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Carol Munn-Giddings<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Anglia Polytechnic University, Colchester, United Kingdom

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THEORETICAL RESOURCE

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## **Links between Kropotkin's Theory of 'Mutual Aid' and the Values and Practices of Action Research**

**CAROL MUNN-GIDDINGS**

*Anglia Polytechnic University, Colchester, United Kingdom*

**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this article is to outline some of the key ideas of Peter Kropotkin on Mutual Aid, which can be seen to have a resonance and relevance to the value base and practices of action research. Written in 1902 as a refutation of the appropriation of Darwin's theories by social philosophers, Kropotkin's work stresses the importance of cooperation, rather than competition amongst humans as the basis for a creative, supportive and developmental human community (society). His ideas can be seen to have a particular importance or relationship to the growing body of action research in the community health and social care fields, where Kropotkin's theory can also be seen to support and explain the activity of the growing numbers of self help/mutual aid groups in both condition specific groups and in social/community concerns more generally.

Anyone new to action research tends to be struck by the proponents' adherence not just to a form of inquiry, but often also to a way of life. Cynical bystanders have commented on the almost 'religious' feel to Collaborative Action Research (CARN) conferences, more sympathetic commentators have underlined the importance and relevance of such a position to the core value base of action research that seeks to align itself closely to more radical practices of educational, community, health and social care development. This core value base is often expressed (in various ways) as a commitment to relationships (in the enquiry process and beyond) based on collaboration (Reason, 1994), partnership (Somekh, 1994), cooperation (Heron, 1996) and non-hierarchy (Stringer, 1996).

Another way of expressing and exploring these 'ideals' can be found in Peter Kropotkin's theories of Mutual Aid. In this 'theoretical resource', I

therefore outline some of the key principles of Kropotkin's work setting them in a historical, social and political context. I then draw some key analogies between his work, and that of the practices and values underlying both historical and contemporary forms of action research.

Born in 1842, Kropotkin was considered by many to be the leading theorist of the Anarchist movement in Europe. Much of his political thought is developed in his book 'Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution', published in 1902, which explained the way in which his theories work and, importantly, how his theories and political views were developed from his observations of animal and human life. Kropotkin came from a privileged social background (a prince in fact!) and, as a young man serving in the Cossack army, also spent 5 years (from 1862 to 1867) as a naturalist studying the geology and zoology of eastern Russia (Logan, 1993). It was during this period that he made his observations that living things coped best with the harsh Siberian environment primarily through cooperative behaviour. This conclusion is contrary to the powerfully influential conclusion reached by Kropotkin's predecessor, Darwin, that progressive evolution of the species rests on the struggle for life and the law of mutual contest.

Coming from a privileged background, Kropotkin was a well-educated man and before he began his own observations, and while crossing Siberia, Kropotkin read Charles Darwin's book *Origins of the Species* (1859). He therefore began his studies looking for the struggle between individuals of the same species, but could not find it:

*... I failed to find... although I was eagerly looking for it ... that bitter struggle for the means of existence among animals belonging to the same species, which was considered by most Darwinists as the dominant characteristics of the struggle for life and the main factor of evolution. (1993, p. 12)*

Kropotkin did not wholly dispute Darwin's zoological thesis, rather he concluded that the struggles for survival has two opposing sides. He did observe that individuals of the same species struggled and competed where limited resources existed, but on the other hand, the struggle between individuals and their environment led to cooperation within the species (Anonymous, 1997). Despite the fact that war and extermination exist in nature, he claimed that mutual aid was prevalent and, moreover, that this is what results in creativity and development:

*... we see that, in the animal world, progressive development and mutual aid go hand in hand, while the inner struggle within the species is concomitant with retrogressive development. (1993, p. 232)*

Kropotkin, therefore, continually emphasises the importance of collaboration, which he believed could benefit isolated individuals, as well as the species as a whole.

In terms of the locations in which the studies were carried out, it is perhaps not surprising that the study designs and environments lent themselves to such different conclusions, i.e. Darwin carried out his studies in the tropics, which exhibit the greatest number of animals and plants per square metre. By contrast, Kropotkin was in an immense area, sparsely populated, agrarian, and with vast amounts of unexploited resources where climatic and ecological conditions are frequently capable of wiping out large spaces and inhabitants. The interpretation of the research also took place in rather different political and philosophical contexts. Darwin was an Englishman inevitably influenced by Western European moral philosophers of the day, particularly Malthus (whom he acknowledged reading during the course of his studies) and his overt concerns with population control in the late nineteenth century. Darwin was also living in a country that was over populated during a period of the industrial revolution and the birth of modern capitalism. The theory of Natural Selection fitted into the tradition of Thomas Hobbes, David Ricardo, Adam Smith as well as Malthus (Anonymous, 1997). Kropotkin was living in pre-Revolutionary Russia, in a hierarchical system dominated by the Czars at a time when the socialist movement was emerging. He, by contrast, was moving towards anarchism during the course of his scientific studies and became very politically active post this period. He credits the biologist K. F. Kessler as being highly influential on scientific thinking (Kropotkin, 1902, p. 14), and politically was particularly influenced by his readings by example of William Godwin, Alexander Herzen and the French anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon (see Fosl, undated).

