

## **Introduction to the Thesis**

The accounts related in this thesis are representations of a research journey which provided opportunities for black (Afro-Caribbean and Asian) professionals and black students, myself included, to share experiences and acquire new experiences that became the basis for discovery, the production of identity, change and transformation. Some of the accounts represent occasions when people produced the meaning and value of experiences that take place and are revealed through narratives and stories.

### **My Reasons for doing the research**

Part of the legitimisation for conducting my research and for writing this thesis is my commitment to improving practice in organisations and bringing about political change to improve the lives of black people in a racist society. That means not only highlighting good practice, but also striving for a positive impact on policy and practice both within the field and in higher educational institutions.

As a black Afro-Caribbean woman living in Britain, I am particularly interested in exploring the lives and experiences of marginalised and oppressed black groups in society. I have made our experiences – micro issues - the focus of my study because, since the 1960's, a wide range of empirical studies have focused on the macro issues. Insufficient attention has been paid to issues associated with the social relations between black people, or to how they construct their reality or to meanings associated with experiences. It is crucial, in my view, to conceptualise black peoples' experiences as mediated by race, gender and class. But how are such links to be theorised? The task is made even more complex when we note a general tendency in the literature to conceptualise the macro and micro levels of analysis as separate, almost independent levels. My own interest resides in trying to understand how the macro and the micro interrelate.

I want to suggest that there should not be a binary divide between the macro and the micro. The micro here is conceptualised as a process, a terrain, in which social meanings are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested. Experiences remain important but they are construed as fluid modalities, as shifting boundaries that mediate structures and relations of power. Hence structure and experiences, macro and micro are enmeshing formations. The one is not privileged over the other and, for this reason, I have been concerned with the place of the personal in the research. Here I have conceived personal in a number of ways as a mode of self-description; as part of the process of theorizing; as part of a methodology. I implicitly challenge objectivism and instead look to my own world and knowledge as a black woman, as well as our own world and our own knowledge as black people, to throw light on what I am doing. I want to go beyond tacit personal knowledge with this thesis and explore how it is implicated in the research processes and academic discourse, but I want to do this in a way that is not exclusive and

excluding. I am uneasy about options of absolute truth and believe that knowledge is always questionable.

I also place value on the variety of subjective experience and on theorising from personal experience because, like hooks (1989), I feel that it is important to acknowledge the need to examine the self from a critical standpoint. Therefore, both individually and collectively, I, as author, and we, as participants in the research, engaged in the personal and complex task of looking back on, and making sense of, not only the research endeavours but also our own lives.

I have taken a stance in the thesis that is reflective and biographical and have included autobiographical accounts of myself, as researcher and writer, and accounts from the people whose views were sought and whose stories I documented. This thesis is, therefore, in part about the use of self in research and writing and, at the same time, is a reflection on the use of self and personal experience in a joint search for truths and co-production of knowledge. It is a circular process (Steier, 1991). The self, the "I" is part of writing and research, and interacts with ideas and people, but "I" can also stand back and reflect critically on that process. This process necessitates skills in self-awareness and the capacity to be introspective and reflective and I drew on my previous and current personal/interactive/communication or other human and professional skills (as a gestalt psychotherapist, a community activist, teacher/trainer/facilitator) in my conscious use of self. My increased awareness of self emerged from my parallel journey of research and therapy, which produced learning from self as therapist and self in therapy. The skills as a gestalt therapist contributed to my development, containing me to work with the research process.

Working with the use of self in this way inevitably involved a process of self-disclosure. Evidence of this is seen, in different ways; in the sense of the accounts in the thesis and in particular the biographical and reflective accounts. An autobiographical account is, by its nature, a disclosure of some personal aspects of one's own life. But self-disclosure is also consciously needed here in the research inquiries as a means of breaking down the hierarchy between researchers and participants, and to enable participants to share more openly and honestly aspects of their own life experiences. The accounts of mistakes, misunderstandings and doubts that abound in the pages in this thesis are in themselves a very real form of self-disclosure.

