Chapter 5

Evaluating the Co-operative Inquiry

Introduction

In this chapter I shall evaluate the co-operative inquiry reflecting retrospectively on the outcomes, learning gained and the validity of the method.   In relation to outcomes, I present some of the participants' comments regarding the benefits, in terms of changes to their personal lives and practice, and their learning from engaging in the research. I shall also offer my learning. In terms of validity I will reflect on our effectiveness in conducting a co-operative inquiry and consider whether or not we were working with this method in its 'pure' sense.

What did this inquiry achieve?

In my opinion the experience of exploring together did lead to personal growth and development. I, personally, experienced growth and development as a researcher and as a lecturer/trainer and I was curious to know whether this was so for other participants and if so how. About eighteen months after the inquiry ended I sent an evaluation form with some questions to participants from the sub-groups (20) for retrospective feedback to check that they had experienced changes. I asked questions about the following:

1. Their motivation for taking part in the research
2. If they felt they were able to participate fully
3. How they experienced my role
4. Their experience of the whole research process
5. What they had found helpful
6. What they had learnt about themselves and the experiences of black professionals,
7. How they have had made use of their learning,
8. Any changes to their life and/or practice as a result of their participation and learning.

I received ten forms back and I shall use the comments from these forms in the section that follows and in subsequent chapters.

Participants reflections and Learning – feedback from the evaluation form

Some participants reported a growth in confidence and an ability to be more assertive. One participant from the practitioner group wrote:

"I have become more comfortable, assertive and confident about who I am, the way I speak and how I present my views. I can "boldly" offer a view about something knowing that it might not be the popular view and yet feel ok about this. Also I no longer look to others for affirmation as much, I look to myself more".

A Manager commented on her change thus:

"It was a liberating experience as it helped me feel more confident about me as a black manager. It was a place to share challenges and triumphs with other black managers. It helped me to stop pathologising myself and focus on the dynamics of the relationship between me and those I manage".

Another manager commented on changes she made that would support her in her organisation:

"I have chosen to make use of a mentor to offer support, develop strategies to survive some of the difficulties I experience as a black manager, as well as getting positive strokes for achievement, finding positive ways of working with other black colleagues".

And one educationalist made changes to her life and expressed her gratitude in the following way:

"I have taken up psychotherapy training since first being involved with the research. I am sure the inquiry contributed to the process of me feeling able to start this new course in my life, Thanks and keep it up".

There were insights gained, which we may not have set out to achieve in our aims or purpose. The following are insights noted on the evaluation forms about participants learning, with their personal and professional development:

A manager said:

"It was useful learning to be able to reflect upon different stages of my personal development. I recognised my development when I listened to students and social workers in practice, I knew their stories. I knew them because they were also my stories when I was a social work student and in social work practice on the front-line. I also realised how much I have moved away from some of those negative stories. I feel more positive and I am pleased".

A Practitioner stated:

"I have learnt about the limits and barriers we put on ourselves as black professionals. Personally I am learning to value what I can do and recognise what I can't do".

And this social work tutor stated:

"I have become more aware of myself and it has helped me as a trainer to raise issues with black people in terms of black consciousness and assist black students to raise issues about their personal experiences in my class. As a new tutor, I am sometimes unsure about what I am doing, but now I feel more confident so that when I am challenged by a black student about my assessment of their written work, I can re-evaluate my assessment and my attitude towards the student's challenge. I feel more able to examine what I have done, how it's done and what would a different outcome have been? I think the research reminded me that I am still a life student, and that there is so much more that I don't know and I am happy to be open to new learning situations. Thank you for providing this opportunity and for being such an inspiration".

<u>My own Learning</u>

I have appreciated the fact that what we have done has been taken seriously and has made a difference to the quality of life of many of those who have participated. Also that I have contributed to making learning possible which would not have been routinely available to us, black people, if we had been doing more conventional, orthodox research. I have developed a conviction that in research all that is said is important and worthy of noting; including views that on the face of it, may appear incompatible. Such views are, nevertheless, of the group's experience and should be valued.

I have greatly appreciated the value of working in partnership with Cathy who acted as support and confidant. We spent hours planning and reflecting so that careful attention was paid to group development, power, authority and ownership. I learnt the value of co-facilitation as we shared the ups and downs as we went along. I have learnt that this type of research cannot be undertaken without effective personal support structures. In this regard, the support I received and still receive from members of the Facilitators Group has been invaluable.

