

Walton, Joan ORCID logoORCID:  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9875-0296> (2021) Social justice and action research: can we collaboratively create a new social movement with social justice at the centre? Educational Action Research, 29 (4). pp. 510-525.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/5362/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

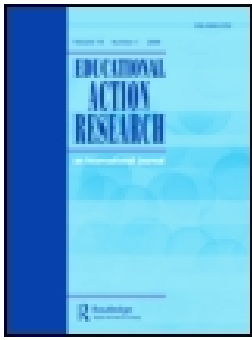
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2021.1939083>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at [ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)



# Educational Action Research

Connecting Research and Practice for Professionals and Communities

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reac20>

## Social justice and action research: can we collaboratively create a new social movement with social justice at the centre?

Joan Walton

To cite this article: Joan Walton (2021): Social justice and action research: can we collaboratively create a new social movement with social justice at the centre?, Educational Action Research, DOI: [10.1080/09650792.2021.1939083](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2021.1939083)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2021.1939083>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 13 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 77



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Social justice and action research: can we collaboratively create a new social movement with social justice at the centre?

Joan Walton 

School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

## ABSTRACT

Ideas about social justice are influenced by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the worldview in which they are located. Since the seventeenth century, the dominant worldview in the western hemisphere has been shaped by the separatist and deterministic principles of classical Newtonian science. During the twentieth century, with the advent of quantum physics, these principles have been contested from within science itself, indicating that the universe may instead be inter-relational, entangled and participatory. A historical investigation demonstrates how, despite findings from modern science, the Newtonian worldview has become deeply embedded in the western psyche, including in neoliberal politics, education, and educational research. As a counter-narrative, an alternative worldview is proposed, which is grounded in the ontological assumption of a participatory consciousness, with implications for ethics and social justice. Supporting a call for the creation of a new story which negates the prevailing neoliberal narrative, I look at ways in which advocates of social justice can, using an integration of first, second and third person approaches to action research, collaboratively initiate a new social movement, with intellectual depth, and with social justice at its centre.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 January 2020

Accepted 26 March 2021

## KEYWORDS

Social Justice; action research; quantum physics; neoliberalism; participatory consciousness

## Introduction

Monbiot (2018) and Ledwith (2020) have sent out a call for a new story which counteracts the dominant narrative of neoliberalism. The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical rationale and methodology for the founding of a new social movement to create that new story, formed by intellectuals and advocates of social justice, and informed by a participatory paradigm. This involves five stages. Firstly, I briefly review contemporary debates about social justice, considering them to be mainly grounded in the separatist and mechanistic worldview generated by classical Newtonian science. In the next section, I challenge the hegemony of the Newtonian paradigm, arguing instead that findings from quantum physics offer an alternative participatory worldview, revealing reality to be entangled and inter-relational, where separation is an illusion (Hutchins 2014). I use Barad's concepts of intra-action and ethico-onto-epistemology to demonstrate that an

ontology of entanglement means that ‘questions of space, time, and matter are intimately connected, indeed entangled, with questions of justice’ (Barad 2007, 236). In the third section, after providing evidence from quantum physics to support the view that we live in a participatory universe (Wheeler 1994), where the observer does not exist independently of that which is observed (Al-Khalili 2003), I include a brief overview of writers whose ideas and thinking reflect a participatory ontology. These include the value of engaging in educational research and practice in a participatory mode of consciousness (Heshusius 1994, 1995), differentiating between participative knowing and nonparticipative knowing (James 1890), and the concept of a participatory mind (Skolimowski 1994).

Having demonstrated that ideas of a participatory reality are not new, I ask the question why – if science has shifted paradigms – does the Newtonian paradigm continue to influence politics and education, including a marginalisation of social justice issues? In the fourth section, I provide an answer to that question, by tracking the historical intertwining of classical science, neoclassical economics, and the origins and development of neoliberalism. This brings us to the present day, where a political system based on individualism and competition results in a society where we feel ‘alienated from each other, from the systems that govern our lives, from the spirit of inquiry, from the natural world, and from tangible reality’ (Monbiot 2018, 66).

It is at this point, in the final section, that I consider what can be done to respond to the call for a new story. Forms of action research, which integrate action and reflection, theory and practice, and emphasise researching-with rather than researching-on (Reason and Torbert 2001), offer a way forward; and particularly emancipatory action research which, as Ledwith and Springett recognise, ‘is overtly committed to social justice’ (2010, 220). The challenge, then, is how can we use action research to bring together the projects, ideas and theories of diverse individuals and groups in a new social movement, which can create a coherent alternative to the established neoliberal narrative?

I propose that, if the movement is to gain momentum, it needs to integrate first-, second- and third-person forms of action research (Reason and Torbert 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2008), paying particular attention to the extended epistemology of Heron’s (1996) cooperative inquiry. This could provide the means for facilitating mutually dynamic interconnections between self, others, communities, cultures and the ecology we inhabit, to achieve transformational change. I conclude by suggesting that an outcome of this special issue on socially just action research and practice, could be an online meeting of all action researchers, including the editors, contributors and readers of this special issue of socially just action research, to discuss the possibility of forming a new social movement, with intellectual depth, and with social justice at its centre.