I approached my work in a spirit of openness, even uncertainty, about its likely course and direction. Part of the research process, as I see it, is the need to negotiate meanings with participants and allow frameworks for understanding to evolve through time. Reality is neither entirely fixed nor given for all time. The use of self- the influence/impact of self – plays an important part in the unfolding of realities. In developing self-awareness an awareness of the influence of and use of self in a research situation has meant acknowledging my responsibility for the overall quality and integrity of the research and for safeguarding the anonymity, confidentiality and general welfare of the participants in this research.

The legitimization of my research is through the values I hold, and which underpin my work. The notion of reciprocity is important in this context and I describe reciprocal interaction and shared endeavours (in putting on a conference, for example). I have a commitment to reducing the power differential in research settings through involving people as participants and – where possible – as active and equal partners. A participative approach to research means not only challenging the social divisions of race, gender, and class but also challenging the traditional professional – client differentiation in welfare settings. I also seek to ‘give a voice’ to people otherwise rarely heard through documenting their previously neglected or misrepresented lives and experience. Further legitimization of my research lies in its potential to empower the people about whom I write and with whom I research, unlike other research in this field (Rex, 1973, 1979, 1987; Rex & Moore 1967; Patterson 1969). These studies say very little on the subject of exactly how their research was harnessed to political engagements and struggles, and give little account of the actual nature of the fieldwork and how the research was conducted.

In my research and in the writing of my thesis It was not my intention to take such a powerful position of superiority but rather to take a position that is derived from the researcher’s and writer’s process and its inherent biases and value judgments. I do not see myself as being outside the political domain, nor do I hold to some notion of value -free research. I did not want to end up speaking from the perspective of a privileged narrative, neither did I want to take a stance that was tantamount to saying that the researcher/writer can become a kind of representative or spokesperson for black groups. I am uncertain about the value of reducing all the voices of oppressed groups’ to a single voice.

So how did the research begin? I shall outline below the background of the research project and elucidate its aims.

### **Background to the research**

A few years ago Cathy Aymer and I, who are two black social work lecturers at Brunel University College, formerly West London Institute of Higher education (WLIHE), embarked on a research project to explore the experiences of black students in higher education and black professionals in welfare organisations. The idea for the project came out of a conversation between Cathy and me in the corridor at work, which led to some of our thinking and analysis being set out in a paper which we wrote entitled ‘Black Students’ Experience on Social Work Courses: Accentuating the Positives’. Our main inquiry question, which resulted in this paper, was "Why is it that when we read about the experiences of black students on social work courses they are always negative?

We took as our starting point our own experiences as two black lecturers with our social work students in a big department of a large higher education institution with a high proportion of black students. Our analysis stemmed from the experiences that we have had, between us, over twenty-five years of

teaching on social work courses, talking to black students and in discussions with black managers and practitioners. We saw a trend developing in which what was told, in public, by black students were all the negatives whilst the students' positive stories were kept to the domain of the private. There was a deafening silence resulting from this trend about the positive achievements and successes on social work courses. We were concerned about how black communities would know of their successes. We wanted to ensure that other black people would be encouraged to enter higher education and the professional world.

Out of our concern for what we perceived as a trend developing of an "aint it awful" culture in social work education we set out, in this paper to challenge the myth that black social work students experiences are all negative. We felt that the positives that were told to us in private should be asserted. We wrote:

"It is important that black students' positive experiences are made public for several reasons. They serve to challenge mythologies that describe black intelligence as inferior. We need to celebrate our triumphs and successes and make public the skills that are in the black community, so that our communities can be valued for their achievements... This is not to deny the reality of the negative experiences that have been so clearly documented, but rather we wish to resist the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy that cannot benefit black social work students, the social work profession, or the black communities. We believe that an 'ain't it all awful' culture creates and perpetuates the notion of black people as victims who are, by definition unable to achieve" (Aymer and Bryan 1996, p.3).

