

Chapter 14

Transformation – my being

Introduction

I write this concluding chapter about my transformation by way of closure and not an end to the work I have done. In writing this thesis, I was particularly interested in my internal conditions of voice, personal growth and development as a researcher. What follows in this chapter is my attempt to reveal myself as researcher and my learning and my vulnerability as I lived my inquiry. I want to show how engaging with my research has been a continuous process of learning and development and how I have been engaged in, what Torbert (1991) refers to as, 'transforming power' which is to show how I have gained power through personal transformation. In so doing I attempted to assist others to gain power to transform their lives. I have also developed my ideas about change and transformation, which I shall present.

The real task of transformation was to discover for myself who I am, but part of this discovery entailed a dialogue with my history and with the developmental influences which have affected me as a whole person, politically, culturally and spiritually. I needed to reflect on the relationship between my research and my life, and on how my emotional, spiritual and professional growth have been affected; in particular, on how my research and practice have been affected by the research itself. I, therefore, engaged in self-examination of my learning, growth and transformation as a black professional as I lived with my research and faced challenges as a researcher. I did this through a process of reflection. I used reflection as a personal process which involved quiet contemplation of issues that were primarily of interest to my 'self' and my development as a researcher. I stopped to think and to reflect in order to take stock of what had happened in my life as the researcher both prior to embarking on the research project and during the research itself.

Through the process of reflection, I embarked on a search for knowledge by engaging in a dialectic process of self-reflection, looking inward at my feelings and thought processes and outward at the situation in which I found myself. I believe that a personal self-reflective approach to research does not just overlay the inner world but is appreciative of the relationship between the inner and outer world, between the individual and the social world, so I also reflected on the actions that I took.

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I am convinced that this self-reflective method of constructing knowledge is more compelling and reliable than standard, detached ways of knowing. I view the personal as making a significant contribution to our understanding of the world and my approach to research takes the involvement of life learning into account. In this regard the interweaving of biography and research should be taken seriously. Like Marshall (1992), I believe that research inquiries would be more rigorous if underlying biographical issues were appreciated and worked with as knowledge making. Both Griffiths (1994) and Marshall (1992) suggest that biographies should be taken seriously. Marshall concluded in her paper "Researching Women in Management as a Way of Life:"

"my researching is also a way of life, I and 'it' have to continue to grow and develop, otherwise my life will become stuck; and I have to be able to apply what I take from my research as learning. Intellectual knowledge is insufficient on its own; it is best mirrored in action and being. My research is also my life. At their best, knowledge-making and personal development interweave, each sustaining and deepening the other (Marshall, 1992 p. 289).

Griffiths states that autobiography is a method of gaining reliable knowledge for the teller and the listener. She further states that for a piece of work to count as a critical autobiography, the individual's experience has to be there because their personal view is important. She adds that writing about one's own story is important in action research and this also includes the final writing of the thesis. The researcher's professional development and personal experiences are important narratives to include. So I began the thesis by writing, in Chapter 2, my autobiography, which represented an historical voice and, primarily, voices from my early years and I am ending it with aspects of my biography which represent some history but, primarily, a current voice.

Transformation, I believe, begins with power and with my understanding of power and empowerment, and I shall present how I became empowered.

Empowerment Begins- what has the process of therapy done for me?

During the early nineties I was going through separation and divorce and I needed to take care of my emotional well being. This meant reflecting on my personal and professional life and examining ways in which I worked for change. In the past, I had been more interested in the macro issues of change related to bigger structures and wider systems. In terms of my early experience as a community social worker and the experience of my initial years at the university, I began to notice a pattern in the way I worked for change.

I kept repeating a cycle of putting energy for change into seeking new structures. I reacted to events by fighting at the front line. I had a direct confrontational approach that was aimed at the power structures as, for example, in my campaigning work in the community.