## **The implications of a Newtonian worldview for ideas of social justice**

Debates about the idea of social justice, and the ideologies that underpin it, have been highly contested (Atkins and Duckworth 2019, 1). However, the main debates that have taken place over the last 100 years have done so in an intellectual context which sees society as the sum of the individuals who make it up; and theories of social justice that assume the centrality of the individual. For example, Miller (1976), in his in-depth study of social justice, identifies three conflicting interpretations: to each according to his (sic) rights; to each according to his (sic) desert; to each according to his (sic) need. A more

contemporary analysis has been undertaken by Nancy Fraser (2003), who differentiates between three types of social injustice: economic (which requires a politics of redistribution), cultural (which requires a politics of recognition), and political (which requires a politics of representation).

What is common to these and other analyses of justice as a concept (e.g. MacIntyre 1988; Rawls 1999) is the emphasis on the primacy of the individual. When more communal terms are used, such as 'participation', the assumption is that the starting point is the individual, who then interacts with other individuals to create some kind of group or collective. For example, Fraser's conception of justice is based on the idea of a 'parity of participation'. Her explanation, though, is that 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers' (Fraser, 2003, 36). Olsen (2008, 475), in his discussion of Fraser's definition of political injustice, also gives precedence to the individual, suggesting that a politics of representation can be developed in two ways: either the right to participate and have choice in the pursuing of individual projects; or the right to pursue collective political goals.

This reduction to the individual, prior to discussions about participation and working collectively is, I argue, a consequence of western culture being deeply embedded in a worldview that is informed by the assumptions of classical Newtonian science: separation, determinism and reductionism. Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) thought the world was mechanistic in nature, with laws inbuilt into its creation which determined how it could and should work. In order to discover these laws, it was necessary to break down complex phenomena into their basic building blocks. In other words, reality in all its intricacy could be understood and lived only through the interaction of its smallest component parts, which were causally related to each other. As the successes of classical Newtonian science transformed technology, communication and medicine through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, so did the belief that all aspects of the universe were governed by the same inbuilt laws, including the behaviour of human beings, with no intrinsic meaning given to ethics. Within that context, then, it is understandable that ideas of social justice were marginalised; and, along with most other social, psychological and educational theories, were grounded in the notion of discrete individuals, who interacted with each other in ways that could be observed, measured, and ultimately controlled.

The Newtonian paradigm has sustained and flourished throughout the centuries, including in education and educational research. This is evidenced by an enduring call for 'science-based educational research, and its close cousin, evidence-based practice' (Schwandt 2005, 285), which are justified due to their adherence to quantifiable and replicable research methods. Slavin (2002) proclaimed that 'education is on the brink of a scientific revolution that has the potential to profoundly transform policy, practice and research'. Later in the same paper, he writes:

Once we establish replicable paradigms for development, rigorous evaluation, replication, and dissemination, these mechanisms could be applied to any educational intervention or policy. (17)

A major purpose of this paper is to question the hegemony of the Newtonian paradigm, including the primacy of the discrete individual; and also to contest the perception of social justice as an optional behaviour, which has no intrinsic meaning within

science. In the next section, I argue that, over the past 100 years, the advent of quantum physics presents a radical challenge to the Newtonian mechanistic world view dominant in western culture. Quantum physics opens up the possibility of a new, participatory worldview; a worldview which proposes that we live in a universe where separation is an illusion, where participation means much more than the interaction of individuals, and where social justice is an ontologically significant principle embedded in reality.

## Quantum physics, entanglement, and ethico-onto-epistem-ology

There are two main experiments that dispute the core assumptions of Newtonian science. The first is the 'double-slit' experiment<sup>1</sup> Al-Khalili(2003), which provide incontrovertible evidence that the presence of the observer, and the nature of the questions posed, affect what happens in ways that cannot be predicted. Contrary to what had previously been believed, it has been proven that the observer does not exist independently of that which is observed, and reality is not deterministic.

The second experiment, led by French physicist, Alain Aspect (b. 1947), demonstrates that two particles, having a common origin, will continue to influence each other's behaviour, even when many miles apart. So, for example, action undertaken on one of the particles generates an instantaneous correlating response in the other. There is a continuing entanglement of the two particles; however, far apart they are separated, which cannot be accounted for by any mechanistic, cause-and-effect explanation (Al-Khalili 2003, 93).

Entanglement is a key term in quantum physics and is central to the new participatory worldview that is being explored in this paper. Karen Barad, a theoretical physicist, philosopher and feminist, spells out the significance of the principle of entanglement in the first paragraph of her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*:

This book is about entanglements. To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (Barad 2007, ix).

From the outset, Barad's claim is that there is no aspect of reality which exists independently from our investigations of it. The notion of interaction – the idea that communication takes place between separate individual agencies – is replaced with 'intra-action', which '*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (ibid, 33, italics in original). This leads Barad to create a new ontology: one in which philosophical concepts such as knowing, agency, objectivity, subjectivity and ethical engagement are reconceptualised in ways that enable their mutual and dynamic entanglement to be recognised:

Knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming. (Barad 2007, 185, italics in original).