I have learnt the value of integrating social work, groupwork, therapeutic work and research skills, learning when to apply them appropriately in collaborative research. I have appreciated the value of working collaboratively and evolving structures that would increase the body of shared information amongst people occupying different roles, gender, status and class positions in organisations and in society. I have appreciated the

importance of the need to spend more time for building and nurturing inquiry groups, paying attention to boundaries and open communication.

I learnt that in having several roles at my disposal, I may have picked up a lot more information. The juxtaposition of my roles as person, co-researcher, initiator/holder and confidante produced a very rich source of data. At the same time, it left me with concerns about the ethical and political dilemmas of conducting a co-operative inquiry in the race field where the issue of power is important. For example, the power of researchers in relation to participants, a set of power relationships, that is bounded by the imperatives of resource availability, can define the parameters of the theoretical framework; it can also control the design of the study, and can inform how the study is conducted, analysed and written up. That is, researchers, in our case initiators of the research, are positioned in particular relationships of power in relation to the participants or other researchers despite attempts to operate with democratic principles. These micro politics of the research situation need to be noted and also analysed (Bahavani, 1990). For example, relationships within this research flowed from the socially ascribed characteristics, of the research participants such as 'race', gender and class.   These socially ascribed characteristics carry hierarchical loading of their own and need analysis.

This unevenness is not necessarily regulated by ensuring matching; for example, that women should research the lives of other women; that black researchers research with and alongside black participants as was the case in this project. Matching and taking note of the hierarchical loading is not enough.   It can take the attention of the researcher and analyst away from the micro politics of the research encounter. This is because matching and noting cannot explicitly take account of the power relationship between researchers and participants and yet both processes imply that unevenness between the parties in a research study has been dealt with.

I have learnt that fieldwork is not an idealized method in which the research process is neat, tidy and unproblematic. 'Good' researchers need to go through the process of self-examination, openness to the experiences of others, constant vigilance, constant questioning of what seems to be occurring, and constant willingness to be proved wrong. Additionally, the researcher's social and emotional involvement in the research setting constitutes an important source of data. In other words, personal experiences provide information that can be useful in the analysis of the data and can help the researcher understand and appreciate the data more thoroughly. Also, beginnings and endings,

confidence and distrust, elation, enthusiasm, motivation and despondency, friendship and desertion are as fundamental to fieldwork as are academic discussions on techniques, methods, making notes, making sense of and writing the data.

The process of our research led me to begin to think more carefully about the words 'co-operative', 'authenticity' and 'qualitative'. I had always seen "qualitative" in terms of being a contrast to "quantitative". I had not really understood at a deep level of 'knowing' the notion of it as being about peoples lives, which they live and which have qualities. Being able to capture the quality of my interactions with people in a research context is something for which I feel I have responsibility.

I was left with questions and concerns as to whether or not Co-operative Inquiry could be applied in exact ways; whether, it might not be unrealistic and possibly idealistic to expect groups of researchers to work with all the principles of Co-operative Inquiry; how, as novice action researchers, we could both utilise prescribed principles of co-operative methods but also give ourselves permission to break free from perceived structures to develop certain processes or parts of the process; would the method lend itself to working with particular types of the groups and not others; would the nature of the inquiry matter for this method to work successfully; was there a relationship between the activity selected for inquiry and the effectiveness of this method?

I do not intend to attempt answers to all these questions. However, I want to go on to consider our inquiry approach and evaluate it in relation to the principles of co-operative inquiry methods, in order to check for validity.

Our Co-operative Inquiry approach - questions of validity

In evaluating our approach, I feel that I need to return to some of the criteria offered by Heron (1996) about validity which I presented when discussing methodology in Chapter 3: *authentic collaboration, dealing with stress, distress, chaos and order, cycling process between convergence and divergence and action reflection, coherence between different ways of knowing*. To what extent did we adhere to these criteria of co-operative inquiry? I offer some evaluative comments in terms both of what we did well and our criticisms and concerns.

Authenticity and collaboration

According to Heron (1996) there are two aspects of authentic collaboration, the relationship between the initiators and group members and the relationships among group members themselves.