What began to particularly concern Kropotkin most about the differences between his own observations and those of Darwin was what he saw as the appropriation of Darwin's work by social philosophers, classically Huxley's essay 'The Struggle for Existence in Human Society' published in 1888 in the journal *The Nineteenth Century*. In this article, Huxley used Darwin's work to relate the notions of 'The struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest' to human kind. Kropotkin originally replied in the same journal, with his mutual aid argument, in a series of articles, hoping that Huxley would engage in a dialogue. This, however, he declined to do despite being invited to do so by the editor.

In his resulting book, *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution*, begun in prison in Clairvaux, France, and finally written whilst in exile in England, Kropotkin began to link his own zoological observations with a critical social philosophy of humans. In this work he specifically attacked the way in which social Darwinists were using the so-called natural law of competition and 'the survival of the fittest' to justify acts of racism (such as slave trading), the growing power of the state (based on the notion that competitive humans need regulation via a higher authority) and the miseries of the industrial revolution. He viewed the appropriation of Darwin's work as a specifically Anglo-Saxon development, which tried to explain in pseudo-

'scientific' terms the disasters being experienced by capitalism and colonialism.

Kropotkin attacked Hobbe's notion of primitive humans as ferocious beasts, grouped in small families fighting each other for territory until a wise man/men (sic) imposed harmony via the state. Kropotkin, tracing the various stages of human evolution, claims that human life outside of community or a society is impossible and that integrated societies existed before *Homo sapiens*:

*The mutual aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history ... whenever mankind had to work out a new social organisation, adapted to a new phase of development, its constructive genius always drew the elements and inspiration ... from that same ever-living tendency.*  
(p. 180)

In contrast to the contract notions of Hobbes and Rousseau, he claims that there is no point at which society was founded, citing hundreds of examples of Mutual Aid amongst insects, birds and mammals in societies that were barbarian and civilised (Anonymous, 1997).

Rather than the state enabling harmonious relationships, he claims that, from a historical perspective, it has always been the function of the state to eliminate communitarian institutions, and he cites many example of the way in which hierarchical relationships stifle the initiative and capacity of both individual and mutual aid associations:

*In barbarian society, to assist at a fight between two men, arisen from a quarrel, and not to prevent it from taking a fatal issue, meant to be oneself treated as a murderer; but under the theory of the all-protecting State the bystander need not intrude: it is the policeman's business or not to interfere.* (p. 183)

(Kropotkin takes from French examples given in the *Journal de Economistes*, April 1893, p. 94):

*It is hardly credible, and yet it is true, that when, for instance, a peasant intends to pay in money his share in the repair of a communal road, instead of himself breaking the necessary amount of stones, no fewer than twelve different functionaries of the State must give their approval, and an aggregate of fifty-two different acts must be performed by them, before the peasant is permitted to pay that money to the communal council.* (p. 187)

Kropotkin, then, viewed cooperation/collaboration as fundamental to human and social development and the majority of examples he cites are of 'equal' citizens engaged in mutually beneficial acts or behaviour (with some altruistic examples for emphasis). He also notes that forms of localised

cooperation endure or re-appear even after the rise of bureaucratic government. For example, how, in the Kursk district of Russia, whole communities, rich and poor, on a given day, combine their skills and produce to provide for the local community (p. 203) large-scale systems of drainage and irrigation that are developed across villages by the people themselves (p. 205); and how an escaped prisoner in France risks re-arrest to save a child in a burning house (p. 219) – examples which he documents across Europe and claims are prevalent across the world (p. 209).

He differentiates this ‘reciprocity’ from acts of charity that he terms:

*..a character of inspiration from above, and accordingly, implies a certain superiority of the giver upon the receiver. (p. 222)*

This is the antithesis of the ‘equal’ practices of mutual aid, where people are not cast in the roles of either ‘giver’ or ‘receiver’, but are both simultaneously – a practice which can be seen to be ‘empowering’ in contemporary terminology. Interestingly, he attributes the motivation to undertake charitable works as not only related to the desire to acquire notoriety, political power or social distinction, but also the desire to fill a gap not satisfied by acquired wealth:

*men who have acquired wealth very often do not find in it the expected satisfaction ... the conscience of human solidarity begins to tell. (p. 229)*

This for Kropotkin underlines the human need for social relationships that cannot be fulfilled through individualistic behaviour.

