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Prefigurative Action Research: an alternative basis for critical psychology?

Carolyn Kagan and Mark Burton

Abstract: Critical psychology should both affirm liberatory modes of doing psychology and engage with the lived reality of those oppressed within current social systems. For this version of critical psychology, the model of 'prefigurative action research' is advocated as an integrating framework. It is characterised by: an analysis of both the structural and ideological dimensions of oppression an emphasis on creating and sustaining examples of alternative forms of social relations that provide a vision of a just society the participation of less powerful people multiple cycles of reflection, doing and knowing simultaneous attention to both agency and structure in emancipatory practice. Some of the ideas underpinning the approach are described. Examples are given of prefigurative action research in practice.

Keywords: prefigurative, action research, social innovation, just society

The idea of prefigurative action research

The term 'prefigurative action research' was initially used in a paper that explored the prospects for community inclusion of mentally disabled people, (Burton, 1983). The problem addressed was the gulf between the moral advocacy of community integration (e.g. Wolfensberger, 1972), and structure orientated critiques that questioned the capacity of the community to include those hitherto marginalised or excluded (e.g. Scull, 1977). Prefigurative action research was proposed as a way of combining these utopian and critical tendencies. It was defined as the attempt to

simultaneously create images of what could be possible while exploring and documenting the actual limits imposed by the current system (Burton, 1983, p. 67)

More recently, we have expanded on the concept. We are using 'prefigurative action research' as a term which emphasises the relationship between action research and the creation of alternatives to the existing social order. This combined process of social reform and investigation enables learning about both the freedom of movement to create progressive social forms and about the constraints the present order imposes. It also creates disseminated 'images of possibility' for a different way of ordering social life.

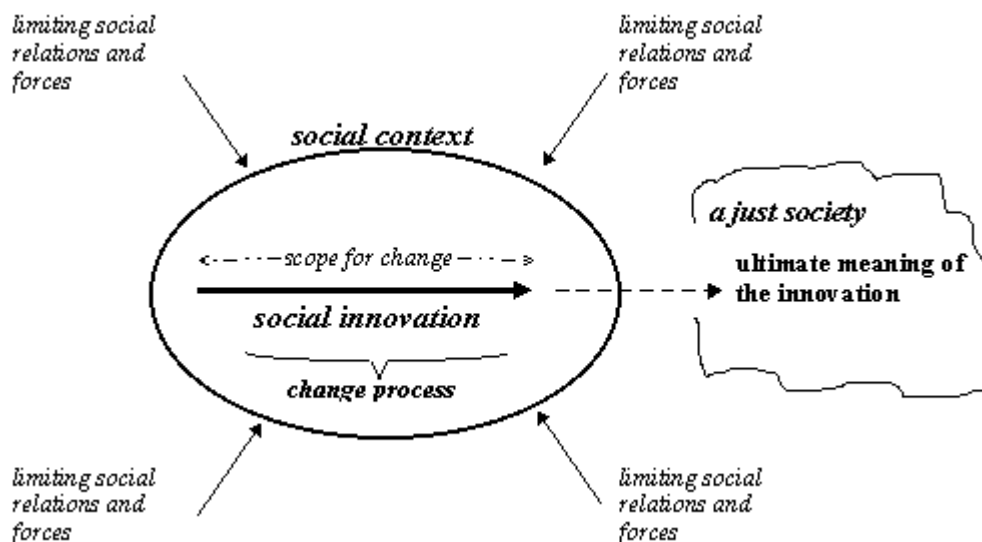
This paper seeks to develop the idea, offering a framework for self-aware social change. We suggest that something like prefigurative action research is inseparable from a worthwhile

‘critical psychology’, although the idea has a broader terrain of potential application.