Relationship between research initiators and group
In retrospect, what we did well was that we paid attention to issues of power and control in the structures we set up and the ways in which we worked with processes which would generate collaboration with some sense of equity.

Power and control
I believe we modelled co-operative working in that we shared power, were open to negotiation and allowed for ideas to be initiated from others. So, for example, although the facilitators planned large community meetings the plans were open to amendment and the processes in the group could have been changed or stopped. Participants chose the issues they wanted to explore and identified the learning needs they wanted to meet. However, I wondered whether or not some participants did always did experience themselves as engaging in a research process, with some ownership of it, or whether they still saw the research as belonging to Cathy and myself.

The group was ambivalent at times about how much control they wanted to take and how much they would give to us, as facilitators. This was evident throughout the contracting stage when, at the end of the meeting, various people stayed on to continue the dialogue, asking for direction from us and discussing the need for more focus. They said that they were keen that "*we got what we wanted*".   Some clearly wanted us to take a more explicit leadership role.

In the early stages, Cathy and I took some control and were directive in giving handouts about the principles of action research. We also took control in designing the structure of the sub-groups and in offering guiding principles for them. However, we engaged in the co-operative mode by offering space for discussion and negotiation in operationalising them. I believe that, in such early stages of group development, a group would feel supported by helpful guidance and support in their struggle. Too many painful struggles, without some intervention from a facilitator, could lead to loss of interest and commitment. On the other hand, too little struggle and frequent intervention from the facilitator, could

lead to group members not taking responsibility in and for the group. Striking the right balance in this situation was important. I believe that, at times, we did succeed in striking a balance. At other times, I thought that my sense of responsibility led me to be over-controlling. For example, In the initial sub group meetings, for example, I noticed myself controlling the group's agenda. Clearly, the tensions and dilemmas about power and authority in relation to sustaining equal relationships in co-operative inquiries did not disappear. I struggled with the tension between holding the power as a facilitator/ initiator and allowing the group to stay with their experiences of learning whether it was creating discomfort or not.

I am of the view that all inequality in power and authority should be rejected and eliminated. This may not be an achievable goal as some people still end up making decisions on behalf of others and, in some cases, act as their democratic representatives. Nevertheless, these issues should be struggled with by researchers and continual discussions held about issues of power and control in the research process.

Working with Trust

The support network and trust which is built up among the members of the group in a forum that encourages sharing, critical reflection, trust becomes the foundation, a vital part of co-operative inquiry design. The role of the researcher/facilitator is critical in establishing this trust among group members. As initiators of the project, Cathy and I played a crucial role in establishing that trust. In so doing we were directive in initiating structures at the beginning stages but negotiated with the group a contract that would create a safe space. Our presence also engendered trust and acted as a stepping stone for helping take the stories out of the private into the public domain. In some cases, we were seen as keepers/protectors of the stories. Another helpful factor was the fact that both Cathy and I were known to many of the participants. This participant stated how helpful her knowledge of us was in enabling her to participate openly:

"It was helpful on a personal note to have some prior knowledge of the main researchers, Cathy and Agnes. This helped to establish a level of trust. Without this I would have been far more guarded and would have questioned things much more if I got involved with people I didn't know".

As research initiators, we paid particular attention to sustaining authentic collaboration in the way in which we structured meetings to encourage active participation and 'envoiced' participants. To assist with this we experimented with different structures like small working in pairs, for example. We also kept the sub-groups small (six-eight people

excluding ourselves) for the sake of manageability. Although these structures were not original or particularly imaginative it worked for us in that it provided space for individuals to pursue their own learning. I struggled, at times, to find the balance between offering structure for support and guidance and offering structure as a way of directing the situation. I thought it was important to have some structure but I found it a struggle to strike a balance between direction and delegation.

Attention was paid to contribution rates in the open discussions so that collaboration did not get restricted to dominant or the most articulate individuals. However, I found occasions where I became carried away with directing discussion towards the themes we had set out at the beginning of the research, with the questions I asked. At times, I felt I might have been contributing too much and might wipe out what others had to say. It highlighted a conflict for me in the researcher/facilitator role between getting 'good' data and being co-operative with other people. At the same time, my role as conversational participant/co-researcher dictated a certain amount of collaboration in keeping the conversation going.