I felt as though, in those earlier years, I was dressed in armour, cut off from my centre as I engaged actively in angry fighting because I was also full of rage at the injustices towards black people in society. Rage can be an act of assertion which sets limits and establishes identity by saying "I won't take anymore of this, I defy racist society" (hooks 1995). I experienced working in that way as extremely stressful. The messages I had given myself was that my emotional needs were not as important as the collective struggle to resist racism. I began to realise that I needed to find the balance between the necessity for confronting racist structures and the need of comfort for myself. I needed to find a way of knowing that my emotional well being was just as important as the collective struggle to end racism. I had done what hooks (1993) described so well when she said:

"Often we replace recognition of inner emotional needs with the longing to control. When we deny our real needs, we tend to feel fragile, vulnerable, emotionally unstable, and untogether. Black females often work hard to cover up these conditions" (p.139).

This is what I had done for many years, covered my real needs and hidden my vulnerability. So I decided to come away from fighting for change on the front line, at the barricades, and try to fight for change from behind taking more care of myself in the process. I knew that I had a difficult time ahead of me and sought help to be able to cope. I went into therapy. I chose Gestalt therapy because of its principles of holism, working with mind, body and person-in-environment. I also liked the fact that it was a process -oriented therapy, which stressed the importance of dialogue.

In therapy, I was confronted with having to examine my life, my 'self'. I questioned in what way I experienced 'self'. Was it as a 'way of being', or as a 'way of doing'? Did my experience contradict what I was doing, my practice, my beliefs, my values, and my politics? Exploring possible answers to these questions brought with it some discomfort but had positive outcomes in terms of the way I now think about my relationship with the world. I was interested in helping other black people to ask similar questions so as to develop our understanding of our own processes, develop our abilities to let in positive feelings, adopt positive thinking and allow spontaneity. Some black people fear that too

much positive thinking is unrealistic. Although I agree that we cannot truly counter the negative by changing thought patterns I believe it is important that we name our benefits. So as hooks (1993) questions:

“What would it mean for black people to collectively believe that despite racism and other forces of domination we can find everything that we need to live well in the universe, including the strength to engage in the kind of political resistance that can transform domination?” (p.63).

I was interested in how we could operate from a place of strength. These are all essential in effecting change. During my time in therapy I was enabled to rethink some of my attitudes about positive thinking and, two years into therapy (1994), I embarked on this research project with Cathy, with one of its aims being to focus on the positives in our experiences.

During therapy I was faced with many challenges to do with needing to create a more healthy relationship with my ‘self’. Some of these challenges extended into the Co-operative Inquiry in which I was challenged to develop authentic dialogue. I had to pay more attention to my authenticity and integrity. As I listened to the stories and to the experiences of others I became focused on my story and my experiences and considered possibilities of making a difference both to my life and to the lives of others. I became aware that I needed to make some changes in my life which might improve my practice and through the passage of time and, in keeping with my need for integration and well being, in 1996 I undertook some life changes, which contributed to my empowerment. What were some of the changes I made? I began by paying attention to my ‘well being’.

The Art of My Wellbeing

I opened my life to a shift of form. Two years into my research and four years into therapy I decided to pay attention to the way I was living my life and focused on living more healthily. I was curious about the way I presented myself in the world psychologically, spiritually and socially and I embarked on radical change towards more groundedness and, transformation. I confronted questions like, how I could connect with my power and vulnerability without being threatened and terrified of them?

I began with a focus on the physical side to my health. I changed my diet and the way that I ate by moving towards a healthier diet, and became a vegan. I had always exercised; but instead of being more concerned with body image I became more

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committed to healthy exercise and became more disciplined in the way that I exercised. I was now interested in the “wellness” of my internal organs. Also included was the “wellness” of my soul and spirit, so I learnt relaxation techniques to manage my stress better, engaged in my own self-therapy by writing a journal every morning and continuing to work on my psychological issues in therapy. I was concentrating on making changes to my internal and external functioning.

This new way of living supported me in integrating the teacher, researcher, political activist, therapist, and mother. The more I focused on my personal and professional growth and change, the more changes I witnessed in my research, in my work with clients in therapy, with clients in organisations and in my practice with students. I noticed that I paid more attention to their physical and psychological well being. I was also becoming more of a reflective practitioner, widening my lenses to take in more possibilities and noticing contradictions in my life and in my practice. My life was becoming a living inquiry.