In discussions with black managers and practitioners in social services departments and other welfare agencies, we had discovered that some of these negative perceptions of experiences and thinking were observed in the work place. Black practitioners tended also construct their experiences in the negative rather than in the positive. We observed that some of the dynamics among black students as they interacted with each other in the educational setting were similar to those in the work setting. We were, therefore, interested to explore further our experiences at a micro level, the level at which black people interact with each other in white institutions, and to discover whether racism had served to define those interactions.

The research project was based on an assumption that black people experience racism on an institutional, cultural and individual level and through personal experiences on an every day basis. It is experienced in multi-dimensional ways in personal encounters; therefore black people's perceptions of racism are an important contribution to our understanding of racism. These perceptions, we believe, should be accepted and valued as important knowledge. We were interested to know how these perceptions contributed to our construction of our experiences and what this would mean for organisations and for us in terms of revision and change. Those interests contributed to the aims of the research

### **Aims of the Research**

Our aim, therefore, was to undertake an examination and analysis of the micro issues - the dynamics and processes that are involved when black

people interact with each other on an interpersonal level in white institutions and with white institutions. Through the process of examination we hoped to:

- Provide opportunities for the development of new ideas and knowledge for reframing the experiences of black students in higher education and professionals in work Organisations. It would also be our aim ultimately to extend the development of these ideas into the black community.
- Generate new knowledge about identity politics, to offer strategies of politicisation that would develop our concept of 'blackness' and intensify our sense of self.
- Raise awareness and enlarge our conception of who we are and promote individual self-development, professional development and collective change.
- Add to the existing body of knowledge about the impact of structural racism, and develop strategies for organisational change.

The point of the work was not just to gain knowledge, but to modify what is done as a result of what is learned. This kind of research, I believe, is central to good professional practice.

We took the position that the reconstruction of knowledge from a black standpoint necessitates studying the world from the perspective of black people because traditionally sociological studies of race have often been distorted by having been centered in the perspectives and experiences of dominant group members. Ladner (1973), among others argues:

"Blacks have always been measured against an alien set of norms. As a result they have been considered to be a deviation from ambiguous white middle -class model, which itself has not always been clearly defined. This inability or refusal to deal with blacks as a part and parcel of the varying historical and cultural contributions to the American scene has perhaps, been the reason sociology has excluded the black perspective from its widely accepted mainstream theories (p.23).

This statement reflected my desire, as a black intellectual, to develop our own ways of thinking rather than to rely on adopting concepts from the dominant western meta narratives which are shaped by western pre-occupations and assumptions. These issues informed our decision to conduct what we call a "black on black" study.

### Black on Black Study

The research inquiry takes the form of a black on black study. By this we mean black researchers working alongside other participants, who were black students and black professionals, to examine, reflect on and analyse our experiences. We had three main reasons for making this a black study solely. Firstly, there is little or no literature on race issues that focuses its attention in this area. Secondly, we would not wish to make comparisons between black students experiences and white students' experiences, as such comparisons inevitably define the white experience as the norm and the black experience as "other". Thirdly, we wanted to take our experiences out from under the gaze of white researchers who constantly seek to define who we are. We wanted to construct our own reality. We were working on an assumption that

we as black people are better able to understand the nuances of racial oppression. However, we were aware that doing research in black communities poses unique methodological problems. Blauner and Wellman (1973) states:

"There are certain aspects of racial phenomena, however, that are particularly difficult, if not impossible, for a member of the oppressing group to grasp empirically and formulate conceptually. These barriers are existential and methodological as well as political and ethical. We refer here to the nuances of culture and group ethos, to the meaning of oppression and especially psychic relations; to what is called the Black...and the Indian experience"(p.329).

Blauner and Wellman's argument underscores the point that research occurs in the context of power relationships both between the researcher and the research participants and in the society at large. As they pointed out:

"Scientific research does not exist in a vacuum. Its theory and practice reflect the structure and values of society. In capitalist America, where massive inequalities in wealth and power exist between classes and racial groups, the processes of social research express both race and class oppression. The control, exploitation, and privilege that are generic components of social oppression exist in the relation of researchers to researched, even though their manifestations may be subtle and masked by professional ideologies" (pp314-315).