Both critical and action orientated

Prefigurative action research is both critical and action orientated. This can be illustrated by means of a diagram (Figure 1):

Figure 1: A schematic outline of prefigurative action research



Prefigurative action research is orientated to social change: it is concerned with an attempted social innovation, in a social context. It seeks to learn about

the process of social change, but it also seeks to learn about ultimate meaning of the innovation, for a more just future society. Furthermore, it seeks to learn

about the current social relations and social forces, as they limit and constrain the innovation, and also about the scope for movement and change in this context.

Liberatory social innovations pioneer alternative social relations, while still located within a dominant social context that puts pressure (passive and active, implicit and explicit) on the alternative setting. Table 1 provides some examples, operating at various social system levels.

We can call these alternative social settings that challenge, ‘prefigurative’. The term is associated with Gramsci, who pointed to the importance in struggle of exploring, defining, and anticipating the new social forms to which the struggle itself aspires (Gramsci, 1968, p. 31 [also 1977: 95]; 1968, pp. 32-33, 38. See also Williams, 1979, pp. 420-425).

Table 1: Social Innovations: new social relations, and dominating contexts. (Burton, 1999)

<i>Social Innovation</i>	<i>New social relations</i>	<i>Dominant social context</i>
LETS (Local	Alternative labour exchange	Orthodox exchange /

Employment Trading Systems)	relationships.	exploitation relations. Non-local markets.
Supported living for impaired persons	Support as a right to enable inclusion in communities.	Societal exclusion and devaluation of impaired persons.
Co-operative movement	Social ownership of means of distribution and production.	Market where big capital dominates and drives down costs.
National Health Service	Health care taken out of the commodity market.	Capitalist economic system prone to fiscal crises. Entrenched professional interest groups. Increased hegemony of market model.
Social revolutions in post colonial countries	Social ownership. Empowerment of peasants and workers (politically, and through redistribution).	Global system of postcolonial exploitation. Local elites with stake in exploitative relations. Imperialist policing / superpower conflicts.

In any new social setting (Sarason, 1974, p. 269), for that is what these innovations entail, there will be two opposing processes. The prefigurative, creative, explorative, radical processes and achievements will be pitted against 'recuperative', retrogressive, traditionalist, unimaginative, conservative tendencies. The sources for the reactionary tendencies are likely to be multiple - in the external environment, and its impact on the setting itself, but also in the ideological and psychological baggage that the participants inevitably bring with them. There is never a clean break with the past.

Prefigurative action research, then, is offered as a way of conceptualizing the active process of learning, in a systematic way, from the experience of attempted progressive social innovation. It explores the possibilities of reform, prefiguring a just society, while at the same time identifying the limits of reform and hence the need for transformation. The assumption is made that through this action learning about social change, resources for more fundamental social change will be developed, through both focused and dispersed social learning (Ray, 1993) and through the catalysis of social movements (Burton, 1989; Burton and Kagan, 1996; Kagan and Burton, 1995) around the reforms.

As we have stated above, 'prefigurative action research' was initially formulated to offer a resolution of the structure versus agency problem in radical or critical social policy. It thereby goes beyond other modes of action research in that it explicitly addresses those social relations and forces that constrain progressive social reform - and we thereby also locate it within the tradition of critical modernism (cf. Habermas: see Dews, 1992). Action research suggests that the best way to understand something is to try to change it -but in the case of prefigurative action research, that understanding is itself part of a 'higher order' change project, sometimes reduced in its ambition, and sometimes suppressed, but an essential part of any critical project that goes beyond 'merely interpreting' the world (Marx, 1888).

Key features

Prefigurative action research is not a methodology, but an organizing orientation. It might use any of a variety of methodologies, from survey methods to discourse analysis depending on the investigative questions and context (Burton and Kagan, 1998). Its key characteristics include:

- An emphasis on creating and sustaining examples of alternative social arrangements that in addition to the benefits they bring to their participants, also provide a vision of a just society.
- The participation of less powerful people.
- Analysis, through direct experience, reflection, testing, and confrontation, with the structural and ideological forms of power and oppression (not forgetting that potentially brought into the situation by the prefigurative action researcher, yet not becoming paralyzed by this inevitable contradiction).
- Multiple cycles of reflection, doing and knowing.
- Simultaneous attention to both agency and structure.

