

## **Chapter 9**

### **Validation and Representation – working with feedback**

#### **Introduction**

The text in this chapter is a representation of feedback from co-researchers of the Co-operative inquiry on the drafts of my research text, which I presented in chapters 7 and 8. It is primarily an exploration of what happened during feedback in a small group, my reflections on the feedback process and some theoretical ideas on the outcome of that exploration.

The purpose of the consultation was to check the validity and representation of some of the field text which was produced by the Co-operative Inquiry. I needed to be aware of factors which that may have determined the nature of the research text – the presence of other co-researchers and the use I made of theoretical concepts in making sense of the field text. I needed to reflect on my own sensemaking of the field text I selected, what shaped my thinking, and the ideas I employed to represent our experience. I was aware that I needed to be in a state of ‘alternative theory availability’, not unduly wedded to any one set of ideas, as a way of making sense of the experience so I created space and opportunities to consult with individuals.

I selected 8 people, representing each inquiry subgroup, (practitioner, manager and educationalist to send the research text and sought feedback from these individuals on two drafts of the text. I selected people on both an objective and subjective basis, objective because they were original members of the inquiry groups and subjective because I still had contact with them both formally and informally. In addition, a couple of them were close friends and were prepared to help. I believed that it was important that feedback as a research inquiry method should be used among research collaborators/co-researchers in this type of action research. So I also brought together some of the same individuals in a small group to discuss their feedback and to further explore my ideas on the draft text. Four people attended. I tape-recorded the small group session and the quotations in this chapter were taken from this recording.

As a way of presenting the outcome of this inquiry I have taken a thematic approach and incorporated some methodological issues such as ‘representation’, ‘validation’, and ‘ownership and control’ audience, censorship that emerged from our exploration. These

will be analysed under the following headings: Subjectivity; Reactions and Responses to the Research Text; Representation and Validation; Private/Public; Protection and Confidentiality.

### **Subjectivity - reactions and responses to the research text**

Throughout the Group Inquiry I felt that group members were not only giving me feedback on my work but were also reacting and responding to what was triggered and stimulated in them by the paper. It was like a continuation of the Inquiry Groups. In fact, people referred back to the Inquiry Groups and to their experiences of the process. In some cases they were stimulated to recall and reflect on earlier meetings as far back as the very first meeting. I felt as though we were engaged in producing what can be described as 'collective memories' and as a result I felt that they were also getting something from the meeting.

They were then able to enter into the discussion of the document and made some interesting comments about needing to see themselves represented or at least have their own inquiry sub-group's discussions and issues made more explicit on the page. One person said that she had lost sight of what happened in the other inquiry groups like the Practitioners' and the Manager' Groups she only knew what had happened in her group, Education group so was looking for comments from this group. She said, **"I didn't actually feel connected with this in many ways because I feel that whatever group I was talking in I couldn't see my stuff. Not just my stuff, but the discussion. I did not recognise it from reading this so I kinda decided to leave that alone and just read this like this and comment on it that way. If I had been trying to put myself into this I wouldn't have found myself there at all I don't think, so that's how I decided to approach it"**. She challenged me to make more explicit my process in selecting the themes and writing the research text more explicit.

These comments brought me face to face with issues about the kind of choices I had about what material I selected from the tape recordings of the inquiries and how I chose to write about them, including the form of representation. Participants commented that I had not made explicit, for example, how I had arrived at the themes chosen. Neither had I made explicit my struggles with the writing. They needed this to be explicit to help them understand my meanings. As author/researcher I had to accept some responsibility for contributing to the discomfort they were feeling.

