

LEARNING FROM ACTION



LEARNING FROM ACTION

Working with the Non-Verbal

Edited by

R. D. Hinshelwood and Luca Mingarelli



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*We want to dedicate this book to the two communities that are our own
families, from which we learned so much*

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Foreword

Donna M. Elmendorf and Edward R. Shapiro

This volume brings to life the deep commitment of its editors, R. D. Hinshelwood and Luca Mingarelli, to understand the human systems dynamics that create health and illness, competence and incapacity, belonging and alienation. Through their contributions and those of the authors they have brought together, they illuminate the power of action to shape social meaning—and illustrate how reflection on action can reveal the powerful forces that underlie the seemingly ordinary behaviours of everyday life.

While the work may be most directly relevant to those who work in therapeutic communities and other systems of care, the insights gleaned from the Learning from Action conferences will prove valuable to anyone who strives to understand the layers of dyadic, group, and organisational dynamics that shape experience.

The writing moves from the theoretical to the practical, bringing both to life with evocative here-and-now accounts. The activity of consultants and participants—dropping a tray of food, allocating money, the decision to open a window (or not)—illuminates unsymbolised affect, personal history, and role relatedness. Concerted collective reflection opens the possibility of translating the affects and attitudes contained

in action that otherwise can serve to silently compel, bewilder, excite, or enrage.

Imagine you are among thirty mental health professionals who have never met before. You have come into an isolated setting where a small staff tells you that you have three days to create a community: you are to divide into three groups (shopping/cooking, cleaning, and planning activities). The staff will provide money (limited) and equipment. You will share your bedroom with a stranger. It's up to you to decide which task to join. You will need to manage your interactions within and across the three groups. Periodically, you will sit with the developing community to reflect on your actions and experience, but all the time you will be preoccupied with what must be accomplished.

You will learn the different values and meaning you give to preparing food, cleaning, and relaxation, and how those meanings impact others and shape the work they do. You will experience intense group dynamics of competition, role differentiation, and irrational behaviour. You will discover how deeply your mind and body can get involved in the conscious and unconscious functioning of a human system.

The event makes public the competence, limitations, competitiveness, and projections of individuals and groups, underscoring the dynamics of what makes a community function. The spare design and the staff's commitment to reflection help participants to recognise and articulate the range of feelings that accompany working in a role with limited time and resources. That learning speaks to all of us.

In a series of mutually complementary chapters that build on one another, the book describes the psychoanalytic and group relations traditions from which these conferences spring, offering a useful formulation of the *language of action* and moving to a systematic report and analysis of individual, group, and intergroup experience. Lively individual reports from staff and members about their struggles to accomplish tasks, contain their feelings, and help integrate the emerging community illuminate the anxiety, excitement, irritation, exhaustion, and risk that all participants experience. The book puts those of us more accustomed to standing outside to study others into the world of action and engagement, educating us about the lives of our patients—and about the world we all live in.

We all communicate through language, but also through the way we interact with others, our actions, our *process*. *How* we do things is natural to us; we don't see it, but others do. We can only learn about what we communicate through our process when others tell us what they see. That becomes possible in these conferences because participants join in shared tasks, take up roles, carry out functions, experience how others behave towards them, and then enter a shared reflective space. They learn to recognise the almost undetectable actions that can push people into stereotyped roles that the group needs: the irritated one, the passive one, the child, the 'patient'. That emerging recognition makes them part of an unusual community, committed to learn about its irrational, projective life.

There is a lot to learn in this book; the unfolding chapters begin to clarify the links between feelings, behaviour, and communication, and between body, mind, group, and society. Our patients who live and work in residential settings struggle with this integration—the experiences reported here will help clinicians to stand in their shoes, providing a new perspective on the power of seemingly ordinary action to create alienation or build connection.

But the book is also larger than that. This body of work points in a hopeful direction. Through over two decades of engagement in these conferences, the writers have deeply understood the healing power of community. These pioneers in the life of therapeutic communities have come to see how acting out of problematic meaning and experience, so often 'assigned' to the disturbed amongst us, can be registered and reworked in the service of 'reflection, awareness, empathy, and cooperative learning'—efforts so deeply needed in our larger society.

Introduction

R. D. Hinshelwood and Luca Mingarelli

This is a publication in the sense that it will be read by the interested public. It is important that this is not owned just by our two selves. It is owned by all who have joined together in these twenty-odd temporary communities that have been formed to learn from action over twenty years.

Reading this book

We intend this as a source for readers who want anything from the detailed experience which forms the basis of learning to the ideas behind the LfA workshops/conferences. Although there is a history of thinking about how we learn about what we do, and that is in the early chapters, the emphasis as we go on is more to do with the experiences that are learned from by participants, staff, and the ‘seniors’ (who have been previous participants). Clearly, different readers will have different interests and you should sample the chapters in the order that suits you. For those who want to ‘get a feel’ first of all, you could consider reading the last chapters first!

Later in this introduction there is a little guide, or map, of the chapters to browse through for the place to start.