I accept that research participants are never equal and they cannot alter the wider political context in which the research takes place. Also, the accountability and commitment of black researchers to the communities they study pose unique problems for their research practice. However, black researchers are also less likely to experience distrust, hostility, and exclusion within some black communities.

Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) argues, black researchers may generate questions that are different from those asked by white researchers. The marginality of black feminist researchers and scholars gives them distinctive analyses of race, class and gender. She sees black feminist scholars as best generating black feminist theory, but also suggests that all intellectuals can learn to read their personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge. As "outsiders within", black feminist scholars use the tension in their cultural identities to generate new, inclusive ways of seeing. Building more inclusive ways of seeing requires researchers to take multiple views of their subjects, abandoning the idea that there is a singular reality that social science can discover. It also requires that we see ourselves as "situated in the action of research" (Rapp, 1983), examining our own social location, not just that of those we study. This is a fundamentally different posture from that advocated by the norms of "unbiased, objective, scientific research in which one typically denies the influence of one's own status, be it race, gender, class or other social status, in the shaping of knowledge.

There is agreement among many social researchers that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed (Ravn 1991; Steier 1991, hooks 1994, Bhavani 1997). This means that the researcher and the researcher's actions are part of that process and should therefore be subject to self-reflection. Knowledge is co-produced, underlining the researcher and the "researched"

(Reason and Rowan 1981; Reason 1994; Gergen and Gergen 1991), where possible as co-researchers (Heron 1981, 1996). Research projects, which involve people who are part of a sub-ordinate social group and oppressed or otherwise vulnerable, raise ethical, personal and political issues about the justification for doing research. This has implications for how we carry out our work in practice (Bell 1990; Bhavani 1997; Oakly 1981; Patai 1991; Stacey 1991,).

We took these concerns into the research project. Concerns about the nature of subjects and objects in research, how we relate as participants and sought for participative and collaborative research methods that question the relationship of the researcher and "researched". This leads to the question of the ability of the black researcher to be a "knower" (a role traditionally denied to black people and women) without its attendant implications of power over research participants.

There are other broader concerns that formed an implicit context for the research and writing of the thesis. These concerns can all be placed in the context of debates on post modernism and black perspectives discourse, which I will discuss fully in Chapter 3 on the theoretical foundation of the thesis. However, here I want to outline briefly concerns such as the representation of black voices in a research context (my own voice as well as the voices of the participants). The voices of black people, especially black professionals, are virtually absent in the social sciences. In this research study we attempt to rediscover the voices of black students and black professionals through the method of qualitative research. This work can be considered a step towards providing arenas or fora where such voices are generated, heard, and ultimately transformed into a political form.

Telling our stories would entail finding our own voice. I am not only seeking to find my own voice in the research, I am also committed to hearing the voices of others, rooted in their experiences and understandings, about their lives. I want these voices to be heard within the public domain, to contribute to the empowerment of black people in their own lives as well as to contribute to the bodies of knowledge. Doubtless, the two quests (personal and academic) are connected. I am not seeking to hear an authentic voice in others or myself but to shift the balance of power, away from a moral self-monitoring and towards a greater sense of agency and personal control over the definition of our feelings. I am referring here to the power dimension of feelings and their voice/expression. Not only does it require much attention and care to hear my own voice, but also it requires even more attentiveness to hear and represent the voices of others. So I was faced with these questions from the outset: Can we, as researchers, provide a space to enable others to bring their 'authentic' voice to language? Can the research process foster empowerment, via the articulation and wider communication of people's own understandings of their lives?

How are the answers to these and other questions presented in the thesis? I shall go on to outline the structure of the thesis and give the reader an idea of what is included.

