Section Two - Methodology and Methods

Chapter 7 - Co-operative Research in Practice

Introduction

In this chapter I describe my research design, the various cycles of engagements, and give a brief overview of the main learning gained from each engagement. In this study there is almost total overlap between content and process, so in describing our practice I am also producing information related to the topic of my study. The main focus of the chapter is *what* I did; however I feel unable to detach it from *how* we worked together. There was always a dynamic relationship between method and process - one was the outcome of the other. My design choices were continuously adjusted, modified and sometimes radically changed as I observed and better understood the impact of previous action(s) taken. In writing about the research in practice I have attempted to make transparent the relationship between method and process. It is therefore important that this chapter is read in a mode of inquiry – seeking to understand what insights are being produced as we (Black women) used the various methods.

Overview of the Research Design

It was my intention that this research should be grounded in the experiences of Black women I did not want it to be based on *assumptions* about how Black women behaved or on what our experiences *may* be. It was critically important to me that what was produced was relevant to my life and to the lives of other Black women in Britain. This research was being done primarily for us. In 1991, when I read the following statement by Marion Milner (1934), a psychologist and physiologist who set out to discover her true likes, dislikes, and to identify her own values, I felt that she spoke for me. She said:

> "Was there not a way by which each person could find out for himself what he was like, not by reading what other people thought he ought to be, but directly, as directly as knowing the sky is blue, and how an apple tastes, not needing anyone to tell him."

Deciding not to start with literature

Later on in the same book Milner says:

> " It took me years to learn that I must never begin my search by looking in books, never say 'I know too little, I must read some before I start', but that I must observe first, express what I observed, and then, if I needed it, see what the books had to say.

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This too resonated. As stated in Chapter 4, in 1985 I had discovered from a literature review, that there was little published material about the experiences of Black women, and that most of what was written was about Black American women. I felt that their experiences would be useful to me towards the end of the study as a means by which our differences could be perceived. However it seemed that I might unconsciously skew my perception and contaminate the research by engaging with this material too early in the inquiry process.

So, in the first years of the study though I read avidly, I was preoccupied with learning about co-operative inquiry and with my own self-development and my reading reflected those concerns. Nevertheless internalisation of traditional research conventions meant that my Internal Critic, was very uncomfortable with my decision and kept prompting that I should be "engaging with what others have to say about Black women's experiences." Sticking to this decision was a source of internal struggle.

Research disciplines and multiple cycles: a question of quality

At the start of the research I was particularly preoccupied by concerns about rigour, trustworthiness, and validity. To establish trustworthiness and quality I:

a. Applied certain disciplines to the inquiry;
b. Undertook cycles of inquiry that allowed information gathered in one cycle, and with one group of women to be tested with another group. The research had two phases, with repeated cycles in each phase.

Overview of Phase 1

In this phase there were three major cycles of engagement from which streams of data were produced:

1. **A living Inquiry** – an exploration of my own life experiences and history. This cycle spanned the whole period of the research.
2. **Action Learning (AL) sets**
3. **Collaborative dialogue with two Black women professionals**

In these I was concerned to:

- *Develop a research design;*
- *Identify Black women with whom I may collaborate in this work;*
- *Develop and /or enhance core researching skills and qualities that I identified as critical to my effectiveness;*
- *Gain support for myself in responding to the challenge of facing the pain of my experiences and of changing survival strategies that I might discover to be inhibiting my growth.*

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- *Inquire into my own experiences, identifying habitual patterns of responses and dealing with some of the old distress that I might be carrying;*
- *Generate concepts of surviving and thriving.*

Overview of Phase 2

In this phase the major cycles were:

4. Confirming and disconfirming cycles of engagement - I used seven opportunities, presented by my work as a trainer / consultant, to test the information about Black women managers' experiences in organisations gathered from the AL cycles.

5. Collaborative Inquiry group – This was composed of a selected group of peers who were actively engaged in their own development and had experience of developing other Black women.

This phase was designed to:

- *Test the reliability of the information gathered in phase 1* - I was conscious that most of the women, with whom I worked in phase one, came from the same organisation. I wanted to ascertain if the themes identified were specific to that particular organisation, or if they had wider applicability. Testing the themes with Roseanne and Elly (from cycle 2) and with my own life experience, was already indicating their reliability, but I wanted to take it further.
- *Establish a dialogue with peers about our survival strategies and about the challenges of thriving in a hostile environment.*

Chronologically there were many overlaps between phases and cycles. The demarcation between the phases is about objectives rather than time frame.

Map of the Research Cycles

Key

Living Inquiry

Collaborative Dialogue

Action Learning

Collaborative Inquiry

Confirming and

Disconfirming cycles

Research Disciplines: enhancing my capacity for researching

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As I contemplated the challenge of transformational change for the Black woman, and as I tried to identify the process needed to effect such changes, it became apparent to me that I must start by standing fully in the shoes of the Black woman. I must understand something of what it means to empower and liberate people who for hundreds of years have been doubly oppressed. This was not just **any** piece of research. It was an attempt to go contrary to a very powerful and pervasive system of thought that was both in and outside of us. In an endeavour to empower Black women to move from surviving to thriving I was attempting to discover how to create scripts different to those given to us by the system. I was starting in the middle of a vicious double bind, because the script we currently held removed from us powers to know, design and create. It seemed that the potential for our success lay in understanding and recognising our situation.

