

Section Two - Methodology and methods

Chapter 6 - In search of methodology for Liberatory Research

Introduction

This chapter outlines some of the factors that influenced the research design choices I made along the way, and explores criteria for quality assurance. I express:

- A. *My reasons for rejecting the use of quantitative and comparative methods and interviews;*
- B. *My struggle to conceptualise Co-operative Inquiry;*
- C. *A first-hand experience of Co-operative Inquiry;*
- D. *My understanding of this research epistemology;*
- E. *Questions I used in assuring the quality of this work.*

A. Coming to the Research: Consideration of traditional research methods.

- In chapter 5, I explained that I came to this research project with certain perspectives on the world that pre-set my openness to new approaches to research, and my rejection of traditional scientific research methodology. I found that many of my concerns about research which had emerged from my personal experience and political stance in the world were echoed in writings of academics seeking for ways of researching that honoured the self-determination of research 'subjects'. Reason (1988) suggested that traditional research contributed to "the impoverishment of our world, and to the frightening consequences of the mechanical world-view, which in the end treats all living beings as things to be manipulated and exploited." Heron (1981) says: "Traditional research on persons is also a way of exercising power over persons". He continues: "Research then becomes another agent of authoritarian social control." Writings such as these, and others, reinforced my view that traditional research was not appropriate to my study. However in the course of this work I discovered my internal critic. She is the part of me that has studied and internalised the dominant system. She knows what the system values and awards, and more than that she shares those values. In fact she **is** the system **in me!** She tries to protect me by instructing me how to succeed in the system. In the early days of this work she was very anxious about my decision to reject the traditional approaches to research. On many occasions she demanded that I considered again, the use of some of the methods associated with traditional research. She suggested that I considered one of the following:
 - a quantitative study;

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- a comparative study involving a group of white men and women;
- a control group of women who may perceive themselves to be already thriving.

A quantitative study?

She suggested that I could identify numbers of Black women at managerial levels and check whether they were progressing through the organisation at rates similar to White men and women. However I soon decided that though it would be valuable to know this information, it was not what I wanted to discover. Such a study holds within it an assumption that progression through the organisation equates with thriving, and this was not *my* assumption. It seemed possible to me that a person may have the appearance of success, i.e. be engaged in a meteoric career rise, while his or her growth, as a human being, may to be stunted. As a consequence, she may not be realising her potential and making her unique contribution to her world. I needed methods that revealed rather than masked such dissonance.

I was concerned to build quality relationships in which I might tap the meanings that other women gave to notions such as 'surviving' and 'thriving', and create the possibility that my notions of those terms may be challenged. I felt the need for open dialogue in which differences in our use of language may be revealed. Heron (1981) asserts that it is in the process of engaged encounter that we negotiate the ways in which we use language. Rowan (1981) argues that some research methods alienate the subjects from both the work and the product. I believed that a quantitative study would create such alienation.

A comparative study?

Another possible approach was that of a comparative study with control groups. In the first period of this study the idea of a comparative study occurred from time to time. My Internal Critic questioned my ability to talk authoritatively about Black women's experiences if I was able to demonstrate how our experiences are different from those of the White man or woman, and the Black man. However in returning to my questions, and I would again see that I sought knowledge of the experiences and responses of Black women. I wanted to know what were group experiences and what were uniquely mine. Within this there was an element of comparison, but it was in-group rather than out-group. Other questions such as "Are we, as Black women, surviving or thriving?" and "What blocks and barriers do we encounter as we try to thrive?" could only be answered by delving into the depths of that experience and presenting the emergent knowledge as valid in its own right. My concern was to map a set of experiences that, then and now, is very much under-explored.

In an ideological system where differences are hierarchically arranged and where difference is construed as deviance or inferiority, Black women's behaviour, automatically becomes deviant, inferior or at best strange. I feared that a comparative study would reinforce that perception. I felt that Black women's experiences, responses to situations and needs would have to be justified against implicit White male norms. Fanon (1952) says that a fundamental problem of racism for the Black man is that he "must be Black in relation to the White man." I feel that his comment is equally relevant to the Black woman. We too struggle with the dilemma of how to

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know ourselves when the pictures of what it means to be human have been formed by a narrow and unrepresentative sample of humanity. Furthermore, it is a sample that does not in anyway reflect ourselves.

In making visible other aspects of human experience that have been denied and obliterated I was engaged in an act of resistance. Amina Mama (1995) in her study of Black women's subjectivity also considered and rejected the possibility of using the more traditional comparative method. She writes:

"My rejection of the comparative methods is based on the fact that studies of oppressed groups have generally done them a disservice by taking the dominant group as the norm. Black women cannot only be defined in relation to the difference between them and white women, as is implied in existing literature. Just as feminist scholars study women in their own right, and Black scholars reject a paradigm that marginalises black experience and centre on white experience, this study investigates Black women in their own right. The comparisons that are made are of similarities and differences between Black women."