The implications of Barad's theorising for how social justice is perceived are transformational. The principles of intra-action apply to all aspects of reality, removing the dualism between subject and object, human and non-human, matter and meaning. This leads to the idea of an 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology', which recognises the need for an intertwining of ethics, knowing and being, because:

each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter. (ibid)

The intertwining of ethics, knowing and being, then, implies an active participation in the 'becoming of the world'. John Wheeler (1911–2008), a theoretical physicist and a colleague of Einstein's, saw participation as being central to the worldview that emerged from quantum physics:

The quantum principle has demolished the once-held view that the universe sits safely 'out there' ... We have to cross out that old word 'observer' and replace it by the new word 'participator'. In some strange sense the quantum principle tells us that we are dealing with a participatory universe. (Wheeler 1994, 126)

Although a participatory paradigm has not displaced the enduring Newtonian mechanistic worldview, there are many thinkers and researchers whose ideas have reflected, both explicitly and implicitly, the perception of a reality which is entangled and inter-relational. For advocates of social justice, these ideas are worth exploring, as they can help us create a new paradigm that has social justice at the centre.

## A participatory paradigm

Many theorists and intellectual thinkers have written from an ontological perspective that either assumes or argues for an interconnected, participatory universe, where there is an inseparability of knower and known, self and other, subject and object, inner and outer; in other words, a nondual reality (e.g. Heron 1996, 1998;; Berman 1981; De Quincey 2002;; Capra 1983; Bateson 1972). Only a small number are considered here, enough to give an indication of the diversity of ways of articulating a perception of a complex, entangled universe, but with no claim that these are representative of all writers.

In this section, I focus mainly on the ideas of Lous Heshusius (1994, 1995), a Professor of Education, who has developed a radical understanding of participatory consciousness within an educational context. From the outset, she questions the reality of separation, as perceptions of separation result in feelings of alienation:

The belief that one can actually distance oneself, and then regulate that distance in order to come to know, has been referred to as an alienated consciousness ... a mode of consciousness that has led to undreamed of technological advances, but has also left us alienated from each other, from nature and from ourselves. (Wheeler 1994, 16)

Heshusius does not accept the Newtonian view, that the centre of inquiry is the individual as an independent entity, but rather understands 'the concept of self as epistemically related to each other through self-other unity' (17). She consciously fostered a way of knowing that let go of perceived boundaries between self and other, thus supporting an ethos of equality and mutual respect. Educational researchers, who inquire within

a participatory consciousness, have an 'awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known' (16). There is no separation, but instead what she terms as, following Berman (1981), *selfother*. This runs counter to Cartesian dualism; but within a participatory paradigm, with the indivisibility of subject and object, the concept of *selfother* makes sense. It also connects with Barad's (2007) idea of intra-action, where the relational nature of being is intrinsic to all that is.

A participatory consciousness implies 'rethinking the boundaries of self and other in the knowledge of their permeability, (where) reality is no longer understood as truth to be interpreted but as mutually evolving' (18). Further, and again resonating with Barad (2007), Heshusius sees ethics and epistemology as inseparable within a participatory mode of consciousness: 'When one forgets self and becomes embedded in what one wants to understand, there is an affirmative quality of kinship that no longer allows for privileged status. It renders the act of knowing an ethical act' (19).

Merleau-Ponty (1962) similarly saw consciousness, the world and the human body as intricately intertwined, confirming the mutual engagement of subject and object in a unitive field. William James (1890) used the terms 'intuitive' and 'conceptual' to differentiate between participative knowing, and nonparticipative knowing where object and subject were seen as separate. Carl Jung (1959) chose the term 'collective unconscious' to refer to his belief that there was a form of consciousness that 'is not individual but universal' (3). Within the collective unconscious lay the archetypes – the 'universal images that have existed since the remotest times' (5), which included the wise old woman with her ideas of justice. Fideler, when critiquing the alienating, mechanistic nature of the Newtonian paradigm, states: 'We do not stand distinct from the world, but bring it to fruition in a collaborative, participatory endeavor. We are woven into a world fabric, and its unfolding is *our* unfolding and vice versa'. (Fideler 2000, 68, italics in original).

Skolimowski (1994) presents a strong challenge to the Newtonian world view with the concept of a 'participatory mind':

The dream of absolute knowledge that Isaac Newton and his followers cherished is shattered. All coherence is gone. We need to reassemble our worldview in a new way. We need a deeper understanding of the subtle expanse of our inner selves, of our complex relationship with all other forms of creation in this cosmos. The Participatory Mind is offered as a form of liberation from the shackles of the prevailing mechanistic worldview. (ix)

Skolimowski also sees ethics and social justice as integral to, rather than separate from, a participatory worldview:

Non-participatory ethics ... cannot be a path to genuine happiness, let alone serve as a foundation for social justice. When selfish ethics prevails for a long time, social injustices build up and then explode with vengeance and violence. ... Thus the very notion of our existence, if we consider ourselves evolutionary beings, implies that we live in a participatory universe and that we are the agents of participation. To be agents of participation, on a deeper ethical level, implies reverence and responsibility for all human beings and non-human beings. (372-374)

Thus, the idea of a nondual participatory paradigm, which questions the Newtonian reductionism of consciousness and the mind, is well established, both historically and geographically, as philosophers, researchers and other intellectual thinkers have explored



different ways of perceiving the reality. In contemporary western culture, such ideas are neglected, with adverse consequences for politics, education and social justice.