Ways of communicating

In terms of communication we offered space for speaking another language and encouraged the adaptation of languages that located people in their personal values. I was mindful that language imposed on black participants could be seen by them as a historical manifestation of colonialism in which a foreign language is powerfully imposed with the intention of eliminating the natural language of the people. I was aware that this could possibly create cultural dislocation and disorientation. We assisted the groups to develop ways of communicating and evolved our own conversation rules that befitted the private-public-political space for discourse. We had our own ways of understanding each other in dialects, slang and jokes and in our artistic and cultural expressions. This participant's comment might be expressing the benefits of this:

"I was able to engage fully in the discussion essentially because I felt at ease. We all spoke the same language, we listened to one another and although we may have come from different places, that is, in terms of our professional development there was respect shown to the views expressed by everyone, and also acceptance of one another".

In our interactional relationship Cathy and I sought to develop conversational systems based on mutual concern, reciprocal caring and comforting and not render the other participants as 'exploited victims' or at least 'passive recipients'. Instead, we tried to create a healthy environment for those who participated which meant paying attention to

getting the balance between being controlling and being active participants in order to allow for empowerment. We allowed the expression of the views of this particular black group in society which had not been given the opportunity to contribute to research findings. Of itself, however, raising voices, does not necessarily constitute empowerment unless the analysis then produced takes full account of the power context in which the views have been expressed.

Relationships among group members

What worked well was that some people already knew each other personally, socially and or professionally which both contributed to the fast pace of the relationship building and assisted communication. There were acts of unspoken communication which included gestures and facial expressions and which produced a state of mind in one another so that at times a collective state of mind emerged. Such communicative actions depended on a host of background assumptions, based on shared knowledge. We co-created a mode of communication through language. We took the opportunity to develop our own systems of meaning. These systems of meaning included meanings attached to words and sentences and also ways of understanding the power of language. Though drawing on them a discourse counter to the dominant discourses was created and this helped with our discovery of experiences.

We encouraged sharing by working with a model that was not about information exchange or taking turns to speak or listen, as this would have distorted the descriptions or interrupted the stories.   However, certain rules were necessary for successful conversation. For instance, that all participants observe a 'co-operative principle'; a co-operative principle, which required that all parties gave as much information as was needed to be truthful and authentic. We also co-opted the principle of 'sharing of' and 'caring for' feelings, amusement and having fun. These were equally valued as thoughts and ideas as confirmed in this participant's statement: **"It was uplifting being able to share common experiences with other colleagues that were stimulating debates which I experienced as supportive".**

Considering the idea that hierarchy should be eliminated from the research process because there is an ethical requirement that researchers always treat other participants as equals requires critical attention. Hierarchy probably cannot be eliminated from the research process by simply having black researchers researching with black people. We were not all equal in power. We were positioned as male, female, according to social

structures and organisational systems and our power position within them (managers, lecturers, senior practitioners, past and present students), which had implications for our interpersonal relationships. These positions were not always fixed. At times we recognised that we were all black people and there were different conversations going on about our experiences, with different rules, and different individual and collective meanings.

<u>Reporting</u>

There was full and authentic participation in all stages of the inquiry except in the writing up of the inquiry, and I regret not offering more feedback in written form to the participants from the structured groups. This was unhelpful, certainly to this participant who wrote, **"What I found unhelpful was not being able to have regular reminders /write-ups of different parts of the process particularly the small groups I was involved in".**

Ideally there should be co-operative reporting (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). However, Cathy and I, as initiators, did the writing although I checked out the content of the texts in this thesis with some members of the inquiry. I suppose it could also be argued that as I shaped the final account of the inquiry I therefore deviated from the idea of full participation and collaboration. We may also have colluded with the group in accepting the roles of scribe thereby accepting their investment of expertise.

