Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Action Research, Power and Responsibility: the predicament and potential of New Zealand community groups.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Massey University, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand.

Carmel Frances Cervin

2001
Abstract

This thesis tells the story of the action research projects of three community groups: The West Auckland Women's Centre, Homebuilders Family/Whanau Support Scheme, and the Autistic Association of New Zealand Inc., Auckland Branch. The projects focused on addressing specific injustices identified by each community group.

Through participating in three concurrent projects, significant insights into the process, context, and key themes of action research are presented. The methodology discussion integrates the literature review with practical examples drawn from these projects. This enables critical observations on action research to be identified and explored in a grounded substantive manner. Key themes include: ethical implications of an academic researcher working with community groups, particularly in terms of power dynamics; recognition and validation of the expertise shared within the groups; and the necessity of trusting in the evolving nature of the action research process. Comparisons between the groups are written sensitively, honouring each group and their processes.

The West Auckland Women's Centre project consisted of qualitative research exploring retirement income and issues around unpaid work for women. The project was undertaken as part of the Women's Centre's role as an advocate on issues affecting women.

Homebuilders began with a story-telling project that sought to address a lack of understanding about their work in their community. However their focus shifted to a new project on Rural Living Standards following concerns raised by Homebuilders workers regarding the difficulties faced by families they were working with. The project developed in to a comprehensive survey on family household living standards, using a participatory process with the involvement of a large number of interested people from the community. The results of this survey are being fed back into the community to raise awareness regarding the spread of living standards and income issues in the local community.

The Autistic Association project consisted of a comprehensive survey of all Auckland branch members to identify needs and gaps in services for families with a family member with Autism or Aspergers. The survey was then used, and continues to be used, to lobby and educate funding providers and government agencies regarding the services needed. The National Autistic Association is, at the time of completing this thesis, running the survey nationally.

Finally this thesis explored the predicament of community groups acting as advocates for families in a context where funding providers set all the rules for ‘negotiation’ and highlighted the potential of community group action research projects for power reversals and enhancing democracy.
Acknowledgments

There are many people I wish to thank for contributing to and making this thesis possible.

Firstly and most importantly, my heartfelt thanks to everyone at the West Auckland Women's Centre, Homebuilders Family Support Agency and the Autistic Association Auckland Branch. Your support, encouragement, enthusiasm, time, energy, work and commitment gifted me with joy, meaning and motivation to make this thesis real. I am immensely grateful for the space you all gave me within your groups, for all that we learnt together, for the wisdom you shared with me and for allowing me to use the projects as part of my thesis.

I would like to say an extra special thanks to my friends Sharon from the West Auckland Women's Centre and Irene from Homebuilders, for suggesting the possibility and inviting me to meet with your groups. Your invitations were a surprise and delight and I feel very lucky to have friends open such wonderful doors to me. I would also like to say a special thank you to Deborah Cox from the Autistic Association for her warmth, guidance and support when I first approached the association.

To my supervisors, Mike O'Brien and Marilyn Waring, a deep thank you for always being there. Your guidance, questions, listening ears, support, laughter and ideas have helped me grow in confidence and relish the challenge of this thesis.

Also a thank you to Massey University, Albany for the award of a scholarship, an important financial support to my thesis.

A special thank you to Cybele Locke for being a fantastic friend and flatmate and for being one step ahead of me on the thesis journey. You helped me realise that a thesis was achievable, and you shone a light for me on the track ahead.

To Malcolm Beggs, Yvonne, Brian, Marilyn and Diane a special thanks for treasured memories and love.

I would also like to thank Shirley and Colette for your support and friendship through the ups and the downs.

A special thank you to Barbara Grant and all the women from the Tauhara Writing Retreats. Our times together were always an inspiration and an invaluable productive space for writing. Also a thank you to all my sailing friends, for support and fun, fresh air and time out.
To all my friends and flatmates who have put up with me going on about this thesis, thanks for your patience and support. A very special thanks to Ian Ashton for all your love and support.

Prior to even beginning this thesis there were many special people who helped shape my passion for community and social justice and I would particularly like to acknowledge Terry Dibble and St Clairs, Ewen Derrick, Neil Darragh and Manaaki.

Finally a huge thank you to my family – Naomi, Liam, Seamus, Brendan and Siobhan for all your love and support, to Elva Lynch for inspiring me with your passion for history and research and finally to my mum and dad, Anne-Marie and Maurice Cervin. You gave me high expectations, endless support, resources, took a real interest in my study, proofed my thesis, and were always there for me. Thank you.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Anne-Marie and Maurice Cervin.
# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1: Introduction

- Introducing Myself .................................................. 3
- Introducing the Groups ............................................. 5
- The West Auckland Women’s Centre ................................. 5
- Homebuilders Family/Whanau Support Scheme ..................... 5
- The Autistic Association of New Zealand Inc., Auckland Branch 8
- The Structure of this Thesis ......................................... 9
- Organisation of Appendices ........................................ 10

## Chapter 2: Methodology

- Action Research .......................................................... 11
  - History and Major Strands of Action Research .................. 11
  - Key Aspects of Action Research .................................. 13
    - Process of Action Research ....................................... 13
    - Social Change Focus ............................................... 13
    - Improving and Transforming ..................................... 13
    - Future Orientation .................................................. 14
    - Evolving Nature of Action Research and Ethical Implications 14
    - Importance of Process in Action Research ...................... 15
    - Role of Dialogue .................................................... 16
  - Action Research in New Zealand .................................... 17
  - Community and Action Research .................................. 17
    - Community Ownership of Problem Definition ................... 17
    - Collective Participation ........................................... 18
    - Collective Knowledge Creation ................................... 19
    - Collective Ownership ............................................. 20
    - Collective Reflection .............................................. 21
  - Researcher Role & Relationship to Groups ......................... 23
    - Working with Existing Communities ............................... 26
    - Being Physically Present and Building and Maintaining a Relationship .............................................. 28
    - Working with Group Timeframes .................................. 28
  - Validity, Objectivity, Reliability and Partiality .................. 29
  - Dilemmas in the Process ............................................ 31
    - The Group may not stick to the Process – It May Decide Not to take Action .............................................. 31
Chapter 3: West Auckland Women’s Centre Action Research Project

