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METHOD OPEN ACCESS

Conducting a Co-Operative Inquiry in the Field of Counselling: Critical Reflections and Learnings From a 'First-Time' Inquirer

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Co-operative inquiry, a form of participatory action research, has been utilised as a method within the counselling field for some time, and whilst reflections have been shared about the use of this outside of the field, little commentary has been offered from within it. This paper outlines critical reflections and learnings from conducting a co-operative inquiry as a 'first time inquirer' to provide insight for other 'first timers', and those conducting this method within the counselling field.

Method: Nine co-researchers met on 11 occasions from March to October 2022, exploring various aspects in relation to the research topic. Thoughts and experiences were communicated in a variety of ways, through poetry, storytelling, and journaling. The researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout the co-operative inquiry process, noting the importance of this process to participatory research.

Findings and Discussion: The reflections highlighted are based around key areas of the inquiry, such as how the group set off, the nature of meetings, and how the data analysis process was managed. Various points of discussion are highlighted such as the use of a working agreement, power dynamics, and the impact of the day job. In addition, this paper outlines a pragmatic approach to co-operative inquiry suitable for doctoral level research.

1 | Introduction

This paper examines critical reflections and learnings from a 'first-time' inquirer (McArdle 2002) conducting a co-operative inquiry (CI) within the field of counselling. As part of these reflections, this paper also outlines a pragmatic approach to CI, which is deemed suitable for doctoral research. The decision to choose CI as a method for this research was based on the feminist positioning of the study. Taylor (1998) identifies one principle of feminist research as the inclusion of participatory methods. CI is a form of participatory action research (PAR) and is positioned as a form of inquiry, 'which does research *with* people not *on* them or *about* them' (Heron 1996, 19). It involves

working with people who have shared interests in order to '... make sense...' and 'develop...new ways of looking at things' (Heron and Reason 2001, 179).

There is precedent for this method being chosen within feminist qualitative research (Godden 2017a; Khandekar et al. 2020; Riley and Scharff 2012), where researchers seek to empower, rather than exploit, the subjects of research (Olesen 2011). Previous researchers have highlighted that CI allows for power relations to be attended to, with the hopes of a more egalitarian process, which does not objectify participants (Barrett and Taylor 2002). These collaborative aspects were noted as features that drew researchers to CI (Barrett

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Implications for practice and policy

- The current paper outlines a pragmatic approach to co-operative inquiry suitable for doctoral level study.
- Key learnings in relation to the process of co-operative inquiry, such as the use of a working agreement, are offered for consideration, particularly for those ‘first timers’ (McArdle 2002).
- The current paper also highlights unique elements of conducting a co-operative inquiry within the field of counselling, which may have implications for the way in which the process is approached by other counselling researchers.

and Taylor 2002), which also aligns with the overall feminist positioning of this research.

CI is an experiential process that is iterative and reflexive (Crowther et al. 2021). In general, small groups collaborate equally on both the research design and research process (Heron and Reason 2001), which can include how decisions about process are made, what the ground rules should be and what happens at each stage of the research (Riley and Scharff 2012). Once a group has agreed on purpose, developed a research question(s) and decided on actions, the group begins to follow a structure that cycles from action to reflection (Greenwood and Kelly 2020; Mash and Meulenber-Buskens 2001). An action phase is noted as a time where participants are positioned as co-subjects, engaging in an agreed action, and reflection, as a time where participants are positioned as co-researchers, reflecting on the experiences they engaged in during the action phase, considering any potential new insights (Kurio and Reason 2022; Mash and Meulenber-Buskens 2001). Cycling between these two allows the process to deepen as it evolves (Kurio and Reason 2022).

Heron and Reason (1997) outline an epistemology that includes four ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical. Experiential knowing is through ‘face to face encounter[s] with person, place or thing’, where knowing is perceived through ‘empathy and resonance’ (Heron and Reason 2007, 367); presentational knowing grows out of the former and allows for expression through story, poetry or drawing, for example; propositional knowing is knowing gained through facts and ideas expressed in written or spoken form, and practical knowing results in the development of a skill or competence; it is how to do something (Heron and Reason 2007). The focus on the specific ‘type’ of knowledge varies depending on which stage the research is at, with the expectation that experiential and presentational will be the main focus initially, which, as a consequence, leads to propositional and practical knowing (Riley and Scharff 2012); however, Kurio and Reason (2022) note that a CI can begin with any form of knowing.