## **The Structure of the Thesis**

The order of the thesis is roughly the chronological order of the research project, which also represents the phases of the research journey. The phases of the research produced a substantial amount of data not all of which could have been included in the thesis. I will note in the outline below the chapters that had to be excluded. Despite these exclusions the thesis is still very lengthy. That is because I wanted to present to the reader the multi-dimensional nature and depth of the inquiry as my life journey and to show how I have engaged in recurrent patterns of inquiry relating to analysis and sensemaking, for example, in order to tell the full story generated. I included quotes from the participants, some lengthy, which added to the length, because I was not willing to take out or be too limiting with the other voices which contributed to the richness of the research text. I also wanted to honour my process and the depth and breath of my work.

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## **The phases**

There were two main phases to the journey. The first phase consisted of collaboration with other black professionals and black students about their experiences and phase two consisted of an action inquiry into my own practice as a lecturer, which included some collaboration with black students. I shall outline below some of what the reader might expect in some sections of the thesis and at the same time offer a flavour of the process of my journey.

### ***Phase One***

The writings from Phase One of the research are to be found mainly in Section Two of the thesis which accounts for the methodology adopted and the range of methods used. I go on to discuss the co-operative inquiry with black professionals and students and to evaluate the outcomes, paying attention to some of the issues involved in researching in that way with black people, and advocate ideas for a research perspective. I also reveal my truth through my stories about my process, for example, my engagement with the process of co-operative inquiry and the story of Cathy's and my collaboration.

Also included is my writing process of the generated information, data that required representation. I faced dilemmas about how I would represent what happened in and with the inquiry groups and the knowledge generated by the groups. I asked a series of questions about how this should be done. Questions about interpretations and dilemmas, about how this may or may not conflict with my ideological positions, about authenticity and not silencing the voices of participants. I engaged in questions about interpretation, analysis and sensemaking. The results of my exploration can be found in Chapter 6.



Engaging with the data led to my discovering that there were common themes emerging that I had always been interested in and wanted to explore, which I found myself theorising about. I, personally, became more interested in what we were sharing about the way we interact with each other and less interested in representations of our successes. I was still interested in the notion of accentuating our positives but more in the context of black on black interactions. So the material in the thesis from this phase of the research focuses on themes emanating from that topic. These are revealed in Chapters 7 and 8. Making myself accountable for my sensemaking and the validation of my representations of participants' stories, I gave some participants my accounts of the co-operative inquiry, including drafts of chapters, which are included in the thesis as feedback. In one instance I gained group feedback which revealed interesting issues about validity. Some of those issues are revealed in Chapter 9.

### ***Phase two***

The questions that I set out to ask had a personal as well as an academic flavour. As an academic, researching within an academic institution into a topic that is about what goes on in such institutions, I was seduced, at the start, into thinking about the research theoretically. Following in the deep current of my research life, I had images which had much to do with the way the experience of my journey through the research was being constructed over time. My research journey was beginning to influence how I was integrating its meaning into my practice and into my whole life.

As time went on, I noticed my energy shifting and my life was changing. In the context of continual questioning I became less driven with achieving my particular goal for the research. The goals remained but were subordinated to wider concerns. I began to become more aware about my yearnings, motives, intentions, and the changes I wanted to make in my personal and professional life that would contribute towards positive experiences for black students.

I was curious about my teaching/facilitation of learning, which was triggered by my awareness of how I facilitated the research and by the stories told by students of their experiences of teaching. I was particularly interested in how I used my power as an educator/teacher and I wanted to know whether I lived out my values in my practice. I was interested in knowing the contributions I made to students' lives and ways in which I could improve my practice. Although the experiences of other black professionals and students were my top priority, I did not want to write about these experiences without exploring my own, so I shifted my focus to looking at my own practice. I wanted to make changes to my practice so that learners would get a better deal from me, so that I could make a contribution to their lives and a change to their experiences of learning in a university.