Mental health and how to produce it

Clearly, mental health issues occupy a large part of our health and social care systems in every country. So, it seems worth drawing attention to ways of working and thinking which may not be familiar to the many thousands of care workers and students for whom the wellbeing of all of us is their life's interest.

Rather than the medical model of caring for those incapable of helping themselves, there is a longstanding approach of a different kind. This is based on *self*-understanding, and the co-production of health through the human relations between carer and cared-for. Such relations are often very distorted and troubled, but that co-production comes precisely from understanding those distortions and frustrations themselves.

We present this attempt to keep in mind the persons who lie beyond the symptoms and diagnoses, and who in some deeper level of their personalities wish to live with the rest of the world again in congenial and creative ways. That idea to be kept in mind is the conjoining of responsibility between a team of carers and a community of the cared-for, all engaged in a common enterprise with each other so far as it is possible. In other words, we expect the reflections in this book to complement the thinking of both sides in the care partnership. Would it be appropriate to think that this book should be present in our therapeutic communities in the way a 'Gideon's Bible' is available to residents in hotels?

With twenty years of experience and with the numbers of people who have been keen to contribute, it seems the right time to establish a more permanent record of the project and what everyone has learned. Both of the editors hope that readers will find what follows stimulating for their work, and their practice, and especially in the uncertainty of this 'Covid time' when we are distracted so much to other things. And that the book will indeed encourage your own conceptualising of care work as a relational activity in which overt and hidden communications amongst groups of people are a prime focus for the work.

That idea that therapeutic community workers would learn in a new and appropriate way in a living together situation emerged around 1980

and is represented in this book by chapters by Haigh and Lees and by Rawlings (Chapters 10 and 11). But it was not until one of us (RDH) began to think through the relevance of group relations with Enrico Pedriali one weekend in Milan in 2000 that the design and practice of learning from active roles emerged as a specific design. It was then, with Enrico's energy and imagination, together with his administrator Daniela Cabibbe, that the first trial of this idea went ahead.

Both Enrico and I (RDH) had been involved in therapeutic communities in Italy and in Britain. And I had been acquainted with a psychoanalytically oriented therapeutic community in Turin for some ten years. That was Il Porto, established by Metello Corulli. The practice of therapeutic communities was not necessarily identical in Britain and in Italy, but both very clearly promoted the idea that mental health needs to be rethought, and the practice of psychiatry should concern itself first with persons and not solely with physiology/medication. Mental healthcare with disturbed persons was not completely foreign to the group relations tradition since GR and TCs had grown out of the same experiments in wartime Britain in the military hospital at Northfield, Birmingham. What was common was learning from experience of being a person within a group and an organisation, and that the learning was the responsibility of the learner just as much as the 'teacher' whose role is to provide the right conditions.

At the time, I (RDH) had been working at the Cassel Hospital, a therapeutic community that had been pioneered by Tom Main in 1946. Main had himself worked at Northfield Hospital, and the Cassel Hospital became a direct descendent of the wartime experiments. At the Cassel Hospital, work was *with* members of the community rather than *upon* them. It was a style of social therapy that had been honed for fifty years. It seemed important to import, if possible, the result of those decades of experience. The method had been termed 'working alongside' and I engaged the senior nurse from the Cassel to be a part of the staff team for the first ten years of the workshops. Janet Chamberlain and I represented the British input into the Italian context. There may have been some rivalry between the two national approaches, but overall there was no serious dynamic from this competition to disrupt the work. Janet gave a solid foundation to the activities and the consultants working alongside. That approach has survived long after she and I have moved aside.

This thinking, together with the energy and organisational imagination of Enrico Pedriali and his administrator Daniela Cabibbe, evolved into a series of workshops roughly every two years for a decade until unfortunately Enrico died in 2009. Thereafter it has been the energy of Luca Mingarelli that has sustained the workshops/conferences, run ten times since then (including two conferences in Japan). So over twenty years or so there may be as many as 400 people who have been members or staff (or both) on one or more occasions. Overall, there has been a considerable appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on the way we as persons engage and relate with each other over work and activity. Action is clearly a different mode of connection which everyone understands, but which in general we all tend to take for granted and think little about.

The character of the workshop has evolved over time, being termed now a conference, and therefore more in line with the group relations events. And inevitably Luca Mingarelli's vision has a slightly different perspective from that of Enrico's at the start. It has emerged slowly, and largely whilst working on this book, that there are two conceptions of the conference that can be discerned. One is to do with the kind of communication that occurs in hidden and implicit ways in an active working together; the other is the emphasis on the responsibility in doing, in deciding, and in accomplishing the work. It may be seen that these could respond to the work with more psychotic people where symbolic representation and communication (including the use of words) is disrupted and distracted by their own distraught impulses. On the other hand, care work can be enhanced by reflecting on the often inappropriate, sometimes enraging, behaviour of those more personality-disordered people.