Furthermore, any claim to have set in motion a shared exploration of agendas and potential research questions could be challenged, because of the extent to which the original ideas of the research were already predetermined, and instigated by Cathy and myself. This raises the question of whether our inquiry could be viewed as a full collaborative venture:

Dealing with stress and distress, chaos and order

In the last chapter I referred to the fact that we did work on containing the emotional interplay in the research field. I believe we succeeded in managing the research process from the point of view of setting and monitoring procedures for engagement. This contributed to our participating in a shared experience with excitement and passion was probably swept along by the process. At times I struggled to allow the muddle and chaos to stay in a place of "not knowing", trusting that we would find out together and find our way through to our meaning making. As facilitators, we were constantly working with

unconscious processes in the groups and I noticed how I was sometimes tempted to fall back on rational reasoning or rational problem solving as a way of coping with such processes. This could have been another way of using structure and control to deny anxiety and possibly to constrain some of the learning that could have taken place. In the heart of the inquiry, with groups so fully committed to reflection, group anxieties may not have been sufficiently explored in sessions. I have realised how control can be used to maintain the status quo and prevent any new destabilising dynamics from happening. I am left questioning how effective we were at managing unconscious projections.

The cycling process – convergence and divergence, reflection and action

The groups were not always focused on the co-operative inquiry methods and were more involved in 'finding out' and developing insights to aid personal development and improve practice. The participants attended much more to reflection, sharing, exploring and making sense of experiences, which made it difficult for the cycling process of experience, reflection and action to be fully engaged with. I am left questioning whether we did achieve a balance between action and reflection.

Some people actively decided to identify specific things to put into action in their work practice or life but, in general, it was difficult to get the process to be consistent and continuous. Others did not do what they took on to do but came to the meeting and shared how their thinking or attitude had changed and their consciousness been raised. We did not engage fully in the divergence and convergence process between action phases (Heron 1996).   In that sense we did not get the principle 'right'. "If the inquirers reflect a great deal about a few brief episodes of minimal action…The inquiry suffers from intellectual excess: its findings have inadequate experiential support" (p.141). This warning by Heron (1996) leaves me questioning this aspect of our inquiry in terms of validity.

However, I felt more positive about the validity of our work when I read this statement:

"What constitutes a good ratio between reflection and action, one that enhances validity through positive and negative feedback loops, is surely inquiry-specific depending upon the sort of experience involved. There is no general formula…It may need a lot of consideration to get clear what was going on in a brief but elliptical conversation. And only a little thought may illuminate a lengthy period of straightforward co-operative action. It is also true that as well as the sort of experience involved, there is the quality and intensity of the reflection to take into account" (Heron 1996, p. 141).

So for our inquiry it could be argued that we needed deeper engagement, reflecting with others who might understand and reflecting-in action. For some participants the period of time was not long enough to immerse themselves fully in the process and to experience fully the cycling process. This had to be lived with for much longer. Heron, (1985) reinforces for me the process we had to strive to achieve and what we had to guard against:

"If each inquirer on every cycle explores a different aspect, then no one aspect is ever taken round the research cycle more than once, so your final reflection may generate a widely holistic view although each of the conceptual bits are shaky. Hence the case, in later stages of going round the cycle of experience and reflection, for being more convergent; that is, for all or several members taking certain aspects of the inquiry area through two or more cycles, in order to refine and improve reflection on those aspects" (p. 130).

We did however engaged in collective research cycling (Heron 1996) in the sense that as inquirers we functioned as a sub-group at every phase and as a whole group in the final phase. We always reflected together and experienced together, either interacting as a group or engaged in individual activities side by side in the same space and location. This was a group-based inquiry where as individuals we were exploring similar experiences, which resulted in the empowerment of some individuals. This was enhanced by the interactive experience among the inquirers. We also engaged in collective reflection and each person had some say and was fully involved. This participant confirmed this by saying, **"What was most helpful and insightful for me was the reflections and small group sessions with others who were prepared to grapple truthfully with some quite difficult issues. We heard each other but remained respectful of differing perspectives"**.

Knowledge and action

It was very difficult to know whether new skills and abilities had been achieved generally. However, we did get a great deal of information which manifested itself in the form of propositional knowledge. Explanations were used as a form of theorising. This manifested itself in our different ways of thinking, the sort of thinking that Heron (1996) refers to as *Holistic thinking, Bipolar thinking, Hermeneutic thinking Aperspectival thinking, and Subtle thinking.* I shall refer to a few of these below.