I asked questions about the role I played in black students' development. What contribution did I make to their learning by virtue of being a black lecturer? How did I help or hinder their learning? What were their experiences of me as a teacher and in what way did I contribute to their experiences of

higher education? These accounts are stories of self-performance showing how I was at work, creatively making meaning, situating myself in relation to public scrutiny. I encountered myself as other and perceived myself through other eyes and ears, thus stepping outside myself, moving elsewhere, to gauge my relation to truth. By placing myself in the position of the other I returned to the truth of myself and the truth about my practice. I found truths in the feedback that was given to me by participants in my inquiries.

However, the details of what I did in the inquiry and how I made sense of the feedback are reported in a very limited way because, having written the first draft of the thesis, I discovered that the thesis was too long. I had to make difficult and sad choices about what to include and what to leave out and I chose not to include in substantive detail the full account of this inquiry.

I also asked questions about my facilitation of learning, my use of power and authority and whether or not I effected change. I took these questions to students and participants whom I had worked with and asked for feedback on my practice and, in particular my facilitation. In the first draft of the thesis, I revealed my inquiry into my facilitation as a researcher and teacher, but, sadly, this chapter could not be included in the final version of the thesis because of the limitation on length.

Whilst these narratives specifically centred on my practice, they offered comments that often took much broader strokes at the meaning of learning and I wondered amidst multiple possible ways of arriving at answers to questions about teaching and learning. My intent was to draw from the answers to these questions to make some contribution as to what lecturers could do to aid black students' learning. Chapter 11 offers some useful suggestions on education for liberation.

#### *More discoveries on route*

As I participated, began to write and draft material developed, some of which was personal revelation of my values and dilemmas, it became clear that my personal autobiography is in some sense an important component of what I have to say. This is evitable in looking at my ideas, values and dilemmas at myself.

Every attempt I made to write the thesis presented me with problems of representation and personal problems about writing, which resulted in me taking a long time to write. I became interested in what was involved in the writing of the stories that were told in the inquiries. So, although what was said was important and I found it very interesting, my energy was in inquiring into what was happening with my relationship with the data and the writing of the thesis. Was I scared to write up what I heard? Was I afraid to put those issues to a white audience? These were important questions, some of which got answered in chapter on writing and making knowledge, which was another sad omission from the final version of the thesis.

My energy was directed into how I was living with and through my research and I inquired into how I created a balance between thoughts, feelings, and actions. I focused more on the effects the research was having on my life and on the relationship between the internal and external world, between the personal and political. A condensed impression of my exploration can be found in the concluding chapter of the thesis Chapter 14. The material in this chapter represents the exploration of some experiences occurring not only in space but also in another dimension, inner or spiritual. It offers learning about self and a journey of my transformation. Moments of recollection also gave structure to parts of the journey that endowed it with meaning and became a form of self-knowledge which, unfortunately, does not appear in its full form in the thesis.

Parts of the journey provided the opportunity for me to acquire experiences that became the basis for the production of my identity. My journey made sense to me as a coming to consciousness and my story consolidated around an identity, – my identity as a black academic, educator/teacher and black woman therapist/researcher. These identities are revealed throughout the thesis but in particular in chapter 13, where I show the meaning I made of my experiences and offer an understanding of the role of black academics as change agents in academic institutions and welfare organisations.

I ended my journey with chapter 11 that acts as a bridge between the two phases of the research, in which I advocate an approach to working with black professionals and black students. This is followed by the two advocating chapters (Chapters 12 and 13) I referred to earlier, and a further chapter on self-learning (Chapter 14).

Although I have omitted the chapter on writing that included my inquiry into writing the thesis, I want to include here some comments about the way that I have chosen to write 'from' and 'about' the experiences in this research.

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### **Writing 'from' and 'about' our experiences**

The ordering of the thesis is overlaid by the fact that I have found my own way of writing 'from' and 'about' other participants' experiences and about my own. Styles of writing are not neutral but reflect shifts in history and the domination of a particular school or particular paradigms. The process which is unfolded in the thesis is not a seamless web because the process of writing the thesis has been a further story for me in unearthing the hidden processes of research and writing and connecting my own experience to that of other participants in the research.