## **Newtonian science, neoclassical economics and neoliberalism**

It is evident that a participatory worldview, and a participatory consciousness, are not new ideas. For those with an interest in social justice, there is much to be gained from an ontological view that sees all aspects of reality, including human beings and human behaviour, as entangled. Christians specifically states that ‘the conventional view, with its extrinsic ethics, gives us a truncated and unsophisticated paradigm that needs to be ontologically transformed’ (Christians, 2013, 155). Quantum physics has proven itself in relation to generating knowledge, being responsible for technological advancements that are often taken for granted, such as lasers and super-fast computers, and is firmly established in the world of science. So three key questions present themselves: Why have findings from quantum physics remained essentially unrecognised in political and educational contexts, when the world of science itself has been transformed by the different conceptions of the universe that have been generated by quantum physics? Why does a view of science, which presupposes separation, determinism and reductionism, continue to dominate in politics and education, when quantum physics offers alternative assumptions of entanglement, interconnection and inseparability? And why are advocates and theorists of social justice, who recognise the need for a new participatory paradigm (Ledwith 2020), or social ontology (Atkins and Duckworth 2019; Christians 2013), not more influential in wider society?

Having been challenged by these questions for many years, I engaged in an in-depth search for literature that would help provide me with an answer. This led me to the work of Edward Fullbrook (2007, 2016), visiting Professor at the University of West England and Director of the World Economics Association, who was disputing the claim made by the founders of neo-classical economics that, having modelled itself on Newtonian science, it was ‘on a par or near par with physics’ (Fullbrook 2007, 16). A reading of texts which gave an account of the origins and development of neoliberalism (e.g. Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Harvey 2007; Friedman 1966) revealed the influence of neoclassical economics, and the materialist assumptions of science, on the formation of the neoliberal ideology. For the last 40 years, neoliberalism has increasingly promoted the separatist, reductionist and deterministic assumptions of classical science in its adherence to the efficacy of market forces, and its promotion of those principles throughout all institutions, including education (Brown 2019; Daza 2013; Giroux 2014; Monbiot 2016; Venugopal 2015)

As a consequence of this reading, I concluded that the metaphor of the mechanistic universe had become deeply embedded in the western psyche, because of a historical, intertwining relationship between Newtonian science, neoclassical economics, and neoliberalism. In this section, I tell the story of that intertwining relationship.

The story begins at the end of the nineteenth century, before the advent of quantum physics. The successes of classical science had resulted in widespread acceptance of the core beliefs of the materialist-mechanistic Newtonian worldview: that is, laws were built into the creation of the universe, which then determined all that happened from that point. The aim was to discover these laws, which were assumed to have universal

applicability, and would permit generalisable theories and accurate prediction as to future events (Midgley 2004).

The co-founders of neo-classical economics, William Stanley Jevons (1835–1882) and Marie Leon Walras (1834–1910), were inspired by this worldview, and explicitly used their understanding of mechanistic science to build their economic theories. When justifying his model of economics, Jevons wrote:

But as all physical sciences have their basis more or less obviously in the general principles of mechanics, so all branches and divisions of economic science must be pervaded by certain general principles ... the mechanics of self-interest and utility. (Jevons 1871 [1970], 50)

Walras took a similar approach:

This pure theory of economics is a science which resembles the physical-mathematical sciences in every respect (Walras 1874 [1984]), 71).

Fullbrook (2007) describes how Jevons and Walras used the concept of free market principles to develop their economic theories. Their argument was that the cause-and-effect relationships between different elements of the economy reflected the cause-and-effect relationships between entities that were the focus of scientific inquiry. Taking for granted the materialist basis of the Newtonian worldview, they implicitly assumed a separation between the consciousness of the individual, and the physical universe which the individual inhabited:

This Cartesian self is mandatory if economic relations between human personalities are to be imagined as isomorphic to those between Newtonian bodies, that is, interacting but without altering their individual identities. (Fullbrook 2016, 60)

The term 'neoliberal' was first coined at a meeting of economists in 1938 who were dedicated to the principles of market forces (Monbiot 2016). Following the Second World War, the Mount Pelerin Society was initiated, including Frederik Hayek and Milton Friedman amongst its members. As a political ideology, it was founded on a belief in the freedom of the individual, within the context of market forces, to prioritise their own individual needs and desires, resulting in an 'inherent tension between the quest for individual freedoms and social justice' (Harvey 2007, 43). In this context, freedom was not about the ability to follow any chosen purpose or goal, but rather

was the positing of autonomous self-governed individuals, all coming naturally equipped with a neoclassical version of rationality and motives of ineffable self-interest, striving to improve their lot in life by engaging in market exchange. (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009, 437).

