manifesto, which began and ended with the bold statement, 'Research can never be neutral' (New Paradigm Research Group, 1981). Gradually, the meetings became less well attended and less engaging, until we stopped altogether.

It was Michaela who said, 'There should be a book based on these discussions!', and it was she who arranged for John and I to meet one summer's day on the grass and daisies in Regent's Park, where we sketched out the outline of what was to become *Human Inquiry*. We were clearly touching on something that was in the air at the time, for we soon had a contract from John Wiley for a substantial book to come out in both hardback (for libraries) and paperback (for students). The first part of the title, 'Human Inquiry', was intended to capture the idea of research for full human beings; the second part, 'a sourcebook in new paradigm research', to show the extent of our ambitions of articulating a new paradigm.

It was quite clear to John and me what needed to be in the book. We needed not just to protest at the inhumanity and inadequacy of conventional research methods and show why they were inadequate, but also, as we wrote in the introduction, to show what might be done instead. We needed to articulate the principles of the new paradigm, set out some of the practices, show some examples, and talk about the different kinds of skills this kind of work called for. These themes have proved robust: they have been the basis of two (soon to be a third) volumes of the *Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, 2008), which in many ways has taken over the work that we started with *Human Inquiry*. But the book needed also to position itself as

both 'academic' (so that students could reference it) while also having the liberating spirit that we had experienced at that early AHP meeting. I think that John, with both his playfulness and his intense and serious commitment, made huge contributions to this.

As well as setting out his dialectical paradigm for research, John had been playfully writing poems and aphorisms that expressed the new paradigm. So on the cover, under the bold words of the title, we asked the designer to write some of these as graffiti:

'Research can never be neutral'

'Dogs sniff loudly when doing research!'

'Who was that research I saw you with last night? That was no research, that was my life!'

In the Foreword to the book, John drafted a passionate statement about what was important about the book. I remember him now, sitting at the typewriter (yes, it was that long ago!) with the words just pouring out of him:

What we are contending in this book is that you don't have to settle for second best. You don't have to accept projects you don't believe in and really don't want to do. You don't have to toe the line of an orthodoxy which is in many ways quite illusory. You can do research which is worthwhile for you yourself and for the other people involved in it. You can do research on questions that are genuinely important. (Reason and Rowan, 1981: xxiii)

We ended the Foreword with a challenge: 'Someone has got to be the next generation of great social scientists – the men and women who break new ground.... You, the reader, might be one of them....' (Reason and Rowan, 1981: xxiii).

John's particular contribution to the book was an articulation of his Dialectical Paradigm for Research (Rowan, 1981). He started from the perspective that research subjects were treated as fragments and so alienated from the production of knowledge about them. He developed a way of describing in words and diagrams the different patterns of engagement between 'researcher' and 'subject' through the common points of a research cycle from pure experimental research through to full collaborative inquiry. He showed how each stage of the research cycle was a dialectical contradiction of the previous one, and that this was what gave a humanistic research project its living energy. And from this he articulated a set of questions that might be asked of any project – questions about efficiency, authenticity,

alienation, politics, patriarchy, dialectics, legitimacy and relevance, thus extending significantly the kinds of quality questions that need to be asked of a research endeavour.

*Human Inquiry* was a landmark book for many people (including myself, as it helped establish me as a radical voice in the field of research and to establish the influential Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath). It sold thousands of copies, and was on the reading list for research programmes round the world. We were thrilled when Carl Rogers described the book as a 'goldmine' of new approaches to inquiry; and equally so when the behaviourist Hans Eysenck wrote that the book deserved to be burned.

But we didn't get it all right. One problem arose around gender. We were writing at a time when feminist consciousness was high, with a men's response beginning to find a voice in workshops and journals such as *Achilles Heel*. John and I were both very aware that we were privileged men, and had long discussions about how to make the language of the book gender-neutral (which was a point of great contention in those days). We sent a copy of the outline to the feminist scholar Helen Callaway, who remarked that since it had so few women contributors it looked more like another book of male inquiry than human inquiry. How right she was. We took some steps to draw on more women, including Helen and notably one of the founders of the participatory action research movement in the countries of the political south, Marja-Liisa Swantz. But it was an embarrassing and sobering moment.

John and I didn't take our collaboration further than *Human Inquiry*. John was more involved with developing humanistic psychotherapy, and my interest developed toward responsible business practice. But we kept in touch. I was able to invite John to contribute sub-personalities workshops to the Facilitator Styles programme I was running with my wife Elizabeth in Bath. We invited many of the visiting facilitators on this programme to stay at our house, and we came to see them through the eyes of our two young sons. We noticed how some of our visitors just wanted to talk about their work, and seemed to scarcely notice the boys' existence. Not so John: he always came out with the kind of appalling jokes that delight ten-year-olds ('What's long and green and holds up stage coaches?' 'Dick Gherkin!'); and was happy to wrestle with the joke plastic fried egg they slid on to his plate as if it were real.

John argued that among the many questions we should ask about researchers were 'authenticity'

questions: did they understand their own motivations, were they genuinely willing to be open to others' perspectives, were they willing to risk their own sense of themselves? I owe John a lot from the time we spent writing together, maybe above all that as an academic researcher I could still be an authentic human being. For this I am deeply grateful. 🙏



**Peter Reason** is a writer. His book *Spindrift: A Wilderness Pilgrimage at Sea* (Vala Publications, 2014) is both the story of a sailing voyage and an exploration of the human place in the ecology of the planet. Prior to his retirement as an academic, he made major contributions to the theory and practice of action research in writing, teaching and research about sustainability. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Bath.

## References

- New Paradigm Research Group (1981) *New Paradigm Research Manifesto*; retrieved 31 August 2014, from: [http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/New\\_Paradigm\\_Manifesto.pdf](http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/New_Paradigm_Manifesto.pdf)  
[http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/New\\_Paradigm\\_Manifesto.pdf](http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/New_Paradigm_Manifesto.pdf)
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) (2001) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: Sage Publications
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) (2008) *Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2nd edn, London: Sage Publications
- Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (eds) (1981) *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, Chichester: John Wiley
- Rowan, J. (1981) 'A dialectical paradigm for research', in P. Reason and J. Rowan (eds), *Human Inquiry* (pp. 93–112), Chichester: John Wiley

# HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY WORKSHOPS

## Workshop Details up to July

Sunday 11 January: **Series Launch:** The Open Centre (Old Street tube), Introduced by **Professor Andrew Samuels - free! 2 till 5 pm**

Friday 20 February: **Dr Dina Glouberman:** "Vision Your Future: The Therapeutic Uses of Imagery"

Friday 27 March: **Martin Pollecoff:** "Improvisations – brushing up your Clinical Intuition"

Friday 17 April: **Professor Andrew Samuels:** "The 2015 Election So Far: Therapy Thinking and the Political Process"

Friday 8 May: **Michael Soth:** "Embodiment - because you're worth it!"

Friday 19 June: **Professor Ernesto Spinelli:** "Co-Creating Worlds: Therapy from an Existential Perspective"

Friday 17 July: **Dr John Rowan:** "Ken Wilber and the Transpersonal"

## VENUE

(from February onwards)  
**7–9 Breams Buildings, London, EC4A 1DT**  
 Closest tube station: Chancery Lane (Central Line)

## COST

(including refreshments)  
 AHP members: **£25** Non-members: **£35**  
**Reserve your place and pay on the door**

## TIME

**18:45 – 21:30**

To reserve a place, or for further information, or to join our mailing list, email Serra Pitt at **serra@arresmedia.com**