There is precedent for conducting CIs within counselling research particularly exploring the experiences of counsellors, such as Ballinger and Wright (2007), who explored the

importance experienced counsellors attached to social class; Ness and Strong (2013), who formed a CI group to reflect on the learning process of counsellors in relation to new conversational practices with clients; Swinton (2016), who explored the experiences counsellors had in relation to spirituality in their training; and Carver (2017), who examined the concerns and challenges that counselling trainers had working in Higher Education. Critical reflections from conducting CIs are captured by those outside of the counselling field (Barrett and Taylor 2002; Charles and Glennie 2002; Donnelly and Morton 2019; Godden 2017b; Gray et al. 2000; Howard et al. 2015; McArdle 2002; Wadsworth 2006; Wicks and Reason 2009); however, little has been captured on this topic from within the counselling field. In this instance, CI was employed in the development of a feminist theoretical framework for counselling and psychotherapy, resulting in a theoretical model of female and non-binary counsellors’ experiences of gendered power dynamics in the therapeutic relationship.

2 | Methodology

A qualitative methodology was considered to be most appropriate for this research as the aim was to both understand the experiences of therapists and find meaning in those experiences (Willig 2013). Morrow (2007) notes that qualitative methodology is also suitable when researching underexplored areas, including areas where theory has not yet been built; both aspects are relevant with regard to this research.

2.1 | Methods

Heron and Reason (2001) identify various types of CI, noting that a researcher may be internal or external to the practice or culture the inquiry is focused on, with this research being an internally initiated, full form inquiry. It is internally initiated as the initiating researcher is personally involved with the practice in which the research is focused on. It is a full form inquiry in that all participants are ‘involved fully as both co-researcher and co-subject, once they have grasped and internalised the method’ (Heron 1996, 41). The initiating researcher’s role was to guide the process of research in line with the method and participate as co-researcher and co-subject. This inquiry is also categorised as an outside inquiry in that the research is about what happens in group members’ working lives (Heron and Reason 2001). On this basis, the group met for reflection phases to share their thinking, and make sense of it, and completed action phases on an individual basis (Heron and Reason 2001). The alternative, an inside inquiry, would involve action phases to occur within the whole group (Heron and Reason 2001).

Godden (2017b) notes that CI emphasises the sharing of power and relationships between those in the group and the cycling through stages ‘...of action and reflection [to] allow for collective and individual reflexivity’ (Godden 2017b, 7), allowing for the development of understanding within a particular practice (Donnelly and Morton 2019), in this case, counselling practice. In this inquiry, co-researchers were counsellors in practice,

exploring the topic of gendered power dynamics in the therapeutic relationship.

2.2 | Co-Researcher Recruitment

As counselling is predominated by white woman (BACP 2024), and recognising that I am also a white woman, recruitment was done through purposive sampling (Bryman 2012) initially targeted at organisations and in groups where white women were less likely to be. Groups including the Muslim Counsellor and Psychotherapy Network, BME Voices Talk Mental Health and Pink Therapy were contacted. Following the recruitment of one co-researcher, the net was cast wider to include additional groups, forums and social media sites where initially 10 co-researchers were recruited. Ultimately, nine co-researchers met on 11 occasions, which included an introductory meeting, from March to October 2022. The group met online, and generally meetings were for 90 min. The group explored various aspects in relation to the research topic, communicating thoughts and experiences in a variety of ways, through poetry, storytelling and journaling.

In relation to the demographic make-up of the group, it is noted that to enable groups to focus on shared issues, its members are ideally relatively homogenous (Riley and Scharff 2012). In this case group, members had to be practicing counsellors, who identified as a woman or non-binary, and had an interest in, and a commitment to, furthering the understanding of gendered power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship. However, Riley and Scharff (2012) also highlight that ‘some differences in experience or sense making are useful in the inquiry process...’ (Riley and Scharff 2012, 211). Demographic details supplied by co-researchers are included below (Table 1).

2.3 | Pragmatic Inquiry

The CI explored in this paper formed part of the author's doctoral research, which at times meant there were deviations from a ‘pure form’ CI. Heron and Reason (2001) note that the process should begin with a group coming together to discuss a shared topic of interest in order to decide on a specific focus. In this case, the research question was decided on prior to the group commencing, which undoubtedly impacted the collaborative nature of the endeavour. Previous research has highlighted challenges around funding, which make an extensive consulting period, to arrive at a mutually agreed research design, difficult (Gray et al. 2000). As this research was self-funded for the first 2 years, this was one area where pragmatism was applied. In addition to the requirements of doctoral study, the author completed all data analysis. Whilst this pragmatic approach might certainly be open to scrutiny, previous research has also highlighted similar deviations to the method due to specific contexts (Khandekar et al. 2020; Mash and Meulenberg-Buskens 2001); however, by being transparent about these challenges with co-researchers, the ethos of the method is still held.