In this setting, social justice and neoliberalism were incompatible. Mirowski and Plehwe explain that neoliberals saw inequality of economic resources and political rights as a necessary constituent element of the market system: 'Demands for equality are merely the sour grapes of the losers, or at minimum, the atavistic holdovers of old images of justice that must be extirpated from the modern mind-set' (ibid, 438).

For three decades following the war, the members of the Mount Pelerin Society continued to advance their theories. There was a strong emphasis on the scientific basis of their work, with natural science metaphors being built into their narrative (ibid, 436). For Friedman, the belief in a notion of 'positive economics' which he differentiated from

'normative economics' was equal to the physical sciences in terms of its ability to analyse and predict:

Positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgements ... (it) is, or can be, an 'objective' science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences. (Friedman 1966, 4)

These ideas spread, influencing, amongst others, the political programmes of Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and Ronald Reagan in the USA. The outcome was that 'the dramatic consolidation of neoliberalism as a new economic orthodoxy regulating public policy at the state level in the advanced capitalist world occurred in the United States and Britain.' (Harvey 2007, 22).

The meshing of the relationship between neoliberalism and the Newtonian paradigm led to the reinforcing of a scientific neoliberal narrative, whose policies and practices were presented as 'the natural, neutral, non-ideological, apolitical, objective, or common-sense alternative to other choices' Daza (2013). Daza also emphasises the irreconcilability of neoliberalism and social justice. She argues that the depoliticization intrinsic to neoliberal scientism establishes a false choice between thinking that is deemed as objective and value-free; and thinking that does not fit in with the 'scientific' principles of neoliberalism, such as, for example, critical theories of race and gender, which can be dismissed as ideological and inefficient.

Thus, a point is reached where:

Neoliberal scientism systematically neutralises the capacity to critique it by managing and delegitimizing resistance ... how can education develop a critical consciousness about ideologies that broadly frame it when its imaginary is always already shaped by those enclosures? ... generally educators have only a vague idea (or no idea) of what neoliberalism is. By some accounts, educators themselves are fuelling the turn to neoliberal scientism, which has resulted in the erosion of their own public institutions. (607-608).

George Monbiot (2017, 40) suggests that the reason for the endurance of neoliberalism has been the absence of alternative stories that have been successful in capturing the public imagination. When laissez-faire economics failed in 1929, John Maynard Keynes produced an economic theory supported by a narrative of restoration; when Keynesian theory failed in the 1970s, neoliberalism was waiting to take over with its promise of freedom, wealth and individual autonomy. But when the financial crisis occurred in 2008, and the flaws in neoliberalism were made evident, there was no coherent, collectively created, alternative waiting to replace it. Consequently, neoliberalism, and with it, the marginalisation of social justice, has continued its hegemonic control.

Monbiot ends his analysis of neoliberalism by saying:

For all its flaws and failure, we can learn from neoliberalism the most important political lesson of all. To change the world, you must tell a story: a story of hope and transformation that tells us who we are. (41).

Ledwith (2020) also talks about the importance of creating a new story as a counternarrative to neoliberalism: 'We need new stories for a new system!' (36). As a contribution to that process, Ledwith includes the ideas of 14 current intellectual activists who she believes can contribute to changing the course of history (39-78).

While in principle, I concur with Ledwith and Monbiot about the need for a new story, I don't think the lack of ideas to create that story is the problem. As acknowledged in the previous section, there are many thinkers and researchers who have written from an ontology which recognizes, either explicitly or implicitly, the core principles of interconnection, participation, entanglement and interrelationality. All these sources, and more, offer theories, worldviews, reflections, and accounts of practice, which counteract the intellectual aridity and social injustices perpetuated by neoliberalism (Dorling 2015; Kotsko 2018).

What is lacking is a methodology that enables the evolution of a collectively created counternarrative, which can be widely shared and offered as an intelligible, coherent alternative to neoliberalism. Our problem, at the moment, is that there is no shared alternative discourse, nor is there a recognized means for crafting that shared discourse. In fact, although many thinkers are arguing, as I am, for a radically different worldview, these thinkers present work in a way that is (usually) solely authored and published as a separate entity in a book or journal. I realise that this is exactly what I am doing in writing this paper. My fear is that, until we have found a methodology that enables a collaboration, our individual efforts will not be sufficient to counteract the Newtonian, mechanistic, separatist mindset that is presently increasing its hegemony in our global society.

Perhaps, as Monbiot (2017, 41) suggests, we should learn from neoliberalism. Mirowski and Plehwe (2009), in their comprehensive historical account of neoliberalism, have as their subtitle: 'The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective'. It tells how the Mount Pelerin society was formed by a group of transnational economists and intellectuals, agreeing a statement of aims at their first meeting in 1947 (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009, 22–24). From that point, they developed a powerful social movement, which drew in others to help drive the movement forward. Thus, in 1979, at the critical point when Margaret Thatcher was looking for an alternative to replace the social democracy associated with Keynesian economics, the work of the Mount Pelerin society was available to her as a well-articulated and comprehensible alternative.