I have tried to write accessibly. I want to be a knower, but what I know must be accessible to others, particularly to those who provided me with the opportunity to develop my research text. It is a long step from theorising and writing for an academic audience to grounding my research and its findings in a medium accessible to a wide audience, particularly a black audience.

I am not indifferent to theory or content but in this thesis I push for a different way of understanding theory by looking at what is conventionally ignored: the process or richness in the textual aspects of such work. In some sections of the thesis I write through the narration of a most concrete set of events, more focused and controlled.

### Style of Writing

I would describe my style of writing as an 'essay'. I am influenced by Karl Weick's work, which is described by Van Maanen (1995) as an essay style. The essay is seen as a literary format linked more to art than science. According to Van Maanen:

"The essay is anything but an overtly systematic presentation of an author's views. This stylistic feature is sometimes treated as a bothersome defect by some readers, a defect than can be overcome only when others extract or cull the analytic jewels out of a messy piece of work, the jewels being the detachable theoretical contributions to be found in the work... Yet, it is altogether possible that the lack of a system and the appearance of a tidy order in his writing is downright central to the point, purpose and value of his work" (p.136).

In Weickian work, theory and style are closely linked; one carries the other. The style becomes the theory where doubts and contradictions are injected in the accounts. There is a tentative, anti-essentialist and moving position presented here; one that I believe may be attractive to the readers and consistent with my message, making writing accessible.

I therefore would like to invite the reader to increase their tolerance for unorthodox approaches as some of the pieces in the various sections of the thesis take pride in the non-linear possibilities of the essay form. Meanderings, detours, distractions maybe commonly found in a few chapters. A personalised author is also presented as is characteristic of the essay style. The use of 'I' is well used as I refuse to cloak my writing in anonymity. I believe that when theory becomes anonymous, it loses style and slides into forms like a research report or a textbook where standard formats, topics, terminology and methods play large roles.

In some of my work the reader may find no ordinary introduction, no generic section titles, no obvious summary or conclusion sections and no recommendations for further research. In some cases, beginnings may well be endings and vice versa. The reader may find this unsettling and difficult to categorise as to its intentions.

Nevertheless there is a shape and pattern to this work; it is not one or two big blobs, but it stands some distance from conventional writing style of Ph.D. academic thesis. Large parts of the thesis read as something of a personal

reflection, a meditation on a theme and are put forward in qualified and personal prose. My interest in the thesis is not presented as ideas with which the reader must agree or disagree; instead I have tossed ideas to stimulate thinking about current issues in theory about teaching and learning among black students, for example, or organisational theory about black professionals.

My intent, in my essay style, is to allow the reader to sense me as the writer struggling with an idea or thought or process and trying to use the idea to come to terms with some concrete event or experience that serves as the narrative center for the writing. In some other instances, I have tried to use the concrete experience to arrive at ideas for explorations, meanings or sensemaking.

Van Maanen (1995) stated an elementary principle of the successful essay when he said:

"An essay works to the extent that readers identify with the writer. And when they do, the essay will carry greater persuasive appeal than writings that force on a reader a systematic barrage of concepts, definitions, truth claims and roll call of famous names all serving to express certitude... It may well be that the most persuasive style in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is one that is informal, a little self-conscious perhaps but basically genial and pitched at creating a conversation or dialogue between equals" (136).

Although my words do not fit neatly into this description, it was my intent to be persuasive with a partly informal style that is people-centered. By that I mean that people could identify with what I am saying, particularly about notions of equality and social justice.

To write in an essayist style requires a domination of the personal, a thinking that is not about black or white but shades of grey. I have tried not to over-interpret and have matters settled and closed. Claims are put forward rather hesitantly, and in some cases, in hypothetical mode, of expression in words such as 'if' 'maybe' 'possibly'. It means writing in a tentative, open, one-step-forward, one-step-back manner in which things could always be otherwise. I wanted to explore a variety of perspectives before arriving at final judgment. I was mindful not to use language that was about 'pinning everything down'.