- Prefigurative action research could join a social project at almost any point in its evolution. It therefore works in several different modes, with different degrees of involvement in designing and making decisions about the development of the innovation.
- It can help create a new agenda, and help in the design of social innovation.
- It can help move an agenda on, for example, where an innovation is stuck, or needs to improve its understanding of its context, content, and effect.
- Finally, it can ‘merely’ contribute investigative skills.

The roles of the prefigurative action researcher are primarily those of collaborator and co-learner, but because of the multiple foci of prefigurative action research, the relationships are potentially complex, involving a variety of potential co-learners and collaborators, well beyond the original research focus. This is consistent with the mandate of research to produce knowledge about more than the particularities of the situation under investigation. However, conceptualizing ‘prefigurative action research’ from formulating research questions through to dissemination of findings in terms of collaboration and co-learning, makes for a less alienating process - at least in principle. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the multiplicity of learning (and therefore the potential co-learners) in prefigurative action research. A key task of the researcher is the intelligible combination of these different knowledges. This may take place through a large variety of methods, both ‘new paradigm’ and ‘old paradigm’ in origin.

Table 2: Aspects of learning in Prefigurative Action research

Learning	about	constraints, society, social power.
Learning	about	the change process, and capacities for change.
Learning	how to	innovate, what it takes, etc.
Learning	by	people in research and non-research roles.
Learning	by	participants and those peripheral to the research.
Learning	that is	both manifest and latent.

Table 3: Aspects of knowledge in Prefigurative Action Research

	Primary producer of the knowledge	
Knowledge domain (after Habermas)	Researchers	Non-researchers
	"scientific knowledge"	"popular knowledge"
1. technical: emphasises means - ends, and prediction and control	often quantitative, usually causal	craft knowledge, implicit knowledge
2. interpretive: emphasises shared understanding.	qualitative - sometimes quantitative	stories, beliefs, myths, cultural practices
3. liberatory: emphasises reducing mystification and exposing hidden power in order to free people.	qualitative, although may be illustrated with numbers	narrative, pictorial: testimony of emancipation or oppression

Examples

There are many extant examples of work that would fit the model of prefigurative action research outlined above. An example is what could be called the research programme of Paulo Freire and others on education for cultural and political freedom. This work, broadly conceptualized, has been carried on by many workers in many countries and contexts, allowing a remarkably rich set of insights into the nature of literacy, popular education, liberation, culture, and so on, in relation to social relations in post colonial contexts, in times of liberation and times of reaction (e.g. Freire, 1972a, b; Freire and Faundez, 1989; McLaren and Leonard, 1993; MacDonald, 1996; Martin-Baró, 1994).

We will also provide two examples on a smaller scale, from our own work, which exemplify what we are arguing for.

1. Social Inclusion and People with Learning Difficulties

In 1982 we developed a project involving the creation of a new community setting, the BLISS project (Kagan, 1986). This project emerged from our understanding of the separation of people with learning difficulties from other people in all walks of life, and especially in leisure pursuits. [Whilst considerable debate rages about the most appropriate term to describe people with learning difficulties, this term is used as the preferred term of People First, a disabled people's self advocacy movement.] When disabled people are separated, they are also excluded from major social institutions such as work and leisure, as well as from informal social institutions, such as friendship and personal relationships. Many of the people we knew, living in one part of Manchester, lived their lives surrounded by and controlled by formal services

and/or family members, and leisure activities and friendships were not seen as a priority for them. Our vision for what things could be like included wide networks of relationships (like the rest of us) and participation in local activities and interests, with supports as necessary. This vision was made explicit at the start of the project, and revisited throughout; both in the light of experience in the project and the incorporation of the views of learning disabled people themselves (in 1982 a practice verging on the revolutionary).