Control Groups?

I considered the possibility of a control group of Black women but it soon became apparent that this would be problematic. I would need to find a group who lived and worked in a context free from racism and sexism in order to test whether they continued to respond to situation by using our habitual survival strategies. Believing as I did (and still do) that racism and sexism pervade all aspects of our social context, the creation of a control group became meaningless. Were there women who no longer suffered the effects of racism and sexism? I knew a number of very successful women to whom that question could be asked, but as I learned about the extent to which I had coped through splitting and masking (Section 3) my trust in the reliability of a spontaneous response to such a cold question reduced. Racism and sexism, as irrational and often unconscious behaviours, are difficult to predict and control, so how would I design an environment, which was free from such experiences?

Then there was the problem of survival strategies. Were there women who did not use them? At that time I saw 'surviving' and thriving as separate states, so I thought that maybe there were women who had moved past the survival state and were always thriving. So maybe I could create a group of women who demonstrated that they did not use survival strategies.

At that time I knew very little about our survival strategies. In the absence of a body of knowledge about Black women's behaviour, how might I find out prior to my inquiry what these strategies were or how they got triggered? I was forming early hypotheses but I had no clear idea about what I would look for in creating a control group. The creation of control groups assumes the presence of a reliable body of knowledge on the subject - which I did not have. It also assumes the facility to isolate certain aspects of experience that, if ever feasible in a study of human behaviour, were not possible in an exploration of covert discrimination, and of our responses to oppression and the effect of both these things on our human development and growth.

Interviews?

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In the early months of this research one of my colleagues, Heidi, asked me to participate in her research of 'Women and Power'. I willingly agreed, as I was both interested in the issue she wanted to explore and I hoped that this would provide me a wonderful chance to experience Co-operative or Collaborative¹ Research. That experience fulfilled my expectations but not in the way that I had anticipated. I learnt a lot about research, though I did not emerge from that experience with the template for doing Collaborative Inquiry that I had hoped for! An important gain was the chance to explore the constraints and opportunities offered by the interview method. Reflecting on Heidi's interview with me, I gained insight into some of the challenges of the method.

The distance of the roles as scripted frustrated me. I longed for a feeling of dialogue and encounter. Despite our prior relationship and Heidi's skills at creating an environment that encouraged me to talk – I found it a difficult experience. There were many times when having struggled to convey a feeling or an idea, that had not been previously articulated, I longed for feedback that would enable me to know that I – not simply the content of my words had been understood. I wanted to know how my thoughts / experience impacted on **her**. I became engaged in her research topic and felt a sense of frustration, disappointment and loss that the process did not enable me to know her better.

I remembered my feelings of awkwardness at the end of the session, our engagement felt unfinished and I did not know what was appropriate behaviour. Could we now drop the role and have a good conversation around these issues – woman to woman? I wanted to say to her ... "OK, so now let's talk - what were **your** experiences and ideas, and what sense have **you** made of the experiences I recounted to you?" It was interesting to observe that although I was well acquainted with Heidi I did not express these thoughts and feelings.

Reflecting on it later, I realised our constructions of the interviewer's role inhibited the possibility of real dialogue. I had been constrained by our respective roles and I wondered whether she too had felt confined by the role and maybe dissatisfied. With interest I observed that though feeling constrained by the respective roles we adopted, I had not attempted to change the rules. I feared that a) it was not my place to initiate a change in the roles and b) by changing the rules I may contaminate the data. From this I realised something of the scale and nature of the challenge we were engaged in as we attempted to shift both assumptions and behaviour about undertaking research. The interview method had not empowered me to take a responsible role in the process, but simply to react. I thought that this may have been because in its familiarity it permitted me (us?) to bring our prior constructions to the role and the possibility of 'breaking the rules' created anxiety or it may be, simply, that the method in itself is alienating. Can the interview be re-framed sufficiently for it to be mutually empowering and still remain an interview? I chose not to try but instead to define my one to one engagements as 'Collaborative Dialogue.'

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Conclusions about quantitative and comparative methods and interviews

After that experience I concluded that these approaches though useful in the generation of information were unlikely tools for transforming my life, or those of the prospective participants. The core purpose of this study was that it should, in itself, be a vehicle for learning growth and development. I was hoping for a transformational process that would impact on the dominant political system, and I concluded that the methods offered by the traditional scientific approach to research seemed unlikely to offer that to me. My engagement with the traditional approaches to research, was however not wasted as in this process I became clearer about how I wanted to be in the study and what I wanted from it. The elimination of certain methods was also progress. I was now satisfied that the traditional approaches were not suitable to my work and was more open to engaging fully with the new approaches to research, I was discovering at Bath, which seemed to share my concerns for the improvement of human relationships.