Unless those who are interested in creating a more participatory, socially just society, are not only willing to dispute Thatcher's idea that 'there is no alternative' (Berlinski 2008), but are also prepared to work with others to produce an alternative that can gain widespread support, then we may find that the principles of neoliberalism will continue to thrive, and its powerbase further strengthen. In the next section, I explore how action research may be developed to create that alternative.

### **Action research to create a social movement committed to a socially just global society**

The history of action research, and the very different ways in which researchers understand and practise it, have been well documented (Reason and Bradbury 2008; Greenwood and Levin 2006; Gustavsen 2008; Adelman 1993). In this paper, reflecting on emancipatory forms of action research that might enable us to create a social movement with social justice as its heart, I am drawing specifically on Reason and Bradbury's (2008) ontological consideration of action research; Heron's (1996) practice of cooperative enquiry, with its participatory ontology and extended epistemology; and Reason and

Torbert's (2001) exploration of a transformational social science which integrates first-, second- and third-person action research.

Reason and Bradbury say that action research is 'rooted in participation', where participation is

An attitude of inquiry (which) includes developing and understanding that we are embodied beings part of a social and ecological order, and radically interconnected with all other beings. We are not bounded individuals experiencing the world in isolation. We are already participants, part-of rather than apart-from. (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 8)

Their ontological assumptions of action research resonate with those of quantum physics, and with the notion of a participatory consciousness. John Heron's ontology also reflects the principle of inseparability: Cooperative inquiry rests on a participatory reality which

affirms a mind-shaped reality which is subjective-objective: it is subjective because it is only known through the form the mind gives it; and it is objective because the mind interprets the given cosmos which it shapes. (Heron 1996, 11).

Such an ontology, Heron contends, requires an epistemology that extends beyond the ways of knowing adopted by either empirical positivism or postmodern interpretivism. There are four dimensions of this extended epistemology: *experiential knowing*, which is the immediate subjective-objective perceptions of the individual in relation to the world; *presentational knowing*, which is an expression of the experiential in creative forms, such as art, story-telling, dance, drama etc; *propositional knowing*, which is the conceptualisation of ideas and theories; and *practical knowing*, which, although it is supported by the first three, is the action that will complete the purpose of the research by contributing to the envisioned positive changes.

Grounded in this extended epistemology, Heron created cooperative inquiry as a methodology which involves 'two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it ... (moving) between this experience and reflecting on it together' (Heron 1996, 1), and in doing so, facilitate 'social empowerment and social justice in every sphere of human activity' (Heron 1998, 100). He lays out in detail the nature of the processes involved in an inquiry cycle, integrating action, reflection, and conceptualisation. He also explains how cooperative inquiry has within it the potential for transformative outcomes, if those participating are committed to personal and social change (Heron 1996, 48–49).

Reason and Torbert develop this thinking, and claim that drawing on a participatory paradigm for research:

forge(s) a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes *directly* to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part. (Reason and Torbert 2001, 6)

They propose, though, that a transformational social science requires an integration of first-, second- and third-person approaches to research if it is to support 'full human flourishing in community and in the more-than-human-world' (6). Cooperative inquiry is a clearly articulated form of second-person research, when participants engage with each other in face-to-face groups. However, integral to cooperative inquiry is the expectation that individuals will, between meetings, engage in first-person inquiry, reflecting on the implications for their own lives of what has been learned in group dialogue, and 'to act

choicefully and with awareness, to assess effects in the outside world while acting' (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 6). A rationale for first-person research as an essential component was articulated by Gandhi:

We but mirror the world. All tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. (Gandhi 1913)

Gustavsen introduces 'participative constructivism' (2014: 352) as a core concept in action research when aiming to create a social movement: that is, where participants involved in action research collectively construct the means to critically analyse and take action to shape the society in which they live. Many well-proven methods exist to enable processes of this kind, including world café,<sup>2</sup> open space technology,<sup>3</sup> Bohm Dialogue (Bohm 1996), and 'dialogue conferences' (Reason and Torbert 2001, 24). The latter was used by Gustavsen to involve large numbers of people in participative dialogue about planned action; but unlike conventional conferences, where attendees would present the results of their research, dialogue conferences were the integration of first-, second-, and third-person research in practice. The knowing generated was not through formal presentations, but in the 'dialogue itself and the subsequent discussion and actions undertaken by the participants to bring about changes in their practices' (Reason and Torbert, 24).

However, action research initiatives are unlikely to have impact beyond the local contexts in which they take part, unless there is a conscious effort to create connections with wider society. Reason and Torbert see third-person research as attempting

to create conditions which awaken and support the inquiring qualities of first- and second-person research in a wider community, thus empowering participants to create their own knowing-in-action in collaboration with others. (Reason and Torbert 2001, 22)

This is not easy to achieve; but if a new social movement founded on action research is to create a new story that inspires a critical mass of the population, it would be a prerequisite to understand and address this challenge. Mary Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Macguire (2003) recognise this when they critique action research for achieving much at a local level but failing to extend the knowledge and experience generated. They note that many practitioners have been struggling to create connections between successful small-scale initiatives and larger-scale social change strategies. For example, Gustavsen (2014) explains that, although action research-based efforts in Norway and other Scandinavian countries had some success in upscaling the benefits of smaller-scale projects, these successes were limited, because of the difficulties inherent in creating a synergy between the learning of different groups.