I experienced them participating in this feedback exercise as they had in the Inquiry Groups. The written document gave them a focus. Although the purpose of the group was to give me feedback on the writing and to validate the work, I was curious that the meeting took on a life of its own. I noticed that I was not taking the lead as a facilitator. One member took the lead and it seemed to me that she owned the process. It was evident that she had spent a great deal of time reading and commenting on the document. I was pleased and encouraged and I marvelled at the amount of personal time she had devoted to reading and making detailed typed comments on the text as well as giving her time for the meeting, when she had an eight week old baby, whom she brought with her. Her investment in the project and in the meeting was immense. She was keen to get the meeting started and participated as if it was an Inquiry Group, inquiring for herself into her own issues about her blocks to writing and her struggles with the representation of black voices. She told a story of her work, in one London Borough's social services Department, to undertake some research into experiences of black staff in a section of that department. Her story demonstrated how my difficulties with the representations of voices and 'truth telling' resonated with her. I was heartened by the discussion because it yielded more than I had expected. It also confirmed for me that there were others struggling with the same issues. I did not feel so isolated with the material and, as well as giving feedback on the structure, form and content of my paper, other more general issues surfaced such as representation, validation, making our private experience public censorship. I felt as if my load had been lightened as others took ownership of some of the content. I felt validated.

#### Representation and validation

The discussion opened with the general issue of validating our work and experiences. One person said how she wanted to see our experiences validated and spoke of what she would need to see in my work to be able to validate it as a participant in the research. She stated that she wanted to see **"Our experiences documented in terms of understanding our context and our realities in the organisation or our experiences we have wherever we are. I want to see a beginning, middle and end so that we know where it all came from"**

Continuing to speak on the issue of validation, she later went on to ask some important inquiry questions and challenged me to use more black theorists and to validate my work, our knowledge of our experiences, as creating theory. She commented, **"How do we make our experience valid? How can we use the experiences that we are bringing and how**

**does it get validated? Where does it get validated and who validates it? Who validates us? It should be we as black people, black theorists. A lot of the theory I come across is linked to white theorists so what I am looking for is theory coming from black people, us creating our own theory”**

The group went on to tackle the issue of representation beginning with questions about representation of their voices in the Paper. Some were concerned that they couldn't recognise their voices and made comments such as, **“I was looking to see myself in this piece of writing”**. One person challenged this comment with a statement which introduced into the discussion a more general issue about representation of other voices. She also brought to our attention, what she recognised us as doing, which reflected what sometimes goes on in other black groups. She said:

**“I think in a sense what we are experiencing here is a mirroring effect which is we are actually talking about wanting to hear the voices and yet still at this point what we are saying is we are looking for our particular voice. That means we are excluding other voices and I don't know how one person can get all those voices to be heard in this paper”**

The research participants wanted some things to be either taken out or contextualised with an explanation and they did not like the way some of what was written was, as they described it **“hitting them in their faces”**. Some commented:

**“There were times when I was struggling because I thought, this sounds so negative. These perspectives portray us as not being able to interact with each other at all and it feels, reads (pause) those negatives are represented more starkly. Perhaps it's highlighting the conflicts that we are having that's coming out, but nevertheless it was hitting me”**.

**“Its like a journey really for some of us and for some of us that negative stuff is natural and we are here are going through a natural process, but without the context of what we are having to work and live with every day its hard hitting. We don't want to deny that, the negatives but in a way right, it's not the total picture which hits you in the face, initially”**.

Their overriding comments were about how the work struck them as they read it, what they felt and, therefore, what they wanted to see included. They were struck by the overwhelming amount of negative comments and felt that they had to search for the positives which, indeed, was an echo of the initial research call. There was a loud shout: **“where are the positives and the original ideas of celebrating our success”**.

They wanted to see more of the positives in our experiences represented and challenged me for not doing what they thought we said we would do originally. One person said, **“I wanted to see our achievements, some of Fanz Fanon’s work on how we achieved without having ‘sold out’ or beat up on one another”.**

Another said:

**“I thought that where you were coming from, where we were coming from at the very beginning was about those successes, those positives. So I am not saying I don’t want to hear the negatives, I am saying somehow in what I have read, its so weighed down by the negatives that some of that other stuff which I thought was your real starting point seems to have got lost”.**