I was supported by friends and colleagues who understood the notion of living inquiry but it was not always a comfortable process for some of my friends, family, and colleagues or for me. My change of life style frightened some of my friends and family. My shift from the macro to the micro was clearly reflected in the courses I taught and this was disturbing to some of my work colleagues. This was much so, that one of my colleagues challenged me for taking on a therapy training and for teaching therapeutic skills to students, accusing me of having ‘sold out’. She thought I had ‘sold out’ because we shared, in common, our interest in political activities in the community in relation to had women’s’ issues and together we taught a module on community work. I had moved on to teach therapeutic work whilst she continued to teach group work in a community context. She viewed my shift as taking on an individualist model at the expense of a group/community model. I was able to say to her that I had not ‘sold out’ but broadened my possibilities for helping oppressed people.

I did so in the belief that groups of oppressed people needed change not only in the external world, in social structures, but also in their internal worlds, personal life structures and systems, in order to get the best out of their lives. This would allow them to get in touch with latent aspects of themselves which served as new avenues through which they could achieve a greater capacity for positive potentiality and change. I believe

that if we can be in touch with our human reality maybe we can build communities appropriate to who we are.

I was experiencing a sense of agency and was using the experience of my change to help others to take on the changes they needed to make in their personal lives in order that they might feel empowered to influence changes in oppressive structures. hooks (1993)states:

”A culture of domination undermines individuals capacity to assert meaningful agency in their lives... Living without the ability to exercise meaningful agency over one’s material life is a situation that invites addiction”(p.68)

Learning to be a Whole person

The real challenge for me was learning to be ‘whole’. I needed to reclaim my ability to live heart-whole and I began to work at restoring myself to my totality, towards a balance between mind and body. I wanted to bring the different parts of my life together into an integrated whole, although not whole in the purest sense, as I believe that tolerating my fragmented parts is also important.

According to Heron (1993) learning to be a whole person means “dipping down into the deeper reaches of yourself in order to integrate with them” (p.92). For me this involved paying attention to what Heron describes as the intra-personal, that is, what goes on in my psyche; working towards integrating thinking, feeling and action; the interpersonal, that is, my awareness of my face-to-face interactions, exploring ways in which I have related to others through projections, for example; the cultural level, that is, examining the ways in which my beliefs, values and roles interconnect to inform my relationships to social structures and inform social change. This involved a process of being clear about the sources and processes of social oppression and how I have attempted to understand social structures and how to challenge for change (Heron 1993). So my reasons for learning to be a whole person extended from the intraphychic through the interpersonal, to organisational and political change and development. It was looking at both internal and external relationships.

I was interested in learning in a holistic way not only for personal development but also educational, political and social development. I also believed in the importance of this way of learning for facilitators, researchers and educators, who engage in and with the

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learning process. I paid particular attention to the learning I was gaining from being in therapy and the ways in which mind and body, thoughts and feelings contributed to learning. So I began to pay attention to how students could learn holistically and whether, as a facilitator and teacher, I was working holistically.

Integration of the internal and external, mind and body was an emerging process, which impacted on my research.

The impact of my emerging integration on my research:

During my time in therapy and with my research I never lost sight of myself as a black woman living in a racist society. The internal and external marriage was close to my heart. I believe that in every thing I do, the two should be moving towards integration and that part of my essence of living is contingent on this integration. I continued to be politically engaged and committed, in my work with black students and social work professionals, in trying to educate for critical consciousness.

As I lived and grew I began to see ways in which my research was also a living organism which was also living and growing. I reflected on this process in my journal:

“As I continue with my journey through my research, my research is never out of my thoughts as I interact in daily life and in my practice. So every group I teach I note my process, I pay attention to my emotional reactions and actions. I am aware of the different levels at which my inquiry is happening emotionally and academically. My whole life feels like one big inquiry. I feel as if I could inquire into everything. I have so many questions that need answers, at what point do I stop? It is not possible to stop asking questions, stop inquiring. I am reminded of my training and practice as a Gestalt therapist and my learning about awareness, how once you become aware it does not go away, neither is it possible to become unaware.. Similarly once you know it is difficult to ‘unknow’ unless you choose to forget or there is memory difficulty. Also if you develop consciousness about something or self-consciousness, that consciousness could remain for life. My inquiry bears the same resemblance. So as I go on my life journey, my research is now an integral part of me”.