Kropotkin did not write specifically about education in this book, but it is of interest to note that he did advocate what he termed ‘integral education’, in which both mental and manual skills would be cultivated to produce an integrated society. He suggested, for example, juxtaposing classroom-based maths and science alongside being outdoors, and learning by doing and observing first hand. Both implicit and explicit therefore in his broader theories is a belief in the value of a knowledge base derived from personal and collective experience.

Unlike Darwin’s work, perhaps not surprisingly, Kropotkin’s work received little institutional support in either Great Britain or Russia at the time it was published. He was supported by the Director of the journal *The Nineteenth Century* and by the Secretary of the London Geographical Society, but in general his arguments were ignored in academic circles, as he was reproached for his ideological interests that were seen to deny the objectivity science required (familiar!). Despite this, *Mutual Aid* was widely circulated in workers and syndicalist circles with hundreds and thousands of editions published and read out loud for illiterate people. His work has been claimed as the foundation of the modern anarchist movement and was influential in mid-twentieth century Spain, as well as with the New Left theorists from the 1960’s onwards (Anonymous, 1997). Interestingly, his work is also being revisited by biologists who, drawing on ecological

theories, are seeking to study the interactive processes in living systems (see, for example, Angros & Stanciu, cited in Logan, 1993).

Although Kropotkin's critique of social Darwinism originated from his critique of the limitations of Darwin's study, as well as its misappropriation by social theorists, he did not explicitly address or critique Darwin's methodology or the philosophy underlying the work, i.e. positivism. Rather, following Darwin, he attempted to use his own work to develop universal laws about human behaviour, albeit more optimistic ones. Despite this limitation, there are many elements within his work that might usefully be linked with historical and contemporary forms of action research. A few ideas are given in Figure 1.

|   |
|---|
| 'Political' context of research<br>Cooperation is as strong as competition<br>Cooperation leads to:<br>Creativity<br>Human development<br>Ownership<br>Equality<br>Empowerment<br>Link between first hand 'doing' & application<br>Notions of 'community' |
|---|

Figure 1. Links to action research.

### Politics

Whilst no-one would assume that action researchers all reach, or operate within, the same political conclusions as Kropotkin, many of the values that both derive from and underline his work can be seen as analogous with the values and practices of both historical and contemporary forms of action research. First, given that social research (let alone zoological research) operates within a social and political system, as action researchers amongst others have been quick to point out – research cannot be seen to operate in a personal or social vacuum (Winter, 1989; Elliott, 1991; Wadsworth, 1998). The starting point for any social inquiry is based on personal or collective preference and certain assumptions about human behaviour. It is this acknowledgement and belief that demarcates action research as a form of inquiry or, indeed, a 'paradigm' from a positivistic paradigm that claims social and political neutrality.

Kurt Lewin, often claimed as the founder of contemporary action research, began his own studies within a specific social and historical context – as a Prussian émigré to America escaping Nazi persecution. He held strong views, which motivated him to make his ideas and research relevant to the daily factory lives of the working classes (Hart & Bond, 1995). Whilst Lewin is accused of failing to link his notions of democratic

participation to any wider societal critique (Adelman, 1993), most contemporary action researchers, particularly in the fields of community and social care either explicitly or implicitly align themselves with a position that rejects the dominance of a knowledge base created, accessed and utilised by a 'privileged few', and supports the creation of a different knowledge base formed by predominately hitherto excluded groups – this has also resonance in the educational field particularly in the work of Paolo Freire (1972). Kropotkin's work reminds us, in extreme terms, of the role of research in challenging, or colluding with, specific ideological notions about human behaviour and society.

### Cooperation

Kropotkin's fundamental belief was in the developmental capacity of humans when they cooperate, rather than working in competition with one another. This, of course, is the cornerstone of action research, which strives towards collaboration between those affected by a situation who together develop methods that better assist them in understanding and attempting to change that situation. This is both the value base and the practice of action research, whether in the classroom, the hospital, social services or in the community.