I felt as if I had let them down. I felt they were saying something to me about my lack of responsibility. I had a great sense of responsibility and felt as if I was charged with a mandate from the community of inquirers to write up the work, these members were acting as a reminder. I felt that I had done it wrong and betrayed them. I too was perpetuating the very thing we had set out to challenge: representations of our experiences in the negative. I felt guilty and became defensive in the earlier part of the discussion. My thoughts were that I wished they knew or could imagine the agony I had gone through, the struggles I had had, the endless mappings, working and reworking I had done, being careful not to be too reductionist, thereby losing the meanings. I wished they knew the pain I had endured as I tried desperately to find forms of representation of the voices and our experiences. How could I let them know that I had struggled to try to recapture the life energy that was in the room at the times of our meetings, and the positive feelings that some others and I had had. I felt they were not being appreciative of my efforts. I paused and became aware of my feelings, noticing how I was responding, which was defensively. I felt slightly upset, criticised, disappointed with myself, but it was up to me to cope with this disappointment, to put it in perspective, and to respond to the issues and the individuals in an open-minded way. I began to ask questions of myself about purpose: *“Did I lose the focus of my research while I was in there and or did I lose my intention in the writing up?”*

I noticed that some of the group were also engaged in their own personal processes of reflection, examining their reactions to and feelings about what was in the room. A real life event was emerging and I reminded myself that I did not have to feel totally responsible for it. I started to let go and not be so possessive of the written material. It was my writing and my sensemaking, but the data did not belong to me. I reminded the

group that I was reporting it as it was. I then commented on the present process in the room. I said that maybe they did not like what they read, as I did not always like what I heard when I was listening to the tapes. It made me feel uncomfortable at times. They agreed that they were uncomfortable about what they saw on the pages and some recognised that they might have to let go. Comments such as:

**“Some of this was making me feel uneasy. I was also trying to work out for me, What’s this about? What is going on?”**

**“I feel it has to be out there but I know that there is actually going to be a feeling I have to deal with once I see it ‘out there’. I am not saying it shouldn’t be out there. What I am saying is I have to acknowledge and recognise that I am going to be feeling like this and somebody else might be feeling worse than me and wants to distance themselves from it in that sort of way. So it’s recognising this and I don’t know whether you have to make that explicit in the paper (pause) that might be it (pause) so that you are giving people permission to either stay with it or distance themselves from it and then come back into it or whatever”.**

Some of their discomfort was attributed to their fear of a white audience reading the material, believing it to be true and acting on it. One person asked, **“Who is this written for? She also wrote on the paper: “Certain audiences may take some of this the wrong way”.** They were anxious that representing too much of our negative experience would add to the body of negative images which were already in the white world.

I was curious about the overwhelming and unanimous reaction from all parties that they were not comfortable with some things being said in public. The meaning that the group was probably conveying was ‘we already know this but we don’t want it in our face’, or ‘lets keep that part as our secret’. bell hooks expressed my sentiments exactly when she said:

“Then there are always those individuals who remain convinced that black folks must not air our dirty laundry in public. Some of these individuals believe we must never appear to be criticizing blackness in front of white folks. While I can agree that there is always the risk that public disagreement and dissent may reinforce white racist assumptions about black identity there are just too few all black settings for us to maintain silence waiting for the best ‘politically correct’ settings to speak freely and openly. Evoking “betrayal of the race” effectively acts to silence dissenting voices”(hooks, 1994 p.70).

This was not the first time that I came up against this with the research data. The pattern emerging so far has been that when I gave the first draft of the research text to participants for comment their responses were: **“you can’t write it like that”; “I think you should take that bit out”; “no, you can’t put that in, if you are going to then don’t say it like that”**. When I first heard such comments on the first write up of some of the field text I accepted them and did leave out parts of my analysis. At that time I was engaged with my initial struggles with representation and form in writing up the experiences in the Inquiry Groups. I was a novice researcher and writer and was not feeling too confident in these roles (as a writer/researcher).

I also felt responsible and felt scared of upsetting other black people. I feared being alienated and losing the support of participants. I was so full of gratitude for the contributions, commitment, motivation and generosity of the participants in the Inquiry Groups that I allowed this to block me. I felt as if I was betraying the group because they had trusted me with their confidences. I fully believe in the principle that confidences agreed upon between individuals and made in groups, should be honored but some distinction needs to be made between this type of consensual agreement and the sharing of information which is deemed private in the interest of protecting individuals. The discussions of the ideas generated in the research groups were not done in private spaces, although they were less public than a lecture, and people were aware from the outset that what they said would be used publicly. In my view the spaces were not constituted as protected ground. However, I was aware of the need for protection.

