

Coitus interruptus: Collaborative inquiry in sport, conversation and sex

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COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY number 11! This Newsletter is devoted to exploration and development of all forms of inquiry which work with people in collaborative fashion, and networking between the practitioners of the various forms of collaborative inquiry.

We start this edition with a challenging article from Bill Torbert who once again invites us to awaken from our slumbers and develop a quality of attention which will interrupt our taken-for-granted world and our patterned behaviour. Bill once again demonstrates how an attitude of inquiry can be part of everyday life, moment to moment. In the 1960s leaders of the growth movement used to say that psychotherapy was too good to be wasted on neurotics; now we see that enquiry is too good to be wasted on academics!

Bill's paper is followed by news from Cornell - some abstracts from their Newsletter - and from Bath. The good news from Bath is that the University Senate has approved the establishment of a Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice. We have been working this year to prepare a new Postgraduate Programme in Action Research which we hope will be up and running in the New Year. Subscribers in the UK will find with this edition a flyer describing the programme, and may wish to write in for the more comprehensive programme description - and we are of course happy to provide information to overseas readers who wish to receive it, just write in or email. We are of course very excited about this new venture, which builds on our experience with co-operative inquiry and various forms of action research over the past ten years or more. I have reprinted the introduction to our programme description in this edition of COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY. Peter Ridge then offers a short account of his collaborative inquiry work with young people.

Finally, we have book reviews. Moira Laidlaw has looked at "Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods" by David Erlandson, Edward Harris, Barbara Sipper and Steve Allen; Catherine Sourbut at "Feminist Methods in Social Research" by Shulamit Reinharz; finally, there is my own appreciation of a book by Thomas Berry.

I am hoping that next year one edition of COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY will come from Case Western Research University Department of Organisation Behaviour, where a strong group of faculty and students have been developing forms of inquiry they describe as "co-inquiry" and "appreciative inquiry". I welcome offerings from other centres engaged in developing the work, and also reviews and appreciations of books and materials both old and new which have provided inspiration and direction.

COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY is entirely self supporting. If you have not paid a subscription for 1993 you will not be included in the mailings for 1994. Subscriptions are £12.00 or \$US25.00. Back copies of editions 1-10 are available at £4.00 per copy (\$US6.00) or £30.00 (\$US45) for the whole set.

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Contents

<i>Editorial</i>	1
<i>Coitus Interruptus</i>	2
<i>The Cornell Participatory Network</i>	5
<i>Action Research in Professional Practice</i>	6
<i>Whose research is it anyway?</i>	7
<i>Shulamit Reinharz: Feminist Methods in Social Research</i>	9
<i>Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods</i>	10
<i>Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth</i>	12

COITUS INTERRUPTUS: COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY IN SPORT, CONVERSATION AND SEX BY BILL TORBERT

Bill Torbert is a professor at the Carroll School of Management, Boston College, and author of "The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society, and Scientific Inquiry" Sage Publications 1991, from which the story retold in this article is excerpted.

Coitus interruptus is a Hindu, Tantric, spiritual practice, as well as a Tibetan Buddhist, Vajrayana spiritual practice, and a practice of collaborative action inquiry. At its best, *coitus interruptus* symbolises and actualises a gentle, transforming discipline that heightens mutuality and awareness.

Most people who see the phrase *coitus interruptus* are, of course, unfamiliar with such practices and their purposes, and imagine instead that the phrase refers to some embarrassingly involuntary disfunction amidst sexual engagement.

In spiritual practice that transforms erotic energy into something finer than just its physical, sexual expression, *coitus interruptus* is a symbol (as all properly sublimated visible actions are) as well as a factual act. *Coitus interruptus* is a symbol for a person's ability to interrupt any pleasurable perspective and action for the higher and more generous pleasure of a more inclusive and more mutual awareness of, and interaction with, alternative frames/persons/realities.

BLIND COMPILSION

The daily newspaper shows us in how many ways our global civilisation falls short of practicing such increasing mutuality in relations among sects, tribes, nations, companies, or sexes. To take one type of example, we in the United States are overwhelmed these days with stories of suddenly remembered child abuse, stories of publicly observed child abuse and of

privately imagined child abuse, stories of multiple alleged rapes by men with famous names, stories of data rape, stories of rape of seventy year-old women, stories of sexual harassment by male officials in charge of legally protecting women against such harassment, and stories of women murdered by men who are under court order to stay away from them.