B. Struggling to conceptualise Research in a New Paradigm: Co-operative Inquiry

I was energised and excited when I discovered that radical change was taking place with regard to:- the purpose of research; what constitutes warrantable knowledge; what can be known and how it is known; the relationship between knower and known; and the role, responsibilities of and boundaries between the researcher and research participants. It was exciting to find my concerns, thoughts and ideas reflected in the debates about the role and relevance of research in the development of ourselves as human beings and of our world. I remember reading my first book on Co-operative research (*Human Inquiry in Action*, Reason 1988), and encountering with excitement Maxwell's statement (1984),

"The basic (humanitarian) aim of inquiry, let it be remembered, is to help promote human welfare, help people realise what is of value to them in life But in order to realise what is of value to us in life, the primary problems we need to solve are problems of action - personal and social problems of action as encountered in life."

This explicit statement of the power and potential of research for not simply generating theory but for improving our ways of living was exciting. I was looking for research methodology that was capable of transformational change.

Like a child discovering a candy shop to which she had free access, I began to dip into the writings on new paradigm research - Reason, Rowan, Heron, Lincoln and Guba, Marshall, Moustakes, Polanyi, Argyris and Schon, Torbert, Cooperrider and Srivasta among others. I was searching for answers. My reading affirmed my research epistemology but it did not seem to be addressing my main question - "How do you *do* new paradigm research". Research methods of positivist research were very clear but methods appropriate for researching in a new paradigm seemed shrouded in mist. My reading uncovered a host of names – Co-operative, Participative, Qualitative, Action, Feminist Appreciative research; Action Inquiry, Action Science- among others. As I read, and reflected on the reading, I began to more clearly locate my passion and clarify my purposes, goals, and objectives for the research. It affirmed my

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political and philosophical stance with regard to research, but it was hard to fully grasp what these various approaches looked like in practice.

At first I thought that these problems would be resolved if I could identify the edges of the various research approaches and fit my study in to one of them. For a while I carried a round with me a set of confusing questions. What particular type of research did I want to do? How did they differ? How would I deal with the fact that I was attracted to features of different approaches and aware of limitations in all? Questions that at that time I experienced as dilemmas were resolved in various and unexpected ways. The opportunity to participate in my colleagues' inquiry was instrumental to their resolution. It helped me to understand that Co-operative Inquiry was essentially a philosophical rather than mechanical or technical change, and that there were no new methods that still needed to be uncovered.

Participating in Heidi's research I learnt that traditional research methods could be usefully employed in new paradigm research. Until that time I had assumed that post positivist needed new methods, as I worked with Heidi I became aware that traditional methods could be appropriately used within a new paradigmatic frame. I was intrigued to observe that Heidi's research design combined interviews (a method associated in my mind with positivism), with self-selected, self-directed Collaborative Inquiry groups. I was fortunate to be involved in both the interviews and the collaborative groups. Reflecting on those experiences I gained valuable insights that radically shifted my thinking about new paradigm research. Suddenly I understood that it was not simply **what** was done but **how** it was done. Lather (1986) says:

"the central challenge is to formulate approaches to empirical research which advance emancipatory theory -building through the development of interactive and action -inspired research design."

C. Learning First-hand about Co-operative Inquiry

Participating in Heidi's collaborative inquiry drew my attention to other pertinent research issues.

Power in Co-operative Inquiry

Most central was the paradox of power in the establishing of a Collaborative Inquiry group. I observed and experienced the disorientation and lack of direction that occurs in a group when power is avoided and not taken. It was an early insight into the challenges posed to the researcher in attempting to create an environment in which power is shared, and where the dynamics of oppression are not re-created. Working alongside Heidi, I was able to gain subjective knowledge about the feelings of insecurity and anxiety that emerge when the leader (initiator of the endeavour) moves from autocracy to power-sharing before the group is ready for the active taking of responsibility. I began to understand the issue of power in Co-operative Inquiry (particularly where there is an explicit objective of attaining liberation) as complex and paradoxical. I was to continue to learn about this challenge in my own work. As a result of this experience I approached the design of my study with greater

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consciousness of the need to find a position of poise between the paradox of autocracy and anarchy, external control structure and abandonment.

Despite the difficult emotions experienced at the start of the process and my concerns about whether there was a mechanism for gathering the data generated, it was an important and powerful intervention for advancing "emancipatory theory - building" Lather (1989), and so increasing the likelihood of social change. Our exploration of 'Women and power' enhanced my understanding of my own stance in relation to power. I began to see the taking of power as not *necessarily* negative, but as a service to the group. I observed other colleagues in our small inquiry group also undertaking valuable learning. I was learning that in emancipatory research, the effect and outcomes were as important as the methods used.