Now, a couple of years later, engaging with the text and feeling a little more confident as a black researcher, I challenged the pattern when I met it again. I thought the process in the room was mirroring something that is an issue for many black people. They did not want aired in public what they considered to be their private business. In the words of one participant **“It’s our business”**.

I named what I noticed. I asked the group to reflect on the process in the room and what had transpired during our conversations. I said that there was an air of caution in the room. I believed that what had been talked about or was being requested was, in fact, a form of censorship and I said so. Some responses were:

**“It’s not that we are saying don’t say that, we are not censoring you, it’s just a caution”.**

**“But it’s still a form of censorship, although softer”.**

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I also believed that there was, at some level, unconscious denial in operation, on the part of people not wanting to accept that I might possibly be representing some truths but not necessarily my truth.

Some of the participants insisted that the 'literal words' did not actually describe what had taken place in their group. Yes they had said some of those things, but, no, in the context of the meeting, the people present had not interpreted their meaning literally. One person was more forceful in her request for me to be accountable, and reflecting back on what she thought went on in her groups, she said, **"This is not where our discussions were going...I want to see the actual script"**.

This led me to ask questions of my work such as, what does 'accountable knowledge' look like? Should 'the real words' override 'the meaning'? And if 'the meaning' prevails, then what would it mean to discount 'the real words' that were spoken?

The group engaged further and more deeply with into the issues of validation, representation, 'relationship between private and public', 'exposure', 'censorship', and 'ownership and control'. There were further questions about readership and the type of audience I was writing for, which were connected to these issues/themes.

Having challenged ourselves, examined our process, identified and explored patterns that we had noticed with other black people, the group went on to conclude that they wanted representation of a more balanced view of both the negatives and positives, that they wanted to celebrate their successes in the text I produced. I felt I was given a mandate to go ahead with putting the work out in public with a proviso that I "explain it properly and reiterate the need for context". This was captured in this participant's forceful statement reflecting what she thought other people might say or expect from me:

**"If you are going to put it 'out there', damn well explain it properly... That's the job you are landed with. You are going to have to explain it properly and if you don't they are going to slate you for it"**

She went on to endorse the need for documentation of our experiences and the need to tell 'the truth', because if we do not do so some of our achievements may be misrepresented and not acknowledged as being successful. She cited one example of the tremendous amount of work undertaken by black professionals and some white

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people in the 1980's on Anti-Racist Training. Black people did not document some works and some of what was written in terms of our experiences was neither checked out with us nor validated by us. She said:

**“One of the reasons why ART (Anti-racist Training) flopped and it was held up to such ridicule was that there was no documentation of it, nothing valid. If anything was written it wasn't written from our perspective so that people could understand it...But when you are going to use people's experiences and there is no validation at all or no checking out, 'is this your experience'? 'Did you experience it like that'? If there is some truth in it, how are you going to get people to look at the truth if there is no, there has been no dialogue”**

## **Reflections and theorising**

### **Suspicious**

I noticed that right from the outset the group members were suspicious and they began to focus on the negatives about the research text. I believe that they had to explore some bad feelings that were being triggered by what they had read in what I had written. I felt there was suspicion of me, of what I had written and, most of all of what was going to happen to the material. There was also suspicion of white readers and how they might misconstrue our meaning. What I had written in the text about suspicion was sitting in the room yet again, and it was mirrored in our process. The suspicion 'out there' in the black community in society was mirrored in this group and focused on me. Some people might argue that it would be natural for us to be suspicious when we come together as black people because of internalised racism.

One person confirmed this **“Suspicion began way before the coming together of our community of inquirers”**. She went on to disclose some of her suspicions while she was in the process of deciding whether to engage with us in the research, She said, **“We all made choices as to whether or not we would get involved in this and clearly we must have thought there is a story to be told but for me I went through a process of trying to work out: ‘Well who are those people? What are they going to do? I mean I knew who you (Agnes) were but what were you going to do? What were you really saying’?”**

I believe we were mirroring exactly the same process that was evident in some Inquiry Groups, in which we had to focus on the negative aspects of our experiences before arriving at the positives. I felt that I was on the receiving end of some negative projections and transference and I, too, was engaged in countertransference. I, too, was engaged in a negative process but in a slightly different way. I heard the feedback in

negative terms at the beginning, so that we were talking about the negatives and I was hearing that my work was negative and that I had been too negative.