2.4 | Focus of the Article

This article outlines critical reflections and learnings from the researcher's personal experience of conducting, and taking part in, a CI. These are communicated in the first person to underline the personal nature of these reflections (Godden 2017b) and are from the perspective of a ‘first-time’ inquirer, coined by McArdle (2002). Some journal entries are also included for further illustration. Reflexivity is highlighted as a fundamental part of CI, particularly in relation to power relations (Barrett

TABLE 1 | Demographic details of co-researchers.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Pronouns	Disability	Religion	Class
Juno	51	White British	Female	Heterosexual	She/her	None	C of E Background	Middle class
Evie	54	Mixed white/Asian	Female	Heterosexual	She/her		None	
Serena	47	White British	Genderqueer	Queer	They/them	None	Paganish	Middle class
Alex	51	White	Genderqueer	Lesbian	She/they	Yes	Humanist/atheist	Working class/lower middle class
Hannah (1)	49	White British	Female	Lesbian	They/them	Yes	None	Middle class
Clare	28	White British	Female	Bisexual	She/her	None	Agnostic	Middle class
Hannah (2)	55	White Irish	Female	Queer	She/her	None	Atheist	Working class
Mae	40	White	Female	Heterosexual	She/her	None	None	Middle class
Nancy								

and Taylor 2002). In relation to this, the impact of the pragmatic approach taken here is also noted.

3 | Findings and Discussion

Donnelly and Morton (2019) highlight the importance of reflexivity within CI, in this case, to develop research practice through ‘...understanding and learning from the different experiences of utilising co-operative inquiry groups...’ (Donnelly and Morton 2019, 455). Within this research, a methodological journal was kept initially to allow for the exploration of ‘methodological dilemmas, directions, and decisions’ (Charmaz 2014, 165); however, critical reflections and learnings during the research process were also captured.

3.1 | Establishing a Working Agreement

One key aspect to gaining ethical approval for the CI was the establishing of a group working agreement, the purpose of which was to foster safety and trust through transparent discussion, considering the potentially sensitive topics that might be shared and discussed in relation to gendered power dynamics (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013). The working agreement was co-created in the second meeting of the group, the first of which was for introductions and information giving about the process. Whilst the creation of a working agreement did appear to achieve the original aim, my sense was that it also provided a talking point for co-researchers, which was within their experience as counsellors and, therefore, was a comfortable area to contribute to (Wicks and Reason 2009):

I’m noticing my surprise at the “ease” in that meeting. I was so focused on people being safe, I hadn’t considered it would just give people an opportunity to talk to each other. It’s perhaps a lesson in looking beyond my own anxiety as the person that has brought people together, and the responsibility I feel for that.

All co-researchers contributed to this process, and discussion was free-flowing, which resulted in the process feeling, for me, like that of an ice-breaker exercise, which encouraged and supported initial relationship building within the group, considered ‘to be the foundation on which the success of PAR depends’ (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013, 591). It also allayed some of my initial fears about the balance of power in the group, with me as the initiating researcher, as all co-researchers appeared to be comfortable to contribute and did not appear to wait for ‘permission’ from me. This initial relationship building, through the discussion of the working agreement, seemed to give the group a solid relational basis to work from.

3.2 | Staying Power of the Group

Maintaining participation across the lifespan of a CI is an important consideration, with other researchers discussing their challenges in achieving this (Donnelly and Morton 2019; Howard et al. 2015). In relation to this inquiry, on commencement of

the group in March 2022, a discussion was had with each co-researcher regarding their general availability and their preference in terms of session times (Wicks and Reason 2009). Attendance at the meetings was generally good; however, at the time of the school summer holidays, this started to wane. There were also difficulties in finding a suitable date, despite our working online together, which was partly chosen in the hope it would be more convenient for group members, relieving them of a commute:

I’ve been reflecting on attendance at meetings. Options are to slow it down and wait until everyone could come, or be pragmatic, keep up the momentum and meet anyway. All will have been involved over the month but not necessarily altogether. The group is big enough to allow this to happen.