I tried to encourage holistic participation, in the way in which we were connecting interactively, by ensuring that we paid attention to our internal process as well as looking

at external factors, making meaning and looking for patterns in our experiences. This was in order to create the idea of well being. We were engaged in experiential knowing and presentational knowing with the rich stories we told. We engaged not only in sameness but also focused on difference. We also focused on positive and negative experiences and in these ways, we were engaged in bipolar thinking, taking account of opposites. We also guarded against explanations from a reductionist perspective. In this way we were ensuring that no view was seen as final or 'the truth', but rather we were interested in pursuing multiple perspectives. We wanted to ensure that explanations were placed in appropriate contexts and in relevant, wider contexts like institutional racism, for example, thus engaging in aperspectival thinking. We also examined the subtle influences on our experiences, such as, for example, covert racism or how internalised racism impacted on our perceptions of others and ourselves.

Cathy and I also used propositional form as well as experiential form to feedback to the groups our sense making. We rarely used presentational and practical forms, although what could be considered as practical here, for Cathy and me, was that working from our domain as lecturers and theorisers we were naming gaps in our experiences as black people and offering ways of theorizing our experiences.

If a principle of co-operative inquiry is that knowledge is formed in and for action, then that principle has been only partly lived out. Our major challenge, therefore, was the one of achieving practical knowledge as an outcome of the inquiry although, from what was noted earlier in this chapter about the changes and learning for some participants, it was evident that there were some practical outcomes for them.

As co -inquirers we were not intentionally making choices about forms in a conscious and logical way. We chose statements about our experiences rather than practical skills as our primary outcome. We needed more evidence of personal transformation or personal and social transformation. Nevertheless we have gained Increased knowledge of:

- consciousness raising leading to increased knowledge of personal and political issues to do with racism and internalised racism
- our interrelations in white organisations
- our interactive process, as black people in groups
- how we perceive each other and our expectations of each other as black professionals
- practitioner research

Our research was not merely concerned with 'data' to be gathered, but was concerned with what was derived from the stuff of peoples' lives. I am more prepared to treat aspects of process as 'data' rather than as research management issues. I have also come to the conclusion that the inquiry group does not have to work 'correctly' and whatever we did in our groups was relevant and needed to receive proper attention, and to be respected and valued. I do not purport to extend our 'findings' to the wider population as 'facts' since the pool from which we chose was limited. However, I question whether the exclusion of some would invalidate the information which was provided by those whom we did choose to contact? The information comprises the experiences of a group of professionals selected from specialised fields. Its relevance, therefore, is as an approach in which uniqueness and particularity are the aims rather than absolute representation, or representative sampling.

What we did was systematic, with a sense of integrity and authenticity exposed in the process, and in that way it can confer rigour. Its achievements should be judged on the outcomes namely, the experiences of some of the participants who have had changed lives. One important outcome for me was that my engagement with our inquiry led me to want to examine further the research methods we chose and evaluate some of their principles in relation to working with black people.   I claim therefore, that research with black people is political and any research done with black people should be transformative and done from a black perspective. I have chosen to close this chapter by providing a brief overview of a few of the underlying principles of such a perspective.

Researching from a black perspective

When researching from a black perspective an overall principle for any researcher whose main agent is a black person/persons, is that they should not reproduce the participants in ways in which they are represented within dominant society - that is, the analysis should not be complicit with dominant representations that re-inscribe inequality. In other words, the accountability of the research is not only to specific individuals, but also to the overall project of anti-racism.

The other principles should be a) *an emphasis on race and racism,* b) that *attention should be paid to power relations and values of empowerment* and c) that *there should be an emphasis on working with experience.* This should follow a process of seeking to

develop critical consciousness, improve participants' lives and transform relationships and social structures. Most of all it should involve people in practice and taking actions to develop their own lives. It should also be about attempting to bring knowledge and action within the reach of ordinary black people who have hitherto been silenced. Owing to lack of space I shall note briefly some key points relating to the features of these principles, for further thinking. Some of these features share some commonality with some of the features of co-operative methods.

The importance of race and racism

Race and racism are crucial issues in all areas of social life and should be taken into account in any research with black people as it can be argued that race and racism structure their personal experiences and beliefs. However, we need to be careful that the primacy of race does not exclude other variables or relegate them to a position of little importance in research. The whole process of research will need to reflect a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression. From this point of view research from a black perspective is a process of "conscientization" for all research participants and should be judged in terms of its success in this respect. In order for this to happen, the theoretical and methodological rules, including the nature of power relations, which have excluded a black perspective from research, have to change.