Though there is no doubt something of a fashion for such stories, and something of a panic about them too - "news" after all is largely defined by fashion and panic - they just as certainly touch each of us deeply, if we pause long enough to allow them to do so.

They touch the essence of our uncertain sexuality. And each of us is essentially uncertain sexually, insofar as we are truly sexual - truly erotic - at all. For the truly sexual - truly erotic - impulse is spontaneous and relational - not pre-meditated and unilateral. The truly sexual impulse cannot know its proper form or enactment until it engages relationally. Truly relational engagement brings recognition of actual differences of power, status, development, etc. that influence the parties' actual mutuality at a given time. Truly relational engagement also allows the fullest realisable spontaneity among the players in mutually creating the pattern of this particular dance.

What, then, is going on when men abuse children or women? We are told by studies (eg Koss & Harvey *The Rape Victim*) that the men more likely to rape

- have experienced more violence in their families of origin
- view males as properly dominant
- treat sex as a sport the objective of which is to see how far you can go, and
- don't believe women mean "No" when they say "No"

In short, these men are not truly relational, not truly spontaneous, not truly sexual, not truly dancing.

But it is not my intent to bash my fellow men. Instead, I would like to offer some positive images of sport, of conversation, and of sex that point to the rewards of exercising mutual, non-violent power rather than unilateral force. We need images of mutuality. We need lessons in what it means, on a moment to moment basis, to act in a fashion that is mutually empowering. We need to learn the civilising pleasure of *coitus interruptus*.

COLLABORATIVE SPORT

Perhaps the positive imagery of an unfamiliar sport can help us at the start to begin to envision sport, conversation, and sexual engagement as predominantly collaborative inquiries rather than as predominantly competitions. My Greek friend Stavros brought with him to this country two rather large and heavy wooden rackets. With the help of an old tennis ball, he has been teaching my "palette" over the past twenty-two years. (Today, one sometimes sees two persons with similar, but

much smaller, rackets and little rubber balls on beaches.)

The objective in *pallette* is for the two (or more) players to enter a mutual rhythm, so attuned to one another's skills as never to overtax them, so spontaneous and ever-changing as always to heighten one another's awareness, and so challenging as to stretch one another's capacities.

One applauds the other's reach and challenge, appreciates the restful lobs, apologises to the other and the god of the game for one's own miscreant shots, and marvels at how much such mutual games improve with age.

Over the years, Stavros and I have played memorably games on pitch dark nights, over and around patchworks of tree branches, and amidst the ocean waves. Of course, we have never fully realised the objective, but we have become true peers and lifetime friends.

Stavros has been teaching his wife, Anne, *pallette* as well, these many years, with the same effect. In the meantime, she and I - she much more than I - have been helping Stavros shape up his conversational game.

TRUE CONVERSATION

For, true conversation requires and generates this same mutuality, this same predominance of collaborative inquiry over competitiveness. Certainly, no conversation is occurring if any of the partners interprets what others' say and acts on that interpretation without testing his or her interpretation publicly with the original speaker(s). (Look at that sentence carefully: few business or family conversations meet its test, and that explains a great deal of human misunderstanding, sense of betrayal, and suffering.) For example, to suggest that one has some kind of private insight or right to interpret - unilaterally, without testing - that another

means the *reverse* of what he/she says ("Women don't mean 'No' when they say 'No'") is to undermine the very possibility of mutuality - the very possibility of conversation - the very possibility of human sociability. Whereas the statement ("Women don't mean 'No' when they say 'No'") treats women with utter contempt, it is the statement itself that deserves our deepest contempt, while whoever utters it warrants our most concerned confrontation.

Now: someone is sure to respond that he can document a particular case and provide witnesses to prove that someone once said (or many people have often said) the reverse of what was meant. Good. Thank you. You have just publicly tested whether you have understood what I just wrote. This gives me the opportunity to try again to convey my meaning, for your response shows that I did not convey it the first time.

I did not say that no one ever says the reverse of what they mean. I believe that sometimes happens, for we are complex, uncertain creatures with only the most occasional and tenuous contact with what we ourselves truly wish. Hence, another may see evidence before we do that we are not doing as we truly wish, or are not saying what we truly mean. But this evidence may or may not be valid. Hence, it must be publicly tested. Moreover, if it is valid, its only valid use in action can be to increase the awareness and free choice of the other, and the mutuality of the pair or group. A wonderful conversational game of *pallette* is being played when a partner recognises and acknowledges in an uncoerced fashion that he or she in fact means the reverse of what he or she originally said. (And such an acknowledgement properly represents anything but the end of the game.)