July and August are often times when counsellors take a complete break from work, and this was not something I factored into my planning in terms of the commencement of the group. Alongside this, Heron (1992) outlines how a group’s energy may flow during a CI using the four seasons as a metaphor for this process, whereby in Spring, new life may start to appear, and by Autumn, the harvesters go on their way, which resonates with my experience. For future inquiries, I would consider the context of the field in relation to session dates and discuss this with co-researchers more fully.

3.3 | Meeting Online Versus Face to Face

Online meetings allowed group members from a wider geographical area to take part, extending the reach of the research (Embury 2015); however, I felt it affected participation for some members as I sensed it was perhaps harder to break into a discussion than if we had been working face to face, due to perhaps limited cues that can be received over Zoom in comparison to in person (Gordon and Edwards 2012). I noticed during the second reflection meeting how little two co-researchers said, and as the initiating researcher, I questioned whether I should ensure all had been able to contribute; however, I also wanted to respect co-researchers’ autonomy in relation to their contributions:

I noticed how little xx and xx spoke today. I debated throughout the meeting in my mind, should I leave them to choose, or should I say something. I’m conscious of not being the only person in the group that could say something to xx and xx, but as it’s early days it perhaps still feels like my group, rather than ours. There feels like such a delicate balance, but I’m aware of wanting to hold my own values of respect, empathy and care for others as well.

As meetings progressed, I decided to offer an invitation to those who spoke less, reflecting on Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell’s (2013) thoughts on the importance of building relationships and noting that part of my role was to ‘...assist the maximum energetic self-pursuit of the questions and answers by the largest number of people possible’ (Wadsworth 2006, 323). This opportunity was

generally taken up with a reflection or a contribution. There were also technical glitches at times that meant that what was communicated was not always heard or understood, which I found challenging given the level of thoughtfulness that went into co-researchers' contributions. Co-researchers were asked to have a good Internet connection prior to the research commencing but this was not always the case.

3.4 | Could I Hold on?

Once the first reflection meeting began, I noticed my own anxiety as a first-time inquirer in relation to the level of control I had over the research process. I recognised early on my own questioning as to why I had not chosen to conduct one-to-one interviews instead. I also had concerns over whether the inquiry was going to 'work' in relation to producing relevant data. These concerns were perhaps more understandable as the CI was being undertaken to fulfil the requirements of my doctoral degree, and therefore, there was a sense for me of 'high stakes' in relation to the ultimate 'success' of the research:

...I'm wondering if I'd done a straightforward interview if I'd have so much more now. I'm wondering if I even know what it is that I want to know, I feel like it's all very muddled...feeling very lost and wondering if I've started down a path that I can't change now.

One aspect in relation to control of the process was with regard to action points. We agreed our first action point in the first reflection meeting, and having initially anticipated that each reflection meeting would be for a different action point, it became clear after our second reflection meeting that there was still more to say on the first point. The collective decision, a cornerstone of CI (Godden 2017b), was made to continue the discussion into the third reflection meeting. I acknowledged in my journal after the second meeting that there was more 'letting go' to do on my behalf in relation to the structure and control of the process, noting the challenges experienced by other participatory researchers in relation to relinquishing control (Gray et al. 2000). I was left with some uncertainty, however, as I wondered how we would know when it was time to move on to the next action point.

This question was answered towards the end of the third reflection meeting when the topic of conversation seemed to naturally shift, moving the group on. I highlighted this to the group, who concurred, and our second action point was set. I noticed that during and after the third reflection meeting, I was much calmer and the feelings of 'holding on' had abated. This was in large part due to my fellow co-researchers and their evident commitment and thoughtfulness on the topics we were discussing. I was also conscious of my overall learning in relation to conducting a CI, and seeing the group process in action reassured me in the sense of whether it would 'work' or not. Both of these factors ultimately settled my nerves, and I began to enjoy the process much more. This was captured in two entries from my journal:

I'm recognising or "feeling" how the process might unfold in a more organic way.

A much more comfortable meeting for me, I felt like I settled into the process and a trusting of the process.

3.5 | Balancing of Roles and Level of Direction

I'm wondering what my role is here and how I balance being a co-researcher and the initiating researcher. I notice as I co-researcher I might respond to others with a reflection, sometimes offer my own feelings or experiences if they seem to relate to what the person was saying, but as the initiating researcher I recognise the desire to be more directive.