Power relations and values of empowerment

The power relations of orthodox research processes have acted in the same direction as those in the wider society, that is, in the construction of black persons as 'the other'. Researching from a black perspective requires repositioning black people, repositioning them as 'knowers' and not silent, ignorant people. We have to struggle to make the agency of black people visible, while not representing the 'agency' as deviant (Essed, 1991). The question, which flows from this, is does this work define the participants into prevailing representation?

It is as important therefore, to reject hierarchies in a black perspective methodology as it is in co-operative methods. There are at least three arguments underlying this rejection of hierarchies. One is ethical: that only non-hierarchical relationships are legitimate among black people and, therefore, in research by black people dealing with black people. The relationship between researcher and 'researched' should be a reciprocal one and "hierarchical" distinctions between researcher and 'researched' should be broken down. If dialogues form the main communication process the 'objects' of research

become 'subjects' as well. All participants are then conceptualised as social actors who actively participate in the research and, therefore co-determine the outcome. Everyone will then have some opportunity to contribute to constructing knowledge and interpreting reality. This is a position black people rarely find themselves occupying in research. There will not be one 'reality' or 'truth'. The different interpretations could be seen as constructs created by many participants, leading to different, situated knowledge.

A second is methodological: that the truth will only be discovered via "authentic" relations. Hierarchy results in a distortion of data, so as researchers we should be interested only in information derived from authentic relations from relationships where all parties experience genuineness.

Finally, there is a practical recognition that if research is to be effective in raising consciousness raising, then it may be essential to involve the researcher in the research process. This leads to an argument for the equal participation of the people studied in the research process. But equality in relationships between researchers is not something that could be achieved simply and important issues about the nature of empowerment require attention. For example, we cannot ignore the need for negotiating power and the need for agency within the research process. Such concerns need to be addressed through an approach which understands the negotiation of power. This entails paying attention to interactive, negotiated distribution and use of power, which is then placed in a wider social structural context. Patterns of racism and anti racism should be part of this wider context for researchers researching from a black perspective.

Emphasis on working with experience
It is also essential that the field should continue to better understand better the unique methodological issues in researching with black peoples' experiences and should continue to embrace newer and emergent conceptual and theoretical frameworks for research which do not reinforce stereotypes of black people based on decontextualised data.

If people belong to a socially or economically vulnerable group (as often pertains to black people in comparison with white people of the same background), there is a good chance that more powerful people will deny the 'truth' of the interpretations they adopt. Therefore it is crucial that we are aware of the importance of building on our own experiences as black. A black perspective methodology affirms the validity of direct experience.

To address black people's lives and experience in their own terms and to create theory that is grounded in the actual experiences and language of black people should be the key agenda for black researchers and scholars. We need to be able to see what is there, not what we have been taught is there, not even what we might wish to find, but what is. Thus, in black perspectives research, black people's personal experience comes to be taken as a 'significant indicator' of the "reality" against which research questions are explored. The argument about the validity of black people's experience may be formulated as an appeal to black people's double consciousness - to their knowledge of the dominant culture and their own perceptions and experiences.

As a result it can be argued that only black people can do research from a black perspective and that only black people can truly understand other black people and their situation; indeed, that only black people should study other black people from a black perspective.

However, we need to take note that an over-reliance on 'experience' can be problematic. When experience is used as a truth it is possible that it silences and ends the right to argue with it. So it is important to drop the idea of parading experience as the claim to truth. It can be argued that we have no direct access to the truth, even to the truth about our own perceptions and feelings. There are times when we can not 'see what is there' because we might be deluded by cultural assumptions which would then be false. What we see is always a product of physiology and culture, as well as of what is there.

It is also true, of course, that, whatever the method used, the data collected and the findings produced will be shaped to some degree, not just by the personal biography of the researcher but also by the social and political relations of the context in which he or she works. In other words, as researchers, we are part of the social situation we are studying.

There is, however, a point to the emphasis on experience. It may serve a useful purpose in underlining the importance of experience as being open to what there is to be learned through collaboration from observation, from listening to or reading the accounts of others, and from examining one's own experience. Also black people's experience should not be regarded as homogeneous. Differences between black people need to be recognised.