Our initial analysis was informed in part by a political understanding of the process and functions of social exclusion within capitalist systems, as well as a theoretical understanding of social devaluation (Wolfensberger, 1992) and a psychological understanding of how leisure and relationships are achieved in Manchester in the late twentieth century. Our starting point, in itself is difficult to define. Immediately preceding the beginning of the project, we had undertaken some community audit work in the locality, and some eight years before the project started, we had undertaken some research into the formation and maintenance of relationships achieved by vulnerable people (Kagan, 1981), and so on.

The BLISS project successfully gained funding to employ a worker who would get to know a small number of people with learning difficulties, and a small number of local people with similar interests or potential interests. The worker would introduce the two people and support them in pursuing their leisure interests. The project had a Management Committee made up of three friends who shared the vision at the outset, key service professionals, key local community 'leaders', and some nine months after the start, a local person with learning difficulties and a local person who had been involved as a partner in the project. The work of the project worker was grounded in the interests and experiences of people with learning difficulties. In this respect the work of the project was a 'bottom up' process. As a Management Committee, we were involved in continual processes of reflection and adjustment of both the process and outcomes of the work. Sometimes we managed these periods of reflection ourselves, and sometimes we recruited external facilitators to help us. We dismissed one worker who was unable to share the vision, and experimented with different ways of achieving change. Small-scale change took place and a significant change to some individual people's lives occurred.

After four years, it proved impossible to find additional funding to continue the project and the formal project ended. However, a number of associated changes took place. The local services made some moves towards adopting a planning process and a service system that started with individual people and their interests and needs, and that had meaningful relationships as the key to better relationships and greater inclusion in mainstream life (Kagan, 1990). The person with learning difficulties on the Management Committee was invited to be the first person with learning difficulties to participate in a National Development Team Inspection. (The National Development Team was set up as a Quasi Autonomous Governmental Organisation with a brief of advising health and social services organisations about Learning Disability Services: it is now an independent agency.) He was also invited onto a regional policy making body, which thereafter advocated the involvement of people with learning difficulties (Kagan, 1991; Kagan and Burton, 1991). Other members of the Management Committee took lessons learned about bottom up planning, the importance of relationships to people's lives, the participation of learning disabled people in all aspects of service delivery and evaluation, and so on into their own services around the Region. The involvement of people with learning difficulties in their services and in evaluation is now commonplace. It was not then (although our only claim here is that BLISS contributed to, or was an early adopter of, this participative shift).

The learning that resulted from the project was multi-dimensional. We learnt about some ways of working with disabled people's agendas, rather than with professional or research agendas; and we learnt about how small scale changes could interface with larger scale social change.

We were able to show that we could move only so far in changing the understanding of what is right and what might be possible. We were able to open up different social relations for both disabled and non-disabled people, although this remained partial: we were unable to transform the social lives of people with learning difficulties, although we did add to some people's lives (this was important given the poverty of their lives). We did not achieve wide scale change in the service system, nor did we produce community social change. The free time that was available to non-disabled people in this part of Manchester did not translate into involvement with people with learning difficulties, or indeed with more anodyne forms of volunteering. We found as others had before, that it can be difficult to engage people who live in impoverished and marginalized communities in activities that go beyond immediate self-help around practical problems. Whilst this specific project has ceased, we are still involved in other citizen advocacy projects that work in similar ways in other localities. We can contribute our learning to those projects and learn more from them for other activities in pursuit of the vision of inclusion. Dissemination of findings from the project has been made in a number of different ways, ranging from the production of a report that is still widely disseminated to others working on similar ventures, to informal talks to people with learning difficulties, and (along with results of other prefigurative action research projects) a book aimed at professionals and family members (Burton and Kagan, 1995). There have been *no* publications arising from the work targeted at academic readers alone.