Valuing Dialogue in research

I observed that the benefits gained from participating in the interview and the Collaborative Inquiry were very different. In both I learnt more about myself and gained insight into my experiences. However, in the Collaborative Inquiry Group, interaction and dialogue with others offered me alternative perspectives, extended my thinking, and increased my ability to make meaning. The benefits to me as a participant were greater and more direct. The knowledge gained from my engagement in the group was a valuable end in itself. With the interview, I was left mainly with a feeling of having contributed something valuable to someone else. From these encounters I formed a greater commitment to research methods that involved dialogue and extended the participants' own sense-making processes. I began to see dialogue as essential to active participation and empowerment. This is reflected in my design choices.

By the end of my involvement in Heidi's Inquiry I had made a leap to another level of understanding of Co-operative or Collaborative research. It reminds me of Schon's (1987) comment

" The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first really understand what he needs to learn, can only learn it by educating himself , and can only educate himself by beginning to do what he does not yet understand."

Around the time of joining Heidi's group I wrote in my journal:

"It occurs to me that new paradigm research is messy. There seems to be no paths and few signposts. Those that do exist seem to have been erected by previous travellers, and lead to places of their own interest, not necessarily mine. It leaves me not knowing whether they are helpful or not."

I was no longer so concerned to find the edges between the different approaches and to fit my own research into any one approach. Instead my focus turned to identifying ways of engaging with my research dilemmas and with other Black women that allowed me / us to explore, sense-make, formulate theories and test those theories in the practices of our everyday lives. My attention shifted from trying to create an interesting research design to dwelling with the challenge of clarifying my research dilemmas; and to exploring my concerns about rigour and validity. I paid attention to

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the work with which I was ordinarily occupied looking for opportunities to engage with other Black women around these issues, and stopped trying to create special activities. I was now relating to Co-operative research in a new way. As I let go of my anxious struggle to determine what was research in a new paradigm a lot of my excitement about this new way of framing research returned.

D. What is Co-operative Inquiry

Like Reason (1988), I use "Co-operative Inquiry" as an umbrella term for research from an epistemology where research is done *with* rather than *on* people. Therefore I deal with the broad similarities between the various approaches, and discuss these under the headings 1) *Holistic Knowing*, 2) *Participation* and 3) *Knowledge-in-action*.

1. Holistic Knowing

When I first encountered the concept of Co-operative Inquiry, one of the ideas that impacted most on me was that of 'whole person research'. I was intrigued by the thought that research welcomed, and in fact set out to engage, all levels of the human being's capacity to know. I had been socialised to see academic work and research as exercises of the mind, and detached from the body, emotions and soul. So this concept of holistic knowing challenged fundamental prior assumptions about being in the world. Therefore it was an aspect of the work that though welcomed conceptually, proved in practice, to be disturbing and challenging throughout the process.

The idea of wholeness challenges the traditional norm of separation and disconnection fostered by the traditional system. It counters the detachment within the researcher which traditional scientific research demands, and prizes highly when it is attained. It transforms the traditional researcher's mode of working in which the individual detaches her mind from her feelings, values and the intelligence of her own body and spirit, and attributes value to the subjective and tacit knowledge gained by the researcher in the course of the research. The idea of what is warrantable knowledge in research is such a critical and important change that I shall return to it again. The notion of holistic research demands a healing of the fragmentation and splitting (Reason 1994) that is traditionally asked of researchers and indeed of all professionals in the wider system.

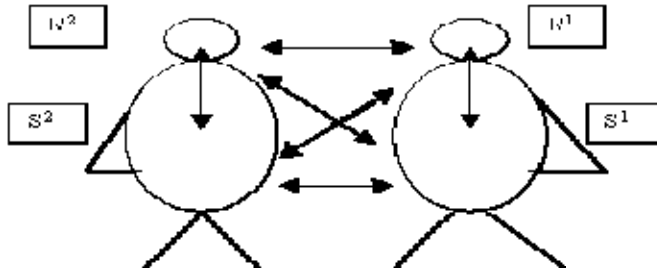
It also demands that we attribute to research subjects a similar wholeness of being. From this perspective we begin to see research subjects as human beings with capacities for cognition and for processing information in ways that are similar to ours. We need to attribute will and power to the participants of our research. We need to see that they have the power to debar us from partial or full entry into their worlds. Laing (1961) draws our attention to the fact that authentic and credible studies of human beings demand fully engaged encounters between human beings. He says:

"If I want to get to know you, it is unlikely that I shall if I proceed as though I were studying nebulae or rats. You will not be inclined to disclose yourself to me. Whatever else I may be studying, I shall not be studying you if I do not know you. If you are adept at self concealment you may be justifiably confident that I shall not learn about you by scrutinizing your

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behaviour alone. If one says all one is interested in is the study of behaviour 'pure and simple' then one is not studying persons."