We took ourselves through a process of deconstruction and re-examined what was written, and memories of what had been said in the Inquiry Groups and further explored our experiences as black people in general terms so as to be able to move on. The following was a helpful statement from a participant, which assisted us in moving on.

**“I also think that one of the things that we loose sight of as black people is that we are whole human beings and we come with all sorts of problems like everybody else. We have good bits, we have bad bits, we have negatives, and we have positives. And because of the ‘shit’ that has been thrown at us over the years we have some how wanted – we got to a place now where we don’t want to actually acknowledge that we have these negative bits. We want to push them on to somebody else and that is not healthy. I don’t think that’s healthy for any race or any group of people and we have to acknowledge that, I think”.**

On one level I believed it was true that some wanted to see a balance, on another I believed that they wanted to see more positive than negative experiences reported. So I too, was suspicious of what was being said and questioned it. Although, as a black woman, I, too, wanted to see the positives highlighted and to celebrate our successes, as a researcher, I felt obliged to present truth, as I experienced it, without betraying confidences. Here lay one of my conflicts as to my responsibility as a researcher and my loyalty to the black community. bell hooks heartens me when she says:

”The evocation of “confidence” has no direct relation to the integrity of one’s word or the pursuit of truth...separation between public and private maintains and perpetuates structures of domination”(hooks, 1994 p67& 68).

### Private/Public

There was fear in the group that if the work were to be seen in its present form some of what might be considered to be our private affairs would be made public and that that type of public exposure would make us too vulnerable. When I asked group members what experiences they might have been tapping into which may have contributed to their reactions and responses to the writing. They said that they feared that white people would get the wrong idea about black people, that they might think that they were not

good at interacting and might choose to pathologise black people's interrelationship. Their comments were:

**"Suspicion, Don't forget our experience to date has been, like I was saying about the era of Anti Racist Training, some white people took it and wrote about how white people have focused on us. So why would we expect them to do any different, the ground for the suspicion is already laid".**

**"It's the lack of control because don't forget we have always had our secrets and when we expose that..."** (pause interruption by another participant, who said) **"fear of a backlash".**

Hence, the request for the negative comments or narratives to be buffered with explanations so that black people did not get offended by them and white people did not use them to continue to oppress us. One person commented, **"In a way Agnes has been given a responsibility. The responsibility is if you are going to tell this story you also have to explain it adequately well so that the other people who read it, particularly white people and some black people, who might object to it, understand what it is you are saying. We don't want them to go away with it and take it out of context. Again, it is the lack of control".**

I asked in an inquiring way *"Is there a way of talking about the success without talking about the negatives"*. One response was, **"It's about, how do you turn a negative into a positive, because if you are actually telling about success, you have to tell the other side of that too. Successes are not just about I am moving from a, b, c, d, e, and I am moving upward. I will be going in all directions before I actually get back on my route again".**

I felt that they were asking for the comments to be 'sugar coated' because they feared exposure. When I said that I thought that they wanted me to 'sugar coat' the comments. One person replied, **"Agnes, I don't think that it's invalid though - the 'sugaring it up' because the stories haven't been told in quite this way before. It has to be told in a way that enables someone else to come along and be more 'raw' still. But right now if you are just going to push this down my throat there is a lot of people out there, they just going to say well hey! And maybe not bother".**

It would be nice if the social world were no more than a range of uncontested meanings so that, merely by renaming the world, we could change it. Thus, for example, the impression I was left with from the group was that if I re-focused on the positive the negatives would go away. The fact that some people's experiences were expressed in the Co-operative Inquiry groups in terms of the negatives meant that at times the positives were marginalised.

My experience is that the prevailing discursive frameworks relating to black people in society are constructed in the negative and some black groups have, at their centre, the assumption of the negative experience as the norm. The sense is that it would follow that we as black people, were able to rewrite these discourses and relocate ourselves at the centre the balance between the negative and positive experiences would probably alter our understanding and the sense we made of our lives.