When we examine the wider context in which the project was embedded, we can distinguish a number of features that are relevant to its limited success. In the part of Manchester in which we worked, there were few other projects seeking to engage people with what may broadly be described as improvements in quality of life. The area was one with high unemployment and poverty, and little history of collective action. There were few facilities or resources in the locality and there were tracts of waste and derelict land. Along with many other similar areas, there was little formal or informal community development taking place. There were few groups with which alliances for change could be formed (Burton and Kagan, 1996), limiting the spin-offs for wider change.

The early 1980s was a period in which the 'New Right' in Britain was in ascendancy, with its focus on individuality and the promotion of self-prosperity. We can see the potential for understanding social change from a societal psychological stance when we scrutinize the experiences of individual people and advocacy partnerships, in the context of this project, itself understood in relation to structure and ideology, both local and society-wide. More fundamentally we identify the limiting factors on the social inclusion of people with learning difficulties in relationships in terms of the way relationships are constructed through the mediation of family, economy and state (Leonard, 1984, pp. 102-118). Not surprisingly, some of the more inspiring examples of social inclusion are found in intentional communities (Shearer, 1986; Schwartz, 1997) - another potential area for prefigurative action research (Forster, 1998).

So this project attempted a social reform in the relationships between learning disabled and other citizens. In so doing it created learning of the 'first order' - about the change process in its local context. And it also created learning about the meaning of the innovation (through its realization) both for itself, and as a challenge to lived reality in one community in the British society of the 1980s. That 'second order' learning required both a critical analysis of society and an awareness of related (in time and space) innovations and their fates.

2. Change on Peripheral Housing Estates

For a number of years we have been working in partnerships with women's groups and residents' associations on peripheral housing estates. We, and colleagues, work alongside local

residents to help them identify some agendas for change, and then link them with other resources (including University resources) which may catalyze or facilitate this change. One project specifically concerned young people on an estate on the edge of a Northern town. Youth had a reputation for being anti-social and with criminal tendencies. At the same time, council officers and many estate residents identified the estate as being a model estate with few problems. The Residents Association was found to be doing a 'good job', but with no participation by young people. The young people did not consider the Residents' Association had anything to do with them as was run entirely by older people who were doing a good enough job.

Young people in areas of high unemployment, and with low school achievement records, are already on the ladder to social exclusion. Their voice is rarely sought and more seldom heard, unless it is exercised in anti-social ways. Yet, clearly, they are the future for estate communities and to engage them is not only a sensible thing to do for them as individuals, it is an essential thing to do, socially. Our vision was of greater inter-generational understanding; of young people exercising control over their destinies, gaining generalisable skills, useful in the formal and informal economies, and contributing to and benefiting from active community participation; and of local resources suitable for all ages and abilities. At the start of the project, there was only a small children's playground and a limited number of activities for elderly people available on the estate.

The action researcher was herself a young person living on the estate, but knew few people and prior to the project and was unaware of the existence of the Residents' Association. She worked with young people, initially to identify their vision for change and what was possible. By getting to know many young people and their interests and experiences, as well as joining the Residents' Association (not as an infiltrator, - members of the Association welcomed this 'young voice', contrary to the beliefs of the young people themselves), she was able to explore possibilities for change. At the start, it was clear young people had little stake in the community life on the estate and had been alienated from the community. Whilst levels of actual crime and drug use were relatively low on the estate, perceived crime and drug use amongst young people, who just 'hung around', was high.

Using a process of exploration and consultation with interested parties (for example, young people, other tenants, councillors, and housing officers), wherein each 'stakeholders' views were shared with others anonymously, the researcher was able to identify a priority for development. She, along with other young people, and with the authority of the Residents' Association, gained the premises, resources and equipment to open a cyber- (or internet) cafe on the estate.

In another example, we worked with a women's group on an 'overspill' estate, initially to help them identify their vision for change. This work resulted in them forming an alternative Residents' Association: our work became that of supporting them in their assertive attempts to be recognized as the legitimate representative Residents' Association. This entailed us writing up a survey they had, themselves undertaken (Kagan, 1998) and helping them identify and use the most effective negotiation strategies. Eventually, they did become recognized, and then began the more difficult process of stimulating interest and participation from other residents in a) improving life on the estate and b) resisting the transfer of housing stock from the City Council to a perceived malevolent landlord.