The diagram below (Reason 1988) aptly depicts the mode of holistic encounter that is so characteristic of Co-operative inquiry approaches. From this diagram, we can see that the researcher is also a 'subject' of the research and that the subject (s) become co-researchers. We also discern that all aspects of the people are involved in this endeavour.

- **Warrantable Knowledge**

As mentioned earlier this is a very important shift away from traditional scientific research epistemology. Reason (1988) says that it is a shift "from objective consciousness to a quality of awareness I have called subjectivity." He defines critical subjectivity as:

"A quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process."

Through such processes the whole person becomes engaged in inquiry and subjective and objective knowing are integrated. Therefore, holistic knowing represents a significant shift in mind-set, and in our schemas about the world. It is a move from the either/ or dialectic that pits objective knowing against intuitive and subjective knowing and that attributes high value to one and discards and devalues the other. In exploring this issue, it is important that we acknowledge the connection between objective knowledge, the 'masculine' and the Western world-view and between subjective / intuitive knowledge, the 'feminine' and Asian /African ideologies (Capra 1982, Charles, 1994). Capra (1982) states:

" For the past three thousand years, Western civilization and its precursors, as well as most other cultures, have been based on philosophical, social, and political systems in which men – by force, direct pressure, or ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor- determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."

- *An issue pertinent to liberatory research*

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Discussions about what is warrantable, valid or legitimate knowledge are about politics as well as research. They are about the process by which the knowledge largely associated with certain people is excluded and devalued and domination and oppression is enacted. What type of knowledge is attributed value and what is assumed as worthless; who has the power to make such decisions; and the nature of the relationship that either suppresses or encourages the emergence of certain types of knowledge are therefore critical issues for research with liberation as their goal.

It is also an important issue, because information about the process of discrimination lies in the experiential and tacit knowledge of the individual (see chapter 5). Essed (1991) makes the point that some people do not have the necessary conceptual framework that enables them to identify and name racism (this is probably true of any other discrimination). Without such frameworks (as is illustrated in my own experience in Chapter 2) people may be unaware that they have encountered discrimination. Also oppression as a deeply humiliating and shaming process is extremely painful to the individual and is often blocked from the conscious mind. Therefore research methods that simply tap conceptual, objective knowledge are unlikely to generate the required data. Freire (1972) identifies the need for integration of subjective and objective knowledge as the oppressed person seeks to gain an understanding of the oppressive process.

Collins (1990) draws our attention to the fact that the significance of this issue extends beyond a concern with the decisions and actions of the individual researcher. She points to the systemic process by which a "white male standpoint is accredited superiority and Black feminist thought is suppressed or ignored." She invites us to problematise the process by which knowledge claims are evaluated, and by which scholarly communities maintain and protect their credibility. She says:

"Given that the general culture shaping the taken for granted knowledge of the community of experts is permeated by widespread notions of Black and female inferiority, new knowledge claims are likely to be viewed as anomalies (Kuhn 1962). Moreover, specialized thought challenging notions of Black and female inferiority is unlikely to be generated from within a white-male-controlled academic community because both the kinds of questions that could be asked and the explanations that would be found satisfying would necessarily reflect a basic lack of familiarity with Black women's reality."

2. Participation

Reason (1988) quoting Skolimowski says:

" Wholeness means that all parts belong together, and that means that they partake in each other. Thus from the central idea that all is connected that each is part of the whole comes the idea that each participated in the whole. Thus participation is an implicit aspect of wholeness."

Reason goes on to say that:

"Wholeness implies participation, so participation means empathy, an almost complete identification with the subject of our attention, and empathy implies responsibility since we cannot truly participate in the whole unless we take responsibility for it"

- **An issue of quality assurance**

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Heron (1981) presents some persuasive arguments for the need for participation in any form of human inquiry. He suggests that a key purpose of research which focuses on human beings or their behaviour should be to have research 'subjects' as well as researcher(s) "functioning fully as intelligent agents. For a self-determining person is one who generates or takes up freely as his own, the thinking that determines his action."