I was living with and through my research differently, opening myself up to its emotional demands and asking questions which resulted in personal change. I was particularly attentive, along with other inquiries, to thinking, feeling and sensing ongoing experiences in my life as well as to facing the unknown. I began to focus more on myself as the

Link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/a_bryan.html

inquirer, on my process as a practitioner, on my changes and on the ways in which I was living my inquiry. I engaged in a type of appreciative inquiry, which allowed me to be immersed in one way of being, with the research and my thesis, letting things emerge. I was staying engaged when I was able to engage, noting down my feelings and what was happening to and for me. I was not making things happen. I had a gentler energy, and was more reflective. I shifted my focus from over-functioning, needing to function well as a researcher and worked towards replacing it with 'being' well with the research.

As a result a different form of energy was shown up in the way in which I was doing my research and in how I was engaging in writing the research text. My research took on a life which was not only 'about' the generation of knowledge or of my working towards the pursuit of knowledge, but also creating knowledge from 'self' and 'collective selves'. Self in this sense, being 'I' and 'collective selves' being the other co-researchers. I began, for example, to notice how my approach to the Co-operative Inquiry was changing. My focus was not only on what was being generated, as I asked questions 'about' but also questions 'from' the research and from myself; I began to ask questions that would assist people to speak 'from' themselves rather than 'about' themselves.

I even began to notice, in my writing of the research text of the Co-operative Inquiry, that I wrote 'about' the events. I realised that I had focused on the doing, on what had happened in terms of action and less on how people had been in the groups and that I had even excluded myself from the writing of the research text. I noticed ways in which I represented the participant's voices which was less about their subjectivity. I noticed some distancing of myself. This journal extract reflects this:

It is as I enter this process of reflection that I realise the missing parts from my writing of the research text. Why is it that these are the parts that are missing, the voices of the participants and their reflections? I have their voices, in the process of their reflections about their experiences', captured in the writing of the data from the co-operative inquiry, but not their voices on their reflections of the research process and the process of telling their stories. I am really curious as to how I came to be writing only 'about' what the participants said and yet the material came from their heartfelt experiences. I feel sad as I realise now how I have left out some of their passion and how they made sense of their experience of 'being' in the inquiry groups. I am now interested in finding out their reflected thoughts on the process. In fact, if I do that I would be engaged in two parallel tracks in this inquiry, inquiry 'about' and inquiry 'from'. I am interested in finding representational forms in my writing that would be writing 'from' and writing 'about'. So I will

return to some of the participants and ask them to tell me about their experience, of their learning from the collaboration and find a way of writing it 'from' their standpoint.

I believe I was protecting myself from feelings of sadness connected to the stories of participants. I became more aware of wanting to hear their voices in different ways. I became less engaged in what the inquiry generated in terms of data and more interested in what I was doing and what this was about, questioning more and more what I did and the effects it had. I became curious as to whether participants had experienced life changes as a result of their engagement in the Co-operative Inquiry. It was as a result of noticing my life changes that I became curious about theirs and asked some of them about this. Evidence of their learning and change has been reported earlier in the thesis.

What has been my learning as a result of reflection on my process of change and development? What sense have I made of it all?

Reflecting and making sense

I have come to realise how in order to work for change in a very fundamental way, we not only have to work at the multiple levels – systemic; structural, cultural - but we also have to inquire deeply into ourselves, and our sense of being in the world. We need to gain insights into how we hold our values in place in relation to change. We have to examine the different ways in which we hold the world by pushing back into our 'self' to explore the politics and multiplicity of self. I began my life career as a political activist in the 1980's in the material world and in the last few years I have sought to politicise the self. Politicisation of self and transformation, have for me, been a process of learning how to be a whole person.

I have emerged with diverse ways of knowing which I now use to inform my ideas of self and identity from which I have generalised to help me make sense of the position of other black professionals from the standpoint of the particular structure of racism and oppression. Now, I seek to find a constructive point of connection between material struggle and metaphysical concerns.