During the second reflection session, I recognised how much I was talking, and I hoped that this would naturally change as the group settled in a little more, but again reflected on whether I would have to be more active to include those co-researchers who were quieter. I was also aware of feeling a potential conflict between my role as the lead initiating researcher and my role as a co-researcher and felt perhaps that I had not got the balance quite right in this meeting and considered how I might change this for future meetings. Recognising that this might be part of the process at this stage (Godden 2017b), I hoped that as the group became more comfortable with each other, responses to experiences would be spread more evenly, as initiating researchers guide the group in relation to the inquiry method, eventually making it their own (Heron 1996), which is what transpired.

Additionally, in relation to PAR, Wadsworth (2006) noted that when facilitation works effectively, the research 'takes off', and the facilitator, or initiating researcher in this case, may then only need to hold the 'emergent design' lightly (Wadsworth 2006, 323). However, there were still moments when I, as the initiating researcher, did speak more, either to seek clarity on what was being shared, to introduce a discussion on where we might go next as a group, to share analysis or to ask more directive questions, which I did in our final reflection meeting. Perhaps this was a reflection of 'holding the emergent design lightly' or, perhaps, crossed this line and was unavoidable due to the challenges of this research being completed for my doctoral degree; however, consideration was given to how this was done. Through being transparent about the reasons for my questions, suggestions and observations, I hoped to allow a space for discussion if co-researchers felt their expectations in relation to the research process were not being met (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013). This is again perhaps an example of a pragmatic approach to CI.

3.6 | Sharing of the Data

Following reflection meetings five and six, the co-researchers discussed getting a sense of the data analysis so far and it was agreed that I would share this with them in the following meeting. The group provided feedback and discussed possible gaps in the data against the objectives of the research. This process naturally felt like an engagement with propositional and practical knowing as discussions centred around conceptualising the data and considering how the initial 'model' would apply to co-researchers' counselling relationships (Heron and Reason 2007).

Based on the gaps identified in the data, action points were agreed for the next meeting. I was aware of the power dynamics of me ‘having’ the data analysis whilst the rest of the group were in the dark. This was the earliest point in the process where I had something to share, and I was glad to do so in order to remove the feeling of withholding that I had.

3.7 | Impact of the Day Job

I’m wondering about how much our role as counsellors is impacting how we interact, are we too thoughtful, too considered, and less just saying how it is for us.

I reflected following the second reflection meeting about the impact our day jobs as counsellors were having on our group process, in terms of the way we interacted with each other. I wondered whether we were ‘too nice’, ‘too aware’ of ourselves and our words, to say how we really felt at times, and whether this would have been different if I had conducted one-to-one interviews. In contrast, I recognised the clarity around the sharing of experience because of the day job, where the awareness of feelings was already present, rather than having to be learnt (Heen 2015).

Yorks (2015) notes the different levels of critical reflection required in the process of CI, highlighting Torbert’s (2004) practice of action inquiry. In relation to this inquiry, on most occasions, co-researchers generally presented their thoughts from an ‘I’, rather than a ‘we’, place, linking to a first-person inquiry (Torbert 2004), with emotions clearly pointed to and articulated. They mindfully enquired about others’ processes, linking to a second-person inquiry (Torbert 2004), and considered the wider systems they were a part of, and how this might be impacting their responses, linking to a third-person inquiry (Torbert 2004). I felt that the level of self-awareness co-researchers had in relation to their own processes and experiences was providing rich data, despite me not understanding at some stages what I was going to do with it. This is similarly observed by other researchers who highlight the messiness of the process and ‘a lack of certainty about the usefulness and applicability of what emerges’ (Charles and Glennie 2002, 217).

I also felt that my role as a counsellor supported me in relation to silences within the group. As the initiating researcher, I perhaps would have felt under pressure in those moments to facilitate the group in some way; however, I was comfortable at those times, recognising that co-researchers were often reflecting, and by not interrupting the silence, I was facilitating (Wadsworth 2006). Any breaking of the silence in those moments would have been for me, not for the group’s process:

Noticing that at times we move to analyse as a group rather than staying with our own experience.

A further aspect I noticed was the practice of the group to analyse, rather than stay with our own experience. I was curious as to whether this was because as a group of counsellors whose day job is to make sense of others’ experiences, this felt natural for us, or whether there was a struggle to centre our own experience. Riley and Scharff (2012) note in their experience of a

CI with a group of academics their initial tendency to focus on propositional knowing, perhaps due to them feeling comfortable with this process due to their work. I considered this a likely possibility within this group of counsellors; however, I recognised how these data felt ‘less useful’ as it was merely theorising without a basis in experience. During subsequent meetings when this analysing arose, and in the process of shaping the inquiry (Wadsworth 2006), I reflected on this with the group so we could consider how useful this was. From my perspective, this process seemed to be limiting how much co-researchers were able to talk about their own experiences and perhaps was limiting in terms of getting to the nub of the inquiry (Wadsworth 2006).