Ironically, I believe that there is much evidence to suggest

that both men and women are more likely to say "Yes" in sexual situations when at a deeper level they feel "No" than vice-versa. Hence, anyone inclined to interpret that others mean the reverse of what they say should especially practice such interpretation and such public testing in sexual situations when the other says "Yes".

This advice will no doubt sound ludicrous and unrealistic to those who treat sex as an exploitative sport the object of which is to see how far they can go. But even those who would like to believe that sex can be 'played' as a different kind of 'game', as a kind of mutual, conversational, sexual *pallette* - even those of us who would like to believe that sex can be an expression of collaborative inquiry and even of love - will feel intuitively how difficult meeting the demand for public testing of interpretations during sexual play is. Consider the following story.

SEEING LOVE

The narrator of this story is describing his week's visit, along with the woman friend travelling with him, to the home of a couple that he knew very well prior to the visit, but she not at all (see box on page 4).

Different readers are likely to have focused primarily on different facets of this story. Some may have noted, for example, that, contrary to the earlier recommendation that persons' publicly test their interpretations, little if any verbal testing of interpretations was occurring early in the story. We don't know how the husband and the visiting woman got into the shower together, nor why they had not tested that choice with the other two. And surely the narrator must have tongue in cheek when he tells us that their presence together in the shower "was too propitious a signal to be misinterpreted".

Over the course of our week together in Princeton, it became clear that the foursome, in all its permutations, shared an unforced ease, warmth and delight. I had known that the couple did not hold an ideology of sexual exclusivity and I had enjoyed the wife's openly provocative comments toward me, but no occasion of full sexual intimacy among the three of us had heretofore evolved. Now, it felt to me as though an occasion of sexual intimacy among the four of us was evolving.

On the final morning of our stay, the wife and I found ourselves talking in just this way, happily talking ourselves into just such an initiative, with the added pleasure of knowing just what we were doing. Suddenly, it occurred to both of us that we had no idea what her husband and my woman friend were doing just then. With playful horror at the possibility that we might merely be discussing what they might be enacting, we snuck upstairs and found them - in the shower together. This was too propitious a signal to be misinterpreted, so we immediately doffed our clothes and joined them amidst great hilarity and affection. Eventually the four of us dried one another and draped ourselves atop the large bed in the adjoining room. There seemed to be no question but that we were all unhurriedly intending a languorous, love-making leave-taking.

Nevertheless, I knew my woman friend to be perhaps a bit more agreeable at times than she really felt, as well as a bit slow to speak her reservations; so I asked her how she felt as the newest acquaintance in this group. Her response did not break the pleasurable mood and could easily have been interpreted as assent to whatever was to come next, an interpretation that certainly fit my sense of inertia and of desired acceleration. But her response was, at the same time, to my ear, a little passive. Even though it seemed somewhat redundant to me to do so, I pursued my initial question more explicitly. Would she be comfortable with - did she wish - love-making among us?

The brief pause that followed was the disillusioning answer, though she reluctantly also spoke a little to say that, really, no. With sighs and glances and touches of regret, but without recrimination, all four of us reversed our inertia, and we gradually dressed and took our leave.

In the car on the way to Philadelphia, I explored with her what her reservations had been. She told me that her mother and stepfather had gone through a tumultuous period of group sexual experiences that ended with their divorce - a period during which she experienced the adults as treating one another cruelly and selfishly - and that that taste and fear had flooded her as we lay atop the bed.

I was so grateful then that the scenario our foursome had enacted together was one of mutual caring in resisting sexual desire - one of seeing love - rather than of mutual blindness in submitting to sexual desire (*from The Power of Balance*).

Some may be struck that even when the narrator says he tested the first time, we hear only his interpretation of the woman's response, not the response itself. Hence, we are given no way of testing whether his interpretation was valid.

Still others may wonder why once the testing started it stopped when it did. Could not the foursome have remained on the bed after the woman said, "No"? Could they not have explored her prior experience and perhaps reassured her that this situation and these relationships were sufficiently different from her fearsome memories to warrant a "Yes" on this particular morning?

All of these concerns suggest that testing interpretations publicly in the midst of action is certainly no simple, all-or-nothing process, with a pre-determined gambit to begin the game and a definitive sign that the game is over. Instead, it is a game that opens in many possible directions at every

step in the play, requiring all our powers of judgement, intuition, and care just when these are most likely to be dimmed by sexual desire.