While there is no doubt that such a discursive transformation would be beneficial to black people, I would argue that this underestimates the multi-dimensional nature of the power of racism, which has both cultural and material aspects. Why do some discourses stick and others not? Rewriting history from a positive standpoint only may have little effect on the massive exploitation and oppression of black people.

Our everyday engagement with the process of defining the world takes place within relationships of power which involve differential control of and access to a range of material, political, cultural and symbolic resources, including the utilisation of means of force and violence. Power relations put constraints upon our ability to remake the world, even at the level of our own small personal 'life worlds' (Luckmann, 1978). We may, for example, be firmly committed to the idea of bringing back the positives into our experiences of trying to create situations in which we gain positive experiences. However, we may find ourselves quite unable to achieve that because we may not have the control that we think we have in certain areas of our lives. This does not necessarily mean that we have no control in any areas of living but in some areas power relations and external forces dominate us. Class, race/ethnicity, gender and age are all aspects of these power relationships, which are embodied in social inequalities.

We cannot, however, acknowledge the positives by just slipping them in and amongst the negatives as an accompaniment to the 'discursive marginality' which might unite black people. Approaches that seek to prioritise one set of meanings to the exclusion of the other, be it negatives on the one hand or positives on the other are distorting social reality. We need to consider the fact that both positive and negative meanings are aspects of constraining power relations and we need to explore the processes of power constraints of naming and of renaming.

Some of the participants believed that some of the negatives should remain amongst us, within our communities. They believed that "***IT'S OUR BUSINESS***" as one participant put

it. The message in this statement is that some things should remain our business, especially if they are very negative. There was eventually a challenge to the notion of “our business” as the group explored the issue of exposure. One person said:

**“It’s a journey, its a journey that we are all on and this is the point where we can now begin to open up and show that yes, here we are warts and all and we have positives and negatives. We have good and bad and that’s the reality. You know we are also part of the human race”.**

This statement changed the mood in the room and the tone of the conversation changed to one of resignation or acceptance. There were permission giving comments in the form of:

**“If we don’t tell it as it is it makes some of what we say or write about our experiences difficult to validate. We will keep being asked by white people where does it come from? And we won’t have anything to show. It will leave them more room to doubt our experiences”.**

**“This piece of work is never going to avoid the negatives. It has to be there because we as black people (pause).... This is, I think, a beginning of a process in terms of us experiencing ourselves up there - exposed”.**

**“Maybe some people will begin to read it and connect with it. But because of the pain or the anger or whatever they might put it aside and maybe go back to it. I think there will be a range of feelings around it and I don’t think there is going to be only one type of response”.**

It is not a straightforward task for researchers to decide what to tell, once the research text has been analysed. Social and political forces sometimes shape what is told.

This cultural value of ‘our business’ has historical and socio-political roots, which can be found reflected in black literature. That value is evidenced in a Jamaican idiom “*ah fe we business*”. It can also be found in the chorus of a traditional Jamaican folksong:

*‘Nobody’s business, business’*

*‘Nobody’s business, business’*

*‘Nobody’s business but we own’*

Sometimes telling the truth when submitting a research text can be a dangerous move. It is, however, impossible for us as researchers to know the extent to which our research or writings are being used, or how much they are affecting other people's thinking or behaviour, as little feedback is given.

However, this issue of controlling what is said in public has been a constant theme among black people, so much so that it has been the subject of black feminist writers such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill-Collins. Their works have helped me to make sense of what I experienced during this feedback process. Audre Lorde described the importance of voice in black peoples' lives in terms of self-affirmation. She echoes my concerns and feelings in this statement:

"Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self revelation, and that always seem fraught with danger"(1984,p42).

This quote resonates with me now as I engage with this piece of writing. I am aware that I feel more comfortable when I write for a nameless faceless audience. The analytic work of writing implies the establishment of a relationship between the author and her readers/ audience and raises questions such as: Who are the readers? Who is the audience?

### Readers/Audience

My concern is that readers should be thought of as further collaborators in the process of the work and our first circle of readers should be the members' of the situation from which the research text derives. My co-researchers who were black were therefore, my primary audience and to hear a participant say, **"This is written - is geared towards academics - I question its accessibility to black people"** disturbed me and made me feel uncomfortable.