The Beginning

Exploring Possibilities

Issue of Retirement Provision Emerges

Literature Review on Recent Superannuation Debates

Choosing Our Method

Preparing Pilot Interviews and Group Discussion

Drawing on Principles of Feminist Research

Values

Politics

Ethics

Research Concepts

Contacting Women to be Interviewed

Interviewing

Drawing Out Strands from the Interviews

Validity

Follow-up Calls

Feedback to Participants and Focus Group Session

Further Discussion on Use of Research Material

Meeting with the Older Women’s Group in West Auckland

Changes at the West Auckland Women’s Centre

Dialogue with the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the Retirement Commissioner

Preparation of the Research Report

Future Steps

Concluding Comments

Appendices

Appendix 3.1 Superannuation Review

Appendix 3.2 My Information Sheet
Chapter 4: Homebuilders Action Research Project

Initial Contact and Building a Relationship

Storytelling

Difficulty Finding Issue Clarity

The Code of Social Responsibility and Homebuilder's Response

Reflection on Awareness/Funding Issue

Beginning of Participatory Living Standards Project

Values

Politics

Ethics

Questionnaire Development

Research Concepts

Piloting the Questionnaire

Selecting the Sample

Organising Funding

Hannah's Role

Asking Interviewers

Preparing the Surveying Process

Replacement System

Call-back System

Training Interviewers

Media Work

Starting Interviewing – Discoveries

Surveying in Snells Beach – Where are all the families?

Supporting Volunteer Interviewers

Benefits for Volunteers

Community Response
### Setting up Data-entry Database

- Data-entry Training 123
- Analysis of Results 123
- Future of the Rural Section of the Survey 123
- Concluding Comments 124

### Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.1</td>
<td>Story Letter</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.2</td>
<td>Story Consent Form</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.3</td>
<td>Survey Information Sheet</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.4</td>
<td>Survey Form</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.5</td>
<td>Survey Feedback Form</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.6</td>
<td>Survey Tracking Sheet</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.7</td>
<td>Instructions for Interviewers</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.8</td>
<td>Survey Call-back Note</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.9</td>
<td>Newspaper Articles on Survey</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4.10</td>
<td>Survey Results</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter 5: Autistic Association of New Zealand Inc., Auckland Branch Action Research Project

- Initial Contact and Building a Relationship 191
- Project Issue Identified 192
- Media Attention 193
- Discussion of Literature Review and Parents' Views 194
- Needs Survey Initiated 195
- Relevant Reports Released 195
- Classroom Survey 196
- Autism Action Committee and Looking for a Building 196
- Personal Advocacy Trust 196
  - Needs Survey Develops 197
    - Research Concepts 197
    - Piloting the Survey 199
    - Values 199
    - Politics 199
    - Ethics 200
- Discussion of Ethical Issues 200
- Training and Beginning Interviewing 201
- Discoveries When Interviewing 202
- Survey Feedback 203
- Searching for More Interviewers 203
- Survey Sample 204
Major Changes in the Auckland Branch 205
Interviewing Continues and Data Entry Begins 205
Analysis and Brainstorming 205
Analysis of Survey for the Committee 206
Survey Results in the Newsletter 206
Identifying the Next Survey Steps 207

National Association Begins Survey 207
New Committee 208
Ongoing Use of Survey 208
Concluding Comments 208

Appendices

Appendix 5.1 My Information Sheet 209
Appendix 5.2 Interest Form for Parents 210
Appendix 5.3 Issue Article in Newsletter 211
Appendix 5.4 Newspaper Article re Eady Family 212
Appendix 5.5 Selection of Media Articles 213
Appendix 5.6 Autism Literature Review Summary 218
Appendix 5.7 New Classroom Newspaper Article 220
Appendix 5.8 Personal Advocacy Trust Article in Newsletter 221
Appendix 5.9 Letter to Members re Survey 222
Appendix 5.9a Newsletter Article About Survey 223
Appendix 5.10 Survey Form 224
Appendix 5.11 Tips for Interviewers 249
Appendix 5.12 Sample Interviewer Tracking Sheet 250
Appendix 5.13 Volunteer Interviewers Poster 251
Appendix 5.14 Volunteer Interviewers Confidentiality Form 252
Appendix 5.15 Special Education Service Submission 253
Appendix 5.16 Initial Analysis of Full Survey 263
Appendix 5.17 Newsletter Articles on Survey Findings 297

Chapter 6: Conclusion 301

Action Research and Retaining My Own Analysis 301
What to Conclude? 302
Two Key Themes: Funding and Responsibility 302
The Funding Environment as an Inadequate Forum for Negotiating Responsibility 304
Community Groups as 'Piggy in the Middle' of Responsibility Debates 306
Impact of Public Responsibility Debates 307
The Power to Define Legitimate Need and Responsibility 309
Questioning the Distribution of Power and Responsibility 313
Importance of Reversing Power Relationships 313
Power Reversals and Democracy 317

Postscript 318

Bibliography 319