However brilliant a small group may be, it will not be able to organize changes of the scope and magnitude needed to sustain a movement. There is, consequently, a need for some degree of cooperation, or at least synchronization, among a number of researchers. (Gustavsen 2014, 353)

Based on his experience, Gustavsen contends that any new social movement needs to be 'characterised by shared goals that are pursued along different paths but in a way that participants learn from each other' (352).

There are a number of initiatives already in place, the aim of which is to address the social issues of our time, using action research principles. For example, the Presencing

Institute,<sup>4</sup> founded in 2006 by Otto Scharmer and his colleagues, has created an action research platform, as a means of supporting social and organisational change. Hilary Bradbury, co-editor of *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*, has investigated 'Action-oriented Research for Transformations' (ART),<sup>5</sup> to provide an opportunity for action researchers across the globe to find community.

To complement these, one practical way of responding to Monbiot's (2018) call for a new story could be to form a plan of action for the founding of a new social movement which specifically focuses on issues of social justice. An example of such a plan is included in [Appendix 1](#).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically analysed the social and political context in which efforts to promote social justice take place. Despite strong claims for a participatory reality, evidenced by findings from quantum physics and reflecting the work of a wide range of theorists who believe that we live in an entangled, inter-relational universe, the Newtonian worldview has endured. I offer an explanatory historical account of the intertwining of Newtonian science, neoclassical economics and the development of neoliberalism, which has led to a 'neoliberal rationality (that has) fashioned an ordinary discourse in which social justice is at once trivialized and monsterised as "political correctness"' (Brown 2019, 7). In reflecting on how we can transform political and educational environments through a more socially just action research, a plan of action could be devised, that integrates first-, second- and third-person approaches to research within a participatory paradigm. My proposal is that, by inviting all action researchers, including the editors, contributors and readers of this special issue of socially just action research, to meet online, we can collectively found a social movement to create a new story with intellectual depth that has social justice at its heart, which will offer a meaningful alternative to the dominant neoliberal narrative.

## Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwXQjRBLwsQ>
2. <http://www.theworldcafe.com>
3. <https://www.involve.org.uk/about>
4. <https://www.presencing.org/aboutus>
5. <https://actionresearchplus.com>

## Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Joan Walton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9875-0296>



## References

- Adelman, C. 1993. "Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research." *Educational Action Research* 1 (1): 7–24. doi:[10.1080/0965079930010102](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010102).
- Al-Khalili, J. 2003. *Quantum*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Atkins, L., and V. Duckworth. 2019. *Research Methods for Social Justice and Equity in Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Berlinski, C. 2008. "There Is No Alternative": *Why Margaret Thatcher Matters*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berman, M. 1981. *The Reenchantment of the World*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Bohm, D. 1996. *On Dialogue*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Brown, W. 2019. *In The Ruins of Neoliberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brydon-Miller, M., D. Greenwood, and P. Macguire. 2003. "Why Action Research? In." *Action Research* 1 (1): 9–28. doi:[10.1177/14767503030011002](https://doi.org/10.1177/14767503030011002).
- Capra, F. 1983. *The Turning Point*. London: Fontana.
- Christians, C.G. 2013. Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* 4th ed, edited by N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln. 125–168. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daza, S. 2013. "Putting Spivakian Theorizing to Work: Decolonizing Neoliberal Scientism in Education." *Educational Theory* 63 (6): 601–619. doi:[10.1111/edth.12044](https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12044).
- De Quincey, C. 2002. *Radical Nature: Rediscovering the Soul of Matter*. Rochester: Park Street Press.
- Dorling, D. 2015. *Inequality and the 1%*. London: Verso.
- Fideler, D., ed. 2000. *Alexandria*. Michigan: Phanes Press.
- Fraser, N, ed. 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso.
- Friedman, M. 1966. "The Methodology of Positive Economics." In *Essays In Positive Economics*, 3–43. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fullbrook, E. 2007. "Economics and Neoliberalism." In *After Blair*, edited by G. Hassan, 160–171. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Fullbrook, E. 2016. *Narrative Fixation in Economics*. Bristol: World Economics Association.
- Gandhi, M. 1913. "Indian Opinion, August 9, 2013, Reprinted in the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, V13, Ch 153." 241.
- Giroux, H. 2014. *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Greenwood, D., and M. Levin. 2006. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Gustavsen, B. 2008. "Action Research, Practical Challenges and the Formation of Theory." *Action Research* 6 (4): 421–437. doi:[10.1177/1476750308094130](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750308094130)
- Gustavsen, B. 2014. "Social Impact and the Justification of Action Research Knowledge." *Action Research* 12 (4): 339–356. doi:[10.1177/1476750314534455](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750314534455).
- Harvey, D. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heron, J. 1996. *Cooperative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*. London: Sage.
- Heron, J. 1998. *Sacred Science: Person-centred Inquiry into the Spiritual and the Subtle*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Heshusius, L. 1994. "Freeing Ourselves from Objectivity: Managing Subjectivity or Turning toward a Participatory Mode of Consciousness?" *Educational Researcher* 23 (3): 15–22. doi:[10.3102/0013189X023003015](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X023003015).
- Heshusius, L. 1995. "Listening to Children: "What Could We Possibly Have in Common?" from Concerns with Self to Participatory Consciousness." *Theory into Practice* 34 (2): 117–123. doi:[10.1080/00405849509543668](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543668).
- Hutchins, G. 2014. *The Illusion of Separation: Exploring the Cause of Our Current Crises*. Edinburgh: Floris Books. E.
- James, W. 1890. *The principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Jevons, W. 1871 [1970]. *The Theory of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Jung, C. 1959. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. London: Routledge.