Although Kropotkin concentrates his theories on the processes of daily life and social organisation, there are clear analogies with the social processes of action research, which Springer refers to in the community context as:

*... a collective process, engaging people who previously have been the subjects of research in the process of defining and redefining the corpus of understanding on which their community or organisational life is based. (p. 10)*

Similarly, to the social relationships described as forming the basis of 'Mutual Aid', the collaborative relationships strived for in action research are based on notions of equity – of worth, of input, of participation. In both practices there is a rejection of the 'outsider', whose role is to provide expertise and guidance. For Kropotkin this is embodied in the state, for action researchers in the conventional and independent researcher. Rather, in both Kropotkin's ideas and Action Research the source of knowledge and action is located with those affected by the situation. The potential for more creative (and workable) solutions derived via cooperation, and mutual aid is greatest when people directly facing the situation or problem formulate the issues. Thus, there is a common belief that being involved in mutual aid processes is what leads to human and social development.

### Experiential Knowledge

Valuing the direct experience of people is also fundamental to action research. Whilst Kropotkin offers us no analogous examples of 'reflective practice', he does clearly value the personal and collective experience and knowledge held, and shared in mutual aid groups. It is within the context of 'experiential knowledge' that Kropotkin's work can be viewed as having a particular relevance for the emerging body of action research led by service users and community groups in the health and social care fields (e.g. Oliver, 1996; Beresford, 1999; Rose, 1999). The service user movement has largely developed from self-help/mutual aid groups which are groups 'made up of people who have personal experience of the same life situation ... groups are run by and for their members' (Nottingham Self-Help Team, 1995) as opposed to support groups facilitated by professionals. These groups are particularly prevalent in the areas of physical disability, mental health, learning disability and carers. They are a growing national and international phenomena whose development has been traced back to the guilds and unions (quoted as examples by Kropotkin) and, more recently, of the women's and civil rights movement (Munn-Giddings, 1998; Borkman, 1999). These groups can be viewed as contemporary forms of the tendency described by Kropotkin, and, similarly to the examples given by him, mutuality as opposed to 'charity' is the basis of relationships and processes in these groups. The knowledge base derived over time from the shared narratives in these groups can and has proven to be very challenging to the prevalent view held by professional groups (Munn-Giddings, 1998). Borkman, one of the leading theorists in this area, has defined experiential knowledge as:

*..truth based on personal experience with a phenomenon rather than information gained by hearsay, folk or lay knowledge, professional knowledge or the pronouncements of a charismatic leader. It is subjectively base. (1976)*

An advocate of participatory action research, Borkman is now developing her theories of how these groups 'learn' from one another to develop a shared narrative' and, in doing so, is drawing on the work of Lewin, Kolb and others who have traditionally informed educational action research. Such work underlines the importance of linking contemporary forms of action research and mutual aid.

### Community

Finally, Kropotkin continually stresses mutual aid as a form of community. The idea of community is also central to action research based on the principles of equality of membership and ownership of inquiry. Although action research stresses the individual development that occurs via the inquiry process it does not happen in isolation, but always within a mutually supportive and collective endeavour (e.g. Carr & Kemmis's 'self-

reflective community'). In a broader sense, community development has been an area that particularly supports and promotes action research, and has particularly highlighted the negative effects of hierarchies and competitive individualism so disliked and refuted by Kropotkin. Community development through action research, as envisaged historically by Lewin & Collier, sought to empower the disempowered and attempted to redress structural problems at the heart of modern societies, even though many contemporary action researchers are cautious in making claims for the societal impact of their work, stressing rather the localised relevance of their work.

Whether trying to achieve local or structural change, both action research and the theories in mutual aid reject the notion of a uniform society. For action researchers this underpins their approach to both research methodologies and practices. As Wadsworth (1998) points out, the reaction of proponents of action research against a conventional science that seeks to determine 'truth' for and on behalf of others:

*leads us to an understanding of a world with multiple and competing views of truth and reality and the need for new methodologies and methods that assist people in their own journey and embracing that of others. (p. 12)*

### Conclusions

Until his death in 1921, Kropotkin remained committed to the notion that mutual aid was the fundamental and inherent criterion for progressive human evolution – in the arts, culture and wider society. He also remained convinced that external intervention, via the state, worked to the detriment of humans' creative capacity to develop their own lives. Returning to Russia with high hopes after the revolution, he was bitterly disappointed by the form the Communist State took. In his later works, he treated authoritarian states, whether Capitalist, Fascist or Communist, with the same contempt. He continued to develop his ideas particularly by linking his work on mutual aid with and to human ethics.

This 'resource' has attempted to link some of his key ideas about mutual aid with the values and practices of action research. In many ways, the two can be seen to share some common ground, most particularly in their optimism and belief in people's potential, and capacity to change their lives (personal, organisational, social) through collective endeavour.

### Correspondence

Carol Munn-Giddings, Anglia Polytechnic University, Severall Hospital,  
2 Boxted Road, Colchester CO4 5HG (c.munn-giddings@anglia.ac.uk).

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