I have taken this concern into my work with black students, for example. I see my work as helping them to understand the 'ground' of their experience before thinking about what must be done to gain personal power and transform their experience. This work is

different from the effort to raise their consciousness about personal experience even though the two are linked. It is important to name and give voice to one's experience but it should be stressed that this is only part of the process of politicisation.

hooks (1989) states:

“Politicisation of the self can have its starting point in an exploration of the personal wherein what is first revolutionised is the way we think about the self. To begin revisioning, we must acknowledge the need to examine the self from a new, critical standpoint. Such a perspective, while it would assist on the self as a site for politicisation, would equally insist that simply describing one's experience of exploitation or oppression is not to become politicised. It is not sufficient to know the personal but to know - to speak it in a different way. Knowing the personal might mean naming spaces of ignorance, gaps in knowledge, ones that render us unable to link the personal with the political” (p.107).

She further argues that the process should also include education for critical consciousness which teaches about the power structures of domination and how they function. She confirms: “It is understanding the latter that enables us to imagine new possibilities, strategies for change and transformation (hooks, 1989, p.108).

Transformation could come from widening our understanding of the kinds of power going on around us and uncovering a wider range of possibilities for embracing power. These can be learnt by unveiling the unconscious feelings surrounding the idea of power, expanding our ideas first, which could then lead to widened practice. Gaining personal power in terms of psychological recovery, for example, can be viewed as only a halfway measure. The psychology, or the soul, of communities also needs recovery too if transformations are to happen. Dysfunctional ideas and not only the victims or bearers of these ideas require a therapy too. Therefore, no matter how sincerely I work through my feelings in regard to power, in therapy, if my mind is entranced by ideas of control, authority, leadership and prestige implanted in society, I will remain twisted in my daily struggles with the operation of power in the actual world. Ideas of power, in society, impinge on my soul and psyche, and I become unwell if society is unwell. Also if I am well or unwell then it is possible that this will have an impact on my research, on my practice. It is also possible that I may also experience myself behaving in inauthentic ways.

Some of the changes in me were enhancing my authenticity but I was sometimes left feeling uneasy, questioning whether I was being truly authentic. I questioned myself because when I began to make life changes and focused on my inner world, I noticed

that I became more and more tempered in the way in which I challenged in organisations and appeared more rational and cool-headed. I also became more worried about threats to my identity and questioned my authenticity and my personal and political integrity. I began to question whether I was 'playing the game', whether I had 'sold out', or was a 'fraud'. According to hooks (1984), threats to personal identity can bring about feelings of fraudulence and even passion and rage and I have become more mindful of that.

I have grown to appreciate that authenticity is a continuing process, one that requires constant effort because it involves difficult struggles. It requires a person to be alert to discovering themselves in a number of different ways, not only through introspection but also through reflection. It also requires paying attention to decisions and choices, how these are made, and the context in which they are made and being mindful about the fact that some decisions and choices are made against a shifting background.

Concern with authenticity engages you in worries over what is a real 'self', over which bits of oneself are the real self. I have also come to realise that there exists no unity of the self, no unchanging core of a being since 'self' is always changing. To be truly authentic and work for change means undertaking assessment and reassessment within a changing context of self. From my experience, this process has required negotiation, tolerance, re-assessment and change as I acted in the present and at the same time reflected on my own incoherence. This dual process of action and reflection offered me a source of insight and further change. I have learnt that it takes courage to instigate self-reflection, which calls one's self into question. Openness to oneself is not always a comfortable process, anymore than is the process of openness to others.

Concluding comments

In this thesis I have opened up to others my story as an inquirer, my practice as a teacher and how I chose to bring about change through the process of education, educating others and myself. I chose therapy, friends and family to help me with personal understanding which resulted in a change of life, chose to stay with exploring a deeper understanding of what I do in the classroom, chose to research with a focus on micro issues on an inter-subjective level. These choices have expanded my personal knowledge and contributed to public knowledge.

The position I am at now is that I have been sharpening my focus by paying attention to how I bring about change in organisations, working as an organisational consultant. However, I mindfully and actively choose the type of work I now take on in organisations, so that I keep paying attention to my health and well being. In terms of my practice with students at the university, I am still working to effect change at Brunel's with a proposal, stemming from Cathy and my research work, for setting up a Centre for Black Professional Practice.