- Kotsko, A. 2018. *Neoliberalism's Demons*. CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ledwith, M., and J. Springett. 2010. *Participatory Practice: Community-based action for transformative change*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Ledwith, M. 2020. *Community Development: A critical and radical approach*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Midgley, M. 2004. *The Myths We Live By*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, D. 1976. *Social Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mirowski, P., and D. Plehwe, eds. 2009. *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Monbiot, G. 2016. *How Did We Get into This Mess?* London: Verso.
- Monbiot, G. 2018. *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for An Age of Crisis*. London: Verso.
- Olson, K, ed. 2008. *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*. London: Verso.
- Rawls, J. 1999. *A Theory of Justice*. MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. 2008. *The Sage Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Reason, P., and H. Bradbury. 2008. *The Sage Handbook of Action Research*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Reason, P., and W. Torbert. 2001. "The Action Turn: Toward a Transformational Social Science." *Concepts and Transformations* 6 (1): 1–37. doi:[10.1075/cat.6.1.02rea](https://doi.org/10.1075/cat.6.1.02rea).
- Schwandt, T. 2005. "A Diagnostic Reading of Scientifically Based Research for Education." *Educational Theory* 55: 285–305.
- Skolimowski, H. 1994. *The Participatory Mind*. London: Arkana.
- Slavin, R. 2002. "Evidence-Based Educational Policies: Transforming Educational Practice and Research." *Educational Researcher* 31 (7): 15–21. doi:[10.3102/0013189X031007015](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X031007015).
- Venugopal, R. 2015. "Neoliberalism as Concept." *Economy and Society* 44 (2): 165–187. doi:[10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356](https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356).
- Walras, M. 1874 [1984]. *Elements of Pure Economics*. Philadelphia: Orion.
- Wheeler, A. 1994. *At Home in the Universe*. New York: American Institute of Physics.

## Appendix 1 A call to engage in an evolving socially just action research project

Initiating question: How do we set about founding a social movement to create a new story that has intellectual depth with social justice at its heart; and will offer a meaningful alternative to the prevailing neoliberal narrative?

The following might provide an initial plan of action:

- (1) Invite all action researchers, including the editors, contributors and readers of this special issue of socially just action research to meet online, with the intention of engaging in a cooperative inquiry, which has the above question (or an agreed version of it) as its starting point. If there are more than 12 interested people, then after an initial discussion, there should be an immediate division into groups of 6–12 for further meetings.
- (2) The research will integrate first, second and third person forms of inquiry, and will be grounded in a participatory paradigm (entangling ontology, epistemology, methodology, and ethics).
- (3) Starting with second person inquiry, and using guidelines from Heron's *Cooperative Inquiry* (reading at minimum Chapter 5 'Stages in the Inquiry Cycle'), agree a launching statement, a plan of action for the first phase, and a method of recording; also a set of ground rules.
- (4) At the end of the first meeting, each person agrees what action they are going to take in their own lives (this will become their first-person inquiry). Each person may have a different personal action plan, there may be agreement that everyone follows the same plan, or there may be a combination of small group and individual action plans.
- (5) All members of this initiating cooperative inquiry should be free to share their experience of being in the group (subject to any ground rules concerning what should be kept confidential).

The aim is to encourage other cooperative inquiry groups to be set up, with the same overall purpose (set by the initiating question), but free to choose their own focus of inquiry relevant to their personal/professional circumstances.

- (6) Methods are established to share the experience and reflections from each group (there may be many methods). These will contribute to the third person research. How experiences and reflections are recorded and disseminated needs to be discussed and agreed as part of the process, but may include the establishing of a website, which enables recordings from the different groups to be made available; and use of social media to share more widely.
- (7) A core group is established to support the mutually dynamic and evolving relationship between the first-, second- and third-person approaches to research, and to create some kind of coherent narrative which distils the main learning from the whole process.
- (8) At all times, the guiding principle of any choices to be made should be: 'what decision made now will best contribute to the creation of a social movement that tells a new story with social justice at its heart?' The aim of creating a meaningful alternative to the neoliberal narrative will remain the main aim (unless an alternative is consciously agreed as part of the process).