3.8 | Power Dynamics Within the Group

As previously mentioned, there were implications for the CI group in this research in that I, as the initiating researcher, was completing the study for the purposes of a doctoral degree. Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell (2013) note the importance of addressing power imbalances as a central feature of PAR. By my having some outside parameters to meet, I may always have held an element of power within the group that could not be changed. I also completed the data analysis. Although it is not unusual for one member of the group to complete this process (Heron 1996), no other group members could have done this if they showed an interest, which again would impact on the balance of power (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013).

However, one dimension, which I did not reflect on before the inquiry commenced, was my experience as a counsellor in relation to other group members:

I’m noticing a shift in the way we interact. The group seems to have recognised where the seniority in experience lies, and those co-researchers are being looked to for “answers”. I had considered my own power, and the potential power in the group in relation to demographics, but I hadn’t thought of each individual’s “role power” and the impact this might have.

I qualified as a counsellor in December 2018, and I am not trained as a supervisor. There were members in the group who were more senior counsellors and were also trained as supervisors. I felt this changed the power dynamics in the group in a positive way, as I was not always the person that ‘knew’. Instead, the senior counsellors of the group were looked to, by me and others, for their reflections on experiences, resulting in a sharing of power (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013). I recognised that my focus and concern prior to conducting the inquiry had been on trying to acknowledge and consider my own power, which is advised (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013); however, the power held by individuals in relation to their work had been overlooked. Previous researchers have highlighted that multiple identities in a group may produce complexity in relation to power relations (Rose 2018) and acknowledged that not recognising the power each co-researcher had was ‘doing them an injustice’ (Barrett and Taylor 2002, 240), which, with hindsight, is what I did here. For future inquiries, I would consider the ‘role

power' (Proctor 2017) of members, alongside my own. In relation to pragmatism, this experience highlights how power relations can evolve despite some 'limitations' in the methodological approach from the outset.

3.9 | Peer Supervision

I've been reflecting on how supportive the group is and how much I'm gaining from in relation to my practice. I never expected to enjoy my time with the group in this way and had firmly placed it in the "research" category in my mind. I will really miss them when the process is over.

A further reflection of my experience with the group was the similarity I felt it held at times to peer supervision. I felt that the group's lens shifted to offer support and advice to other co-researchers, with the research seemingly taking a back seat. In some cases, the examples shared were 'made sense of' through this peer supervision process, which directly informed the data. For example, the word consent was expressed by one co-researcher after listening to another's experience, and this was reflected back to them in a way that might have mirrored a response given in peer supervision. Due to my lack of experience, I had few expectations of how the group might work together, merely hoping that people would be comfortable to share, and no one would feel hurt by others' responses. This level of support and genuine interest in one another's experiences was unexpected, but lovely to be a part of. I recognised at the end of the last meeting how much I would miss the peer support I had experienced with the group. This experience appears to resonate with research about peer supervision, which notes that it can be a 'unique professional development experience that...can result in profound [supervisee] growth' (Schumann et al. 2020, 108) and 'a supportive space amongst peers' (Schumann et al. 2020, 113).

4 | Conclusion

McArdle (2002) notes that 'doing research with people means doing research as a person. And we cannot see everything' (McArdle 2002, 188); therefore, some of the experiences I have shared here may reflect my own lack of experience as a 'first-time' inquirer and would have been foreseen by others. However, whilst there is no one way to conduct a CI (Yorks 2015), and each inquiry will perhaps reflect the researcher's discipline, biography and profession (Wadsworth 2006), it is hoped by offering some critical reflections and learnings it provides researchers some food for thought when considering the complex process of PAR (Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell 2013). Additionally, this paper outlines a pragmatic form of co-operative that holds the values of the approach alongside the requirements of doctoral study.

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Ethics Statement

The CI discussed in this research was given ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee in the Department of Social and Political Science at the University of Chester.

Consent

Consent to Participate: Informed consent for the study was given verbally in one-to-one online meetings. In addition, co-researchers collaborated on a working agreement outlining how they would work together throughout the inquiry. This included, but was not limited to, ways of communicating, awareness of group process and confidentiality.

Consent for Publication: The participants in the study provided their consent for the publication of the data obtained in the current study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.M., upon reasonable request.

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