He states that to achieve this research 'subjects must be 'privy to the research thinking'. He argues strongly for the need for encounter and dialogue in the inquiry process, firstly, in interpreting behaviour and sense making. He says "whenever a person is functioning *as a person*, that person's construing - and intending is a necessary irreducible part of the explanation of his or her behaviour." He points out that there are many explanations for human behaviour and like Laing (1961) he sees the need for research 'subjects' to be engaged in the interpreting of their behaviour. Heron suggests that the "wise researcher" will "through dialogue, interaction and co-operative endeavour" establish from the subjects of the research "how they symbolize their experience in their world." In the process of human to human encounter researcher and subject are able to generate a shared view of their world, they "agree how to use language to make ... propositional knowledge of facts and truths about ourselves and our world."

Secondly, Heron reminds us that face to face encounters offers the researcher the unique opportunity of gaining practical and experiential knowledge of his/ her subject of study. He states that through a commitment "to get to know what is in front of me" and through "sustained perception and interaction" the researcher is able to engage in both propositional and presentational construing. He describes propositional construing as "seeing the entity in terms of the concepts and identifying names. Presentational construing is an encounter with the presence of the other. While talking or interacting with the other we are able to "construe the whole spatio-temporal gestalt of a person, both non-verbal and verbal – including the sequence of gestures, posture, facial expressions, eye contacts, paralinguistic features of speech, together with the meaning of what is said and what is not said."

He argues that the quality of the propositional information gathered must be tested with the world encountered. "Any set of propositions ... remains but an unanchored set of possibilities until it corresponds in substantial part with the world as encountered.

The connection between participation and validity also resides in all forms of action research. Argyris(1992) says that Action Research approaches are all:

"based on the Lewinian proposition that causal inferences about human behaviour are more likely to be valid and enactable when the human beings in question participate in building and testing them. Hence it aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including the choice to participate) and generate internal commitment to the result of their inquiry"

When there are major differences between the researcher and his/her 'subjects' such as cultural, racial, gender or class differences there is an increased need for participation, if quality is to be assured. In such situations the need for full engagement and for empathetic interaction becomes heightened. Collins (1990)

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argues that efforts to "decontextualize" the researcher and /or the research subjects result in a process in which information is separated from meaning." I perceived participation to be critical to my research, as I believed that it was only in a process of dialogue that we would be able to surface and give meanings to our habitual responses to situations, and to identify the situations in which they are generative and when degenerative.

- **A pertinent issue for liberatory research**

Any process that denies human beings the opportunity to participate in decision – making processes; to name, define and give meaning to experience; and share in the formulation of propositions that then form the basis on which future decisions are made, is a political act. Politics is about the dynamics and distribution of power. Mama researching Black women 's

subjectivity (1995) draws attention to the fact that the power relations of orthodox research processes resulted in the silencing of those who were researched upon and they have often been the less powerful groups of society. Freire (1972) says:

" An act is oppressive ... when it prevents men from being more fully human." He continues:

"Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects ... and transform them in to masses which can be manipulated."

Maria Meis (1993) exploring methodology appropriate to feminist research says:

" The contemplative, uninvolved 'spectator knowledge' must be replaced by active participation in actions, movements and struggles for women's emancipation.

Therefore, the full participation of research 'subjects' in the research process is an act of resistance.

3. Knowledge-in –Action

Another unifying theme across the various Co-operative Inquiry approaches is that of knowledge in action. Reason (1988) points out that though co-operative researchers may write books and articles what is really important to them is the knowledge gained through their actions. The grounding of research in everyday practice is a central value in all branches of action research. Schon (1983) asserts that there is a

" kind of knowing ... inherent in intelligent action. Common sense admits the category of know-how and it does not stretch common sense very much to say that the know-how is in the action – that a tight rope walker's know-how ... lies in, and is revealed by, the way he takes his trip across the wire ... there is nothing in common sense to make us say that know-how consists in rules or plans which we entertain in the mind prior to action."

Schon suggests that it is a by a process of critical reflection while in action we are able to tap this knowledge.

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My prior assumptions about the ways in which as human beings we come to know the world were challenged in the course of this research. From writers such as Bateson (1972), Heron (1992), Field/Milner (1934), Polanyi (1967), Belenky et al (1986), I learnt that thinking, cognition and knowledge generation is not restricted to the mind but that intelligence resides in the whole of our system. As I became more consciously aware of myself in action, and made reflection-on-action a routine habit I began to understand about the different quality of knowledge that becomes available. I therefore became more and more committed to research methods that encompassed reflection in and on action. I say more about this in chapter 7.

- **Co-operative Inquiry: a methodology appropriate to liberatory research**

In choosing to locate my research in the co-operative inquiry methodology I was making a political decision. I was choosing to work in ways that reflected my objective of empowering those who traditionally had been oppressed. Taking a systemic approach to the issue of institutional discrimination I saw the everyday occurrences in the local situation as holding valuable insights to the wider social situation. Therefore I saw the concrete experience of Black women in organisations as pregnant with knowledge. In those narratives I looked for information about the nature of the organisational context, and of the relationships constructed around Black women. In those stories I attempted to give meaning to the abstract ideas of inferiority and superiority, domination and oppression.