We were able to link the group with a group of students studying Community Psychology at the University. Nine students worked with residents over a seven-month period on a number of projects that residents identified (Lawthom et al., 1999). These included the development of an adult literacy project, a gardening project for elderly residents, a project to improve local

transport availability, the development of welfare and a health resource pack. During the same time period the residents, with help from the students, transformed the community house from an under-used, shabby property, surrounded by litter and kept closed with a heavy padlocked chain, to a bright, newly decorated (including a graffiti room adorned by children along with a local artist), accessible and lively facility, with cleared grounds and a children's play area.

Achievements over the time period were slow, hindered by bureaucratic obstacles erected by the City Council (ranging from a refusal to recognize the group to delay in approving fire regulations in the community house).

Both of these projects were characterized by a number of key features. These included:

- opportunities to form strong alliances for change;
- the need to negotiate shared vision amongst different stakeholders;
- conflict management;
- imposition of bureaucratic constraints;
- an ideological context that encouraged partnership.

These projects are both in relatively early stages, and we have yet to see what small and large scale changes take place. Nevertheless, we can already identify a number of important points for learning. Most markedly, the learning has been two way. Residents have learnt about the possibilities afforded by linking with a University and how resources might best be used. They have stepped inside a University (some for the first time when they came to hear students present their work) and research and academia have lost some of its mystique. We have learned much more about the lives of poor people and the force and creativity of their resistance to further oppression. We have learnt about the speed with which change can be achieved - how it can be catalyzed by strategic alliances (see Burton and Kagan, 1996) and how it can be hampered by bureaucracy and interpersonal, inter-group and inter-institutional conflict. Within the University we have learnt about how to maintain unorthodox and radical education of students within psychology and how to harness this unorthodoxy so that it is difficult to dismantle. Finally, again there will be 'second order' learning about the limits exerted on community based social change by the structural and systemic social factors that need to be changed through political and economic struggle.

The dependability of knowledge in participative action research

The societal contexts, local problem contexts, and social innovations, are inevitably 'messy', raising the question of what can be known about them, and what methodological strategies are available to the prefigurative action researcher. There is not the space to explore this problem in detail here, and as we have already noted, prefigurative action research is not itself a methodology. However, methods drawn from action research, and the qualitative and qualitative research traditions, are available (e.g., the methods of constant comparison, the identification and systematic examination of potential sources of error, systematic and non systematic replication, and so on). Our view is that there is a social reality, and despite its reflexive quality, it is knowable, although without any final security. We can discover phenomena and their causes (cf. Bhaskar, 1989; Collier, 1998; Morrow, 1994; Pawson and Tilley, 1997), and our training as investigators is a resource for this, that enhances prefigurative action research beyond a social activism reliant on the 'naked eye'.

Conclusion

We have offered a model of research that is both critical and action orientated. It is conducted within a context of emancipation, systematically studying the process of principled social

change in relation to the local and societal contexts that make such change necessary. It should therefore be no surprise that the examples cited are from the field of community psychology (although there is no reason why the model should not also apply to other applied fields of psychology, whether primarily concerned with individuals, groups or organizations). We agree with the analysis of Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997), that there is typically a gap between the aspirations and actions of community psychology, and that an orientation to social justice is a key to moving from an ameliorative to a transformational style of work. The model of prefigurative action research provides a framework for keeping the micro, meso and macro actions and theories focused and connected. At the same time we agree with Rappaport and Stewart (1997) who note the elitist and often self righteous intellectualization of much of what passes for critical psychology: again prefigurative action research offers a model for grounding theory in the transformation of social relations. So prefigurative action research is also a potential framework for doing critical psychology - but perhaps not critical psychology as we have come to know it!

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