I was thrown back to my conflict of having to write for an academic audience as well as speak to the black community. Patricia Hill-Collins, articulated this dilemma clearly when she spoke about the dilemma for black women scholars saying:

"The dilemma facing Black women scholars engaged in creating Black feminist thought is that a knowledge claim that meets the criteria of adequacy for one group and thus is judged to be an acceptable knowledge claim may not be translatable into the terms of a different group"(Hill-Collins, 1990, p.232)

Other black writers such as June Jordan also expressed such difficulties. She went on to illustrate the difficulty of moving among epistemologies:

“You cannot “translate” instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive into Black English. That would wrap the language into uses antithetical to the guiding perspective of its community of users. Rather you must first change those Standard English sentences, themselves, into ideas consistent with the person-centered assumptions of Black English”(Jordan, 1985, p130).

A sense of audience is crucial in the author’s approach to both form and content. Different texts inscribe different analyses, different viewpoints, different emphases, and different subject matter. Deciding who we are writing for still implies decisions about what we are writing about, for what reasons and from what perspective. The basis of these decisions might be informed by the expectations of the audience and reader.

Patricia Hill -Collins outlined the expectations of some black people of the black scholar in order to be credible in the eyes of ordinary black people and the task that stems from such expectations:

“To be credible in the eyes of this group, scholars must be personal advocates for their material, be accountable for the consequences of their work, have lived or experienced their material in some fashion, and be willing to engage in dialogues about their findings with ordinary, every day people”(Hill-Collins, 1991, p.232).

My wish to listen to others is not simply a kind of liberal impulse to listen. Rather, it is to contribute to a creation of a theory, which is not blind to difference. I would also want the listener to be open to listening in an inquiry way, to listen to ‘what is’. But the process of listening and trusting one another as black people is sometimes fraught with difficulties, and can be dangerous. Fortunately, I had already established a relationship with this group who were able to listen and to trust me enough to give me permission, at the end of a long struggle and deep explorations, to write what I felt needed to be written.

I took up the mantle and arrived more confidently in the knowledge that social science research on black people’s interrelationships by black researchers remains scarce and I recognised the importance of doing this work. I also recognised that in this work the significant relationships were those which involved confrontations with individuals outside the family and community. However among black professionals, relationships within

family and community are treated as complex and significant. For some, such relationships should not be made public, especially if such relationships reveal negativity. Others do not want to keep hearing about the negativity. Metaphorically speaking, 'we must not keep singing the blues' at least not in public. This collective harmonious demand for the positives could be viewed as covert silencing of dissenting voices and opinions. bell hooks said:

"Efforts to censor surface whenever marginalised groups are overly concerned with presenting a positive" image to the dominant group"(hooks, 1994, p.66).

### Censorship

In the Co-operative Inquiry sub-groups some of us explored taboo subjects to do with how we interact with each other. In some ways this group was warning me against violating those taboos. In effect this could be viewed as a form of censorship. bell hooks said:

"Censorship is a troubled issue for black folks. Bourgeois class values often shape overall public opinion across class in black life, so that almost everyone is taught to value discretion and secret-keeping...Black support of censorship seems strongest when the issue is public exposure of flaws, wrongdoing, or mistakes by black political figures"(hooks, 1994,p.64).

She continued:

"If we do not address the issue of censorship in a thoughtful and complex manner, then old unproductive, habitual responses will determine the scope of our discourse"(hooks, 1994,p71).

From my experience of some black groups and comments on black support groups from students and workers, groups disintegrated at times when the speaking of diverse opinions led to confrontations and conflict. Those dissenting voices were at times punished by exclusion and ostracisation. This was echoed by hooks, in her statement about what went on in radical groups in the early years of the feminist movement. She said:

"usually, repression is enforced by powerful members of the group threatening punishment, the most common being ostracization or excommunication. This may take the form of no longer including an individual's thoughts or writing in relevant discussions, especially publication, or excluding individuals



from important meetings and conferences. And in some cases it may take the form of a consistent, behind-the-scenes effort to cast doubt verbally on their credibility”(hooks 1994, p.66).