Secondly, in line with many Participatory Action Research initiatives I saw my project as an opportunity not only for gathering information, but also as a means by which interventions designed to change the system are made (Freire 1972, Fals Borda 1991, Rahman 1991, Collins 1990). Aiming as I was to empower others, and myself, to resist and even transform the forces by which our abilities to experience our full humanity were inhibited, it was important that there remained a constant link between action and reflection. In these ways, abstract thought remained closely tied to experience, and possibilities for change while in the process of action remained ever present.

For me, this choice was also an issue of quality assurance. Collins (1991), writing from an American perspective, identifies that in Afrocentric thought great value is placed on knowledge that is grounded in experience. She says:

" For most African –American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences"

Quoting Mitchell and Lewther (1986), she continues:

"Experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicles is a fundamental epistemological tenet in African-American thought systems."

She identifies the valuing of concrete experience as the source of not just abstract knowledge but wisdom as being "not only an Afrocentric tradition, but also a women's tradition. Belenky et al (1986) found that a substantial number of women in their studies were what they termed "connected knowers". Other studies such as

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Gilligan (1982), Chodorow (1978) indicate that women are orientated towards contextual knowledge rather than abstract principles.

E. Questions for assurance of quality

At the time of starting this research I found myself pre-occupied with concerns about ensuring of validity, rigour and reliability. These issues seemed to hold within them legitimate concerns for determining the quality of research - whatever the model. Peter Reason (1988) says "the issue of validity is not simply an academic issue but is intensely practical. In exploring questions of validity researchers are looking at the *soundness* of their endeavours and exploring questions such as " Are we in any way deceiving ourselves in our claims and in our practice?" Heron (1988) offers us a dictionary definition of the term – "the quality of being well founded"

I totally agreed with both statements and with the necessity for such processes yet I was uncomfortable with both the term and the anticipated process. What follows is an exploration of my concerns and a statement of what I consider to be appropriate criteria for testing the soundness or quality of my research.

Rigour

Exploring these issues I began to realise that the attainment of rigour, in its traditional form, demanded high researcher control, and often the sacrifice of relevance of the research. Argyris (1992) suggests that research which is at the rigorous end of the rigour – relevance dialectic is likely to alienate. He poses Edwards' (1954) framework for attaining rigour as a template. At this end of the continuum, research is completely orientated towards the needs of, and controlled and managed, by the researcher and set in an artificial and alienated context. In such a setting research 'subjects' are treated as 'other,' objectified and available for whatever manipulations.

Reliability and Validity

My concerns about issues of reliability and validity in research were expressed in a piece of allegorical writing in a journal dated November 1988 - written at a time when I was still struggling to internalise the meaning of Co-operative research. I wrote:

*The image of my research as a large wood or even a jungle is a recurring one. One of the attractive things about doing this type of research was the idea of setting out with an idea of where you would like to get to, but no clear idea of the means by which you will attain that goal. It conjured up images of walking down tracks, arriving at intersections and *then* choosing which path to go down. Going down that path and on the way discovering new paths, or areas for in- depth exploration. Maybe a pond teeming with life which reveals itself gradually as one sits silently staring and listening; or a beautiful idyllic spot full of wild flowers, each unique and worthy of study in itself. A place where one feels able to stop for a while, rest, be re-energised and refreshed before continuing the journey.*

When thinking of research in this way the process is the product. The goal becomes the exploration of the wood, and having explored it maybe to map it

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for those who have not had the opportunity of such travel. It seems in this way of thinking the 'for me' is the journey itself, and 'for others' the map and maybe some descriptive writing, photographs and sound recordings.

This image helps me to understand an important difference between new paradigm and traditional research. In the traditional method one starts with the map, the paths are sign-posted and one starts off with a clear idea of what one will study. The aim being to enhance and expand the map i.e. that which is already known. Exploration outside of the predetermined area becomes a deviation - activity that has distracted from the main goal and purpose. This seems a very effective way of mapping the wood, but it assumes that the terrain is static, small and confinable. One may question the value of maps. Do they not simply outline the path taken and provide signposts and milestones marking the traveller's particular interests? What do they tell us about the place itself?

The woods or jungle of Human Inquiry seems more like that in Narniaⁱⁱ. It is constantly changing. Here the trees walk. They engage in dialogue, revealing themselves in different ways to the various travellers. In situations like this each journey is a unique experience, revealing new things and worth recording. Maps and signpost of paths are less accurate. In terrain of this nature what can the traveller produce that may be of use to 'others' i.e. those who have never experienced such woods?