Arguments about the importance of experience may serve a useful function in countering the rigidity of methodological ideas. However, they carry the danger that they may encourage treatment of some of the researchers' or participants ' own experiences and assumptions as beyond question when these actually require scrutiny. Adapting a standpoint which ascertains privileged insight to black groups and claims, for example, that only a black person can understand other black people, can be problematic. A standpoint which stresses that people's experience and knowledge is treated as valid or invalid by dint of their membership to a black group needs to be treated with caution. We should ask on what grounds we can decide that one group has superior insight into reality. It cannot be simply because the group declares that it has this insight since otherwise everyone could make the same claims with the some legitimacy. This applies to traditional research which is white and patriarchal, as well as to feminist and black perspective research. There is no doubt that those in different social locations will be able to draw on different experiences and on different cultural assumptions and that this diversity can be extremely fruitful for inquiry; both in producing novel theoretical ideas and in generating criticism of established ideas. However, we must beware of claims that one group or category of people necessarily has more valid insights. Since all experience is a construction, it always carries the capacity for error as well as for truth. There is no such thing as raw experience. In becoming conscious of anything we process information about it through social and cultural lenses. While we must recognise that black people may have divergent perspectives, giving us distinctive insights, we should be mindful of a claim that we have privileged access to knowledge.

So, research from a black perspective and action-oriented research methods, such as co-operative inquiries are in somewhat different ways, all seeking perspectives which attempt to alter the previously existing power of 'establishment' researchers and research perspectives. The effectiveness of such strategies is a subject for debate, particularly as regardsthe extent to which they can create new kinds of power relationships, which have new kinds of detrimental effects.

There clearly can be no detailed prescription of a research process which will empower and dis-empower in all the right places to the right degree. The experience of our co-operative inquiry, outlined in the previous chapter, illustrates the complexities of power relationships in such a project and exposes, unsurprisingly, the need for these to be consciously examined by participants in the research process.

Concluding Comments

The unspoken rule I derived from the experience of our inquiry is that only actions which contribute in some way to the welfare of others (particularly oppressed others) are legitimate. This eliminated a lot of possibilities. Approaches which do offer a way of acknowledging such concerns now have a high profile for me, especially approaches that recognise the inevitable political nature of social research.

Our co-operative inquiry has been grounded in politics, in the politics of race and racism. I brought to the inquiry values and presuppositions, some of which have not been subjected to testing and challenges. My prejudices and biases about methods and methodology, for example, have influenced the ways in which we undertook the inquiry. My values informed the way in which I participated in the process and the actions I took. I make no claim therefore to be value-free. What is more I do want to make a claim that any research done with black people is not value free.

I do not want to leave the reader with an impression that it was easy to achieve what we achieved in our co-operative inquiry, that any group of black people could come together and inquire. When researching socially invisible relationships with a socially invisible group in society a number of difficulties surface for a number of reasons. Their absence from public institutions and the research literature, and the tensions between voicing and silencing personal and private experiences in the semi-public space of the inquiry group are among those reasons. Participants may feel reluctant and vulnerable to exposing emotional aspects of black peoples' relationships, maybe because of the subordinated position our private lives hold in the wider public institutional sphere.

Therefore sensitivity is required in the selection of a research method by any group of researchers wanting to use collaborative methods with black people. It is important that a range of methods is explored and that the researchers devise their own form which is suitable and can be adapted creatively to the research issues.

The co-operative inquiry enabled me to evolve questions and answers in a shared experience with a group of black professionals. It helped some participants to find a better and more effective way of relating and practicing. The co-operative method offered

a discipline, which encourages the development of collaborative participation, reflection, consciousness and a community of inquiry.

The memorable aspects of the experience for me were the processes involved which felt much more obvious, and more preoccupying than the overt purpose. They were:

- Opening up channels of communication- learning how better to be understood
- Developing relationships and group identity
- Discovering ways of sharing meanings and feelings
- Undertaking a shared enterprise

We found a way of starting out together and that was what seemed to matter most. I thought that it was a move towards making sense together within a common life and a common world. It provided legitimisation for further research.

In the next four chapters I shall present my struggles to write the data from the inquiry, offer an analysis of the data generated and discuss the feedback from some participants on the quality and validity of the data.