In writing honestly, personally, and I hope accessibly, I intend to demystify research and writing. In so doing, I aim to engage a range of people who may have an interest in research. This includes black people who are merely curious and interested in research ideas and practice, as well as those who are, or have been, involved as or participants.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I began this research wanting to write 'about' the experiences of black people in their encounters, generating material that could be theorised about and conceptualised in a format that would be in keeping with traditional, academic style. I intended to present a balance that would be a representation of the content of what was generated by the work with comments on the process. I have ended up writing a thesis with a focus on generating knowledge from

and on the process of doing the research, and about how my inquiry transformed itself over time. From the outset, my inquiry was less about macro issues to do with black peoples experiences; it was more to do with inquiring at a micro level, by inquiring into our processes and behaviour patterns as we engage with each other and how that shapes our experiences of the world which we inhabit at any point in time.

The thesis forms part of a developing literature of reflective research accounts and draws on the works of black feminist writers (see, for example hooks 1994, Patricia Hill-Collins, 1990, Lorde, 1984, Bhavani 1997,). Their scholarship and discourse helped to frame the problems and the inquiry questions. I have also cited individual sociologists, psychologists, and psychotherapists, action research theorists and educationalists. However, I have been severely disadvantaged by not being able to draw on a range of literature from a black perspective in the field on which I was researching and writing. I found little or no literature on collaborative inquiry either with black people or on the micro politics of black people's interaction when we encounter each other. As a result, I have had to draw on the work of a few black psychologists and academics who have written generally in their field of race, culture and race relations politics.

The impact of this omission has meant a lot of worry on my part about the validity and credibility of what I was saying. I frequently questioned the value of what I had to say. I had the problem of not only wrestling with my own critical judges but with the added burden of not being able to refer to relevant theoretical sources to a sparse body of knowledge on the experiences of black professionals.

Many of the accounts in this thesis suggest that the value of experience ambiguously moves between resistance to a structured world produced by traditional research and a reconfiguration of the conventional values of research. Such accounts suggest that research allows people an experience of self that is usually absent from the traditional view of research and on a personal level, the daily work of the researchers.

I implicitly challenged objectivism and instead look to my own world and knowledge as a black woman, as well as our own world and our own knowledge as black people, to throw light on our experiences. It seems to me, however, that there are broader and implicit contexts in which my work can be placed. Firstly, my focus on black, marginalised and oppressed groups relates to issues about empowerment, to the political implications of research and, ultimately, to questions about autonomy, justice and equity and in particular how these notions can be construed in research.

Secondly, my focus on participative and collaborative research is related to the feminist debate and to the ideas of some action research theorists about the relationship of the researcher and "researched". This led me to the question of the ability of the black researcher to be a "knower" (a role traditionally denied to black people and women) without its attendant implications of power over research participants.

A Third focus is the concern with self and other, subject and object as well as with subject and subject of research, and the questions about the status of the "voices" in the research. I try to deal with the notion of representing black voices in a research context (my own voice as well as the voices of the participants) together with an emphasis on uncertainties and dissonance within the research role. I also place value on the variety of subjective experience, and on theorising from personal experience. These concerns reflect a wider context in current social science debates, debate on post modernism and black perspectives discourse.

The material in the thesis is meant to influence beginning black researchers, writers and teachers of adult learners who can benefit directly from reading and taking heed of other people's personal accounts. However, I wanted to go beyond tacit, personal knowledge with this thesis and not use personal in a way that is exclusive and excluding. I am uneasy about options of absolute truth and believe that knowledge is always questionable.

I hope to appeal to people interested and involved in collaborative and participatory research at all levels but in particular, in research with black people. I would like to appeal to black practitioners who are interested in research and writing but are too frightened to take the risk. I intend to encourage practitioners to be reflective about their own practice and to think how to research. But my thesis is also intended for white researchers and practitioners who can identify with some of the issues and dilemmas.

I shall begin the presentation of accounts in this thesis with my own personal account of myself as the inquirer, in the next chapter, in order to give the reader a sense of who I am as the researcher.