A little map of the chapters

The attempt here has been to set the scene with the conceptual background and the emergence of therapeutic communities from experiments way back in the Second World War in the 1940s, which transferred to civilian psychiatry (Chapter 1). Then Giovanni Foresti and Antonio Sama, in Chapter 2, give a detailed overview of the early origins of group relations conferences (GRCs) and their development with therapeutic communities in parallel, and converging. Their philosophical but impassioned (and even poetic) conclusion is that action only happens

in a communal setting. This is complemented in Chapter 3 by Mario Perini, reflecting on the place of a ‘language’ that is implicit in actions and their place in a GRC context. These are historical connections with the Tavistock group relations tradition which evolved from the famous Northfield experiments in the Second World War in the UK. But also the therapeutic community tradition evolved from that tradition, as Foresti and Sama describe. The intimate tie-up between GRCs and therapeutic communities is described in Chapters 1 and 4 by Louisa Brunner and R. D. Hinshelwood. It has been possible with hindsight to construct some of that early thinking, which in an earlier version we wrote with Enrico in Hinshelwood, Pedriali, and Brunner (2010). Perhaps the intentions have become clearer over the years. For those with a taste for a historical story, Appendix 1 consists of two letters—between Enrico Pedriali and R. D. (Bob) Hinshelwood—which Louisa discovered in her papers.

The rest of the book consists of detailed descriptions and personal reflections of the experience from which members and staff have gained their own learning. The initial thinking had to be boiled down to an actual set of groups, tasks, and persons—in short, a detailed timetable. This important practical step is the focus of Chapter 5, by Giada Boldetti and Luca Mingarelli. The elements of the LfA events are shown in detail as a timetable. And Appendix 2 gives a sample of the various timetables as they evolved over time and were used in 2001, 2005, 2012, and 2019. But each element of the timetable consists not only of intentions but eventually of actual experiences. Chapters 6, 7, and 8, by Simona Masnata, R. D. Hinshelwood, and Davide Catullo, are accounts of ‘snapshots’ of those experiences that staff have captured and retained from various editions of LfA. These snapshots were gained from different roles that staff performed, mostly consulting to one or other element of the event, including the administrator (Chapter 6). Gilad Ovadia (Chapter 9) takes us on his thoughtful journey through the consultancy work he did.

The development of LfA was not in isolation. Apart from the GRC and therapeutic compassionate and ‘enabling’ communities, an initiative initially developing as early as 1978 was to run experiential weekends for therapeutic community workers as training experiences. In part, that early experiment, the living–learning experience (LLE), prompted the thinking from which LfA evolved ten years or more later. The series of LLE weekends still continue and some comparison is made by Rex Haigh

and Jan Lees in Chapters 10 and 11, together with some formal fieldwork research by Barbara Rawlings (Chapter 12). Such a parallel experiential workshop has a collegial feel to it and comparisons are worthwhile. Haigh and Lees clearly aim towards a co-production of ‘compassion and enabling’, in contrast to LfA, which aims at a co-production of communication and understanding. Reaching these chapters, the reader may want to engage with the question of whether there is a significant difference between LfA and LLE or not.

The purpose of the experiences in LfA is that it should be fertiliser for thinking about the work with the behaviour and communications encountered in the work back home. John Diamond (Chapter 13) is Chief Executive of the Mulberry Bush Organisation, which regularly sent a number of its staff to LfA events. This chapter surveys the kinds of experiences important for people in the frontline work of therapeutic communities. Learning from LfAs has resulted not only in developing the work in therapeutic communities, but it has also had a strong influence on the development of LfAs themselves. Chapter 14, by Luca Mingarelli and Giada Boldetti, describes some of the developments in the content of the programme in later years, and notably after 2010. So many people had been members in more than one edition that it became possible to consider a category of member termed ‘senior’. Although developing such a hierarchy suggests different levels of authority and responsibility, the attempt has been to focus on levels of experience, and especially on the experience of sharing the co-production of knowledge.

In the last seven to eight years, LfA has become truly international, and this provided some opportunity to recognise the contrasts between aspects of community living in different cultures. From the beginning of the LfAs, some degree of difference in the relations to work and to decision-making together were apparent in Italy and the UK. But with many other nationalities now attending and sometimes several from a specific culture, different dimensions of the culture can be discerned. This is especially noted in the account from Hungary by Zsolt Zalka and Lili Valkó (Chapter 15), who concentrated on the events in a therapeutic community as if a drama in a theatre. Eriko Koga and Yuko Kawai organised the first LfA outside of Italy, in this case in Japan, on two occasions in 2017 and 2019. They discuss, in Chapter 16, a number of specific differences between Japanese and European culture which manifested in

the LfAs and had to be handled. Finally, Heather Churchill (Chapter 17) emphasised the experience of belonging, or lacking it, from a US perspective. By this point, we hope readers will also get a sense of belonging, a belonging to the embrace of this kind of community where one can absorb even a little of the health we can produce together.

The experience of reading this book will convey something, though not everything, about coming to an LfA. What it will convey is largely a verbalised account of the event, whereas being here is a very different challenge and experience. It is to learn in the context of being together, and not the solitary experience of the armchair you are sitting in. Nevertheless, we hope you will be sufficiently intrigued to retain these impressions of other people's experience and to consider if that can fertilise your own work, or even tempt you to join an LfA in the near future.