This behaviour may stem from the need to evoke romantic images of unity and solidarity. The notion of solidarity is, therefore, reduced solely to the issue of keeping secrets in the desire to construct and sustain images. To continue in this way would be a denial of opportunities to create communities where respect, mutual commitment and free expression of ideas could flourish.

Although my feedback group was not giving out such strong messages nor saying overtly that they wanted to censor what I wrote, I thought that they were covertly doing so in their request for representation of the voices to be ‘masked’, as I describe it. I thought they wanted me to speak the truth, but the paradox for me in speaking the truth was that I might be accused of betrayal. The equation of truth telling with betrayal is one of the most powerful ways to silence someone.

### Protection and confidentiality

The research text is also written for my doctorate, where it is perhaps necessary both to follow certain conventions and to justify what I do. But how do I cope with the rule of confidentiality in this situation without alienating the research participants? Which version of the truth should I tell? What indeed is the truth and is there ever one version of it?

As researchers we may deliberately omit some part of our field text. We may, for example, conceal aspects of our research in an attempt to protect the research participants by hiding information which could be used against them. I was left wondering whether some of the things the participants revealed, for example, the difficulties they experienced with certain aspects of their role, could harm them professionally if they were exposed or, conversely, whether such exposure could serve to enlighten those in power. I have felt reluctant to talk critically of the people who have participated in the research so willingly. Omitting information that is likely to offend does affect what is eventually produced, though I think we have a duty to advocate for our participants rather than reveal damaging information about them.

### My way forward

I was and still am concerned about the issue of betraying confidences and I want to maintain my credibility. I am aware that some people may bring up the idea of confidentiality as another way of talking of 'secret keeping', as a way of suppressing negative and uncomfortable comment. Nevertheless, I feared negative repercussions from both black and white readers but more particularly from black readers of my work. These fears acted as censors. In exploring my fears I discovered that they were rooted in my self-esteem. My identity was linked to my academic standing in the white community where I was struggling with a self-definition which is connected with external approval. I did not want however, to be alienated from this group of black professionals, some of whom were now my friends. These fears have made me pause for a time but I was determined that they were not going to act as censors. During this pause for reflection, I concluded, as shown in extracts from my notebook:

*As a way of moving on, I have accepted some critical comments, which the group offered. I will make careful attempt to contextualise the work so that the relationship between the private and public is viewed from an understanding of its location within the structures of white domination. I will be mindful not to perpetuate negative stereotypes of black people but maintain authenticity of the voices and my integrity around truth telling.*

I am constantly checking for self-censoring, by checking my fear of reprisal and asking questions like "what is the worst thing that could happen to me"? Is the threat of negative reprisal imagined or real? I occasionally remind myself of Susan Jeffers' book "Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway" and it helps to remove some my blocks. I also remembered this participant's words:

**"...Yes the book or the thesis or whatever it is going to be will hit some people hard but what they then will have to do is to converse with others about it. There has to be a forum for discussion".**

I also returned to bell hooks' words of encouragement:

"To maintain the space for constructive contestation and confrontation, we must oppose censorship. We remember the pain of silence and work to sustain our power to speak - freely, openly, provocatively"(hooks 1994, p.72).

I do not claim to report 'facts'. I was aware of my impact on the situation and of my intentions to 'prove something' with the text and I made every effort, therefore, to make it equally possible for the opposite to be proved. This was a major discipline of my

'methodological imagination' – to stand far enough back from my own intentions to allow critics the chance to challenge them, and to provide the evidence with which they might do so.

### **Concluding comments**

Feedback, from this group and others was helpful for me in that it gave me a crucial purpose for my research text, one purpose being to act as a *discussion* document through which the dialectic of theory and practice could move back from the moment of theory (the research text) to the moment of practice (what is to be done with the text). I hoped that my research text would suggest to our collaborators a plurality of possible action strategies and that the choice among these possibilities would be a *collaborative* choice, which I had no need or wish to pre-empt, by representing *one* conclusion or recommendation.

With this chapter I end this phase of my research journey, the Co-operative Inquiry. In the next chapter I shall move on to Phase Two of my journey in which I present my explorations and the analysis of my action inquiry into my practice as a teacher.