It seems that this may partially depend on the experience and consequent perceptions of the audience. To an audience who have never experienced Narnia and knows nothing about trees that walk and talk, it may be that they demand maps, signposts, and guidebooks. To such people it may seem a grave omission and even irresponsibility on the part of the traveller/explorer if the terrain was not mapped and sign-posted. However to the people who have experienced places like Narnia it may be clear that a record of the travellers subjective experience with descriptions of the various characters encountered, views, opinions and aspects of their character revealed may seem more worthwhile. This seems to be one of the difficulties of communicating across paradigms. There are no shared assumptions about the nature of the world. This is more difficult when the power lies with the holders of the old paradigm. Maps and guides must be produced and signposts erected even when one knows that they are little use.

The allegoric writing above indicates an intuitive, if not conceptual appreciation, of some of the challenges that validity checks posed to my work.

- ***Challenges to notions of reliability***

The allegory identifies a perceptual gap between the explorer / researcher of the woods of Narnia, and the reader/assessor who has never encountered such a world. A common language may in itself hide the communication challenges that exist between them. Notions of reliability challenge the assumption that the research environment and the participants (including the researcher) remains stable, and that it is possible to replicate it and produce the same outcome. From the writing above it can be seen that

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I did not carry that assumption. For me, all aspects of my research were in constant changes, and no two experiences were the same. I fully share Schon's (1983, 1987) repeated assertion that each situation is unique.

My metaphor also draws attention to the challenge of emergence. In a totally unmapped and unknown terrain it is impossible to predict what may be worth exploring. It is in the process of engagement that it becomes clear what is worthy of attention. It is in the moment of the inquiry that possibilities and constraints emerge that were previously unknown. I would argue that this need to engage with the emergent always persists even in situations where it is assumed that the terrain is well known.

Reliability as a criterion for research quality assumes that outcomes could be predetermined and seeks to impose a value of neutrality in the interpersonal dynamics between researcher and 'subjects'. In this way it attempts to remove the self-determining and therefore unpredictable nature of human beings and constructs the people as automations. Reliability also obscures the large difference that that one small change may make to the research outcome (Capra 1997). I agreed with Lincoln and Guba (1985) that

"replicability in the traditional sense can be determined only within a given framework and that that is itself a construction, not an inevitable and unchanging part of reality."

And for these reasons I decided that concepts of reliability were not appropriate assessment criteria for this work.

- ***Challenges to communication across worlds***

The metaphor assisted me in identifying the differing assessments that may be made about what are worthwhile products of research, and raised questions about appropriate modes of communicating out from unknown worlds. It suggested that in such situations, forms of engaged dialogue, which allow the exploration and agreement of meanings, and which permit the researcher to express the nature of the terrain, may be of far greater value. (Heron (1981) says that in the absence of face to face encounters between the researcher and her subject, "the result is a set of alienated statements hanging in an interpersonal void." I would argue that there is the risk of a similar void when the communication between researcher and audience / assessors crosses cultures and oppressions as essentially we are trying to communicate between different worlds.

Therefore it draws our attention to the puzzle of what conceptual frameworks are needed if the audience is to make sense of the information offered or even to appreciate the challenges of communication being experienced.

- ***Power relationships between researcher and audience***

In working with this metaphor I was able to identify one of the main sources of anxiety in this work to be the power relationships that exist between the explorer and her audience. I realised that objective and abstract discussions of validity mask the power differentials between members of oppressed groups and the dominant system.

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It seemed that in a situation where there is a powerful audience and a disenfranchised researcher challenges become very difficult to resolve, and the chances of successful communication about issues of real value are slight (Collins 1990).

- *Emotive trigger*

I also realised that 'validity' was an emotive word for me. It conjured up images of powerful authority figures claiming the right to define and give credence. It triggered old feelings of anger that are not directly related to this discussion of research data, but that spring from the experience of being a member of more than one oppressed group whose perceptions, views and perspectives have been routinely negated and deemed invalid. For these reasons validity became a term I rejected. I was more comfortable with the idea of ensuring quality. My reflections on the allegory also indicated to me that I could actively participate in determining the appropriate criteria for the assessment of this research.

- *Questions for ascertaining quality*

The following criteria used to ascertain the quality my work emerged from my goals, objectives, hopes, and aspirations for this piece of work:

- Were the research – methods and processes - conducive to empowerment and consciousness- raising and liberation?
- Has it revealed other perspectives on our shared world?
- Has this research facilitated my development and my ability to thrive?

Closing Remarks

This chapter outlines the research epistemology that underpins this work, expresses my concern to attain congruence between means and ends and identifies the questions that have guided my attempts to ensure the quality of this endeavour. I now move on to describe the research design and engagements.

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