Indeed, some will say that this story demonstrates why mutual, conversational, sexual palette (ie love) is such a rare game among men and women. To play this game, some will say, requires the awareness, the ability, and the will to go against the most primitive urges we can arouse in ourselves *just when we are arousing them!* And they are right. To play this game invites us and requires us to be more civilised than we ordinarily are - to wed the natural, the social, and the conscious in ourselves in a marriage that few of us ever achieve momentarily, let alone permanently. To play this game requires at least the symbolic, if not the actual, practice of *coitus interruptus*.

Since we rarely practice such sublim(e)-ation, we often *suppress sexual desire* because we know it is inappropriate at this time, in this setting, or with this

person. This is quite normal, even though it can be devilishly difficult on occasion. Sometimes, we do not succeed and make do with the less comfortable alternative of *controlling our behaviour* even though we are aware of desire. Sometimes, we do not succeed even in this and *depend on the other to control us*. Sometimes, the news reminds us, *we control the other to despicable ends*.

It is an altogether different level of demand to intentionally arouse and *express* sexual desire, yet at the same time to arouse our awareness and to inquire of the other with some persistence, as in the story told above, just when we wish to act. This way of relating asks us to wed the sexual, the verbal, and the silent conscience within ourselves in an unusual way, and to be prepared, possibly, to move against our own sexual desire after everyone present has participated in arousing one another's desire.

In effect in seeking to play this kind of mutual,

conversational, sexual palette, we place *the highest possible spiritual demand* on ourselves - to care equally what the other wishes as what we ourselves wish, to in fact wish only what both wish - just when we are also experiencing *the strongest gravitational force* in the human world.

Why seek to play such a game together?

Why follow a path so sure to introduce us again and again to conscious suffering?

Each reader must answer for himself or herself. And no ordinary answer will do, for each play of the game will arouse these questions anew. Only an eternally fresh answer will do.

Why play this game?

You can get some interesting but inadequate, intellectual answers by contrasting it to the sexual games you now play. Is any other form of sexual play as fully mutual? Is any other form of sexual play as fully present to the changing reality of each moment? Is any other form of sexual play as fully attentive to one another's lifetime? Is any other form of sexual play as fully freeing from compulsion? In short, is any other form of sexual play as playful and as dignifying?

In conclusion, let this author not appear to present any of the above as though from an unassailable height. After two divorces and much, still-incomplete recollections of my relational patterns, I continue to seek, and only occasionally find, the elusive path of mutuality in sport, in conversation, and in sexual relations.

THE CORNELL PARTICIPATIVE ACTION NETWORK

WHAT IS PAR?

Participatory action research is based on relationships of active collaboration between researchers and communities. Practitioners are joined in the research process by members of the organisation or community under study from research design, information collection, evaluation, and presentation, to responsive action planning. Research reflects the range of values, conflicts and agendas represented by each participant.

PAR may be used as a framework within which both quantitative and qualitative methods take on greater utility and purpose than is possible when the research objective is determined outside the research setting. On the other hand, a PAR approach often constitutes a single component of a larger research project, such as a comparative study, which is not intended to be responsive in nature throughout.

The Cornell Participatory Action Research Network is a coalition of faculty, students, practitioners, and community members. It aims to facilitate thoughtful dialogue and practice,

and to help tease out the full implications of doing social research with an explicit intent to participate responsibly in both local and global processes of social change.

WHO GETS INVOLVED IN THE CORNELL PAR NETWORK?

Network participants come from many backgrounds, but generally they bring a commitment to one or more of the following:

- open participation in research by those dependent on its results
- Focusing on the constructive and contextual relationships between theory and reality, rather than on the positivist and interpretivist social research paradigms
- Pragmatic concerns for addressing research problems in ways which will effect changes in the community.

The Cornell PAR Network draws participants from across the campus community and beyond. Many academic disciplines today are concerned with the

relationships of social research to social change. Examples of studies using responsive research methods include:

- municipal planning
- natural resources management
- university course revision
- school reform
- corporate change
- rural and urban economic development
- international development
- religious renewal
- agricultural research
- health services planning
- animal science

A SAMPLING OF CORNELL PAR NETWORK ACTIVITIES ...

Work Groups play a vital role in the Network. They are independent, free-form units, each with its own unique objectives for participatory action research. Benefits to Work Group participants include opportunities for broader recognition of their work, and access to services offered by other Work Groups in the network.

PAR Reading Work Group
This group meets to discuss readings from the participatory