At the time of starting the research my conceptual grasp of the nature of our dilemmas and our position in the system was even less than it is now. However I knew that I did not know. I knew that I did not understand how to liberate myself from many of the situations in which I felt trapped, so this left me aware of my need to learn. This was I feel an important step on the learning journey. Journalling, therapy and my collaborative dialogues with Roseanne[i] were my attempts to both start and support myself in this process of learning.

These initiatives and later my encounter with the works of William Torbert (1991) and Marion Milner (1932) alerted me to the need for an awareness of self in action. Johari's window (Luft 1984), a model used frequently in learning events, gave an indication of the fact that as human beings our knowledge about ourselves is extremely limited. It indicated that others hold information about us that we do not have ourselves. For these reasons I perceived feedback from others as critical to our development. However I realised that in this inquiry we needed to go further than that. To give feedback on behaviour I must first be aware of it. In trying to identify habitual, taken-for-granted responses I realised that I was unlikely to get feedback from others on such behaviours. I became apparent that I needed to heighten my own awareness in order to separate the problem from my reactions to it, and to 'catch' the thoughts that triggered the feelings and the reactive behaviours. I needed to understand the messages, needs and urges that drove the thoughts that produced the actions, and that kept me wedded to responses and behaviours that I had identified as detrimental to myself. These insights encouraged me to consider what further researching skills, and qualities I needed in order to effectively undertake this study. I identified these as research disciplines needed to be developed by me, and applied in all cycles of the research if quality was to be assured. I saw these research disciplines to be:

1. **Conscious awareness;**
2. **Contemplation;**
3. **Reflective practice;**
4. **Dialogue;**
5. **Quality questions.**

1. Conscious Awareness

Conscious awareness is both a practice and a way of being in relation to:- others, our world and ourselves. It moves us from the sleepy numbness in which we often live, to an alert attentiveness to ourselves in action, in our environment. It is an attentiveness that allows us to know ourselves as both separate from, and in connection with, people and things around us. It acknowledges that there are different types of knowledge available to us as we live our lives and that the whole of our being has cognition - the capacity to know (Bateson, 1972). It is a practice that over time gradually widens our ability to be more aware of what is happening at any particular time.

Torbert (1991) says that most of us are unaware of the fact that our information about what is happening to us at any one time is, **must be,** inadequate. He illustrated this:

> " For the most part, our attention simply does not register a great deal of what occurs. Reading this book the reader is likely to become oblivious for protracted periods of time to sounds and other events in his or her environment, oblivious too of his her own body position and breathing, oblivious even of the book as a material object as distinct from the cognitive meaning of the words and sentences […] we are rarely aware of our own behaviour and others reactions as we act. Seeing and hearing oneself on a videotape is almost invariably shocking: one had no idea of the gestures one makes in public, of the facial expressions, of the tone of voice, of the run-on sentences, and so forth."

Conscious awareness acknowledges, and attributes value to knowledge gained from intuition and from feeling and sensing our world. In the previous chapter I talked about wanting to tap the knowledge from the whole of my being and from my interaction with the world around me. This was the skill through which I was to try to do this.

Milner (1934) talks about this widened attention as a process through which one learns " not from reason but from the senses." She writes about discovering, as she studied her perception and her experiences, that:

> " There were different ways of perceiving and … the different ways provided ...different facts. There was a narrow focus which meant seeing life as if from blinkers and with the centre of awareness in my head; and there was a wide focus which meant knowing with the whole of my body, a way of looking which quite altered my perception of whatever I saw. And I found that the narrow focus way was the way of reason."

This wide focus knowing seems to include what my therapist describes as the "intelligence of the body"(also Bateson 1972, Torbert 1991, Berman1989). Her work challenged me into the awareness that, though a woman, over the years I had learned to give more value to the 'male' side of me and that professional competence whether as a consultant, manager or a researcher was often defined in archetypal male ways. I had learnt to mistrust intuition and was constantly being surprised when in retrospect I discovered something that I had known without knowing how I had known it. Milner drew attention to the need to bring my 'female' subjective intuition to the more commonly used 'male' intellect of reason and objective knowledge, and of the need to sometimes let go of purpose in observing. She says:

> "My male side, unwilling to let go its purposes, had not dared give in to receptiveness, for it feared the loss of its own identity. And until it did I was unable to escape from that narrow focus of attention which always accompanied my purposiveness."

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She also comments on the potential of the critical 'male' approach for restricting vision. She writes:

> "If one was in the habit of arguing about life it was very difficult not to approach sensation with the same concentrated attention and so shut out its width and depth and height."

I believed that much of the information we carry about sexism and racism had been gained from experience in the process of communicating. I thought that a lot of the messages were communicated at the pre-verbal level that Heron (1988) suggests happens while in face to face encounter. It seemed that if we were to tap such information we would have to develop the subjective intuition, purposelessness and receptive engagement that Milner described.

She suggests that there is a need for unintentional playfulness in the gathering of this information. To my well-developed adult self, that seemed to bring a ‘childish’ lightness and lack of seriousness, to situations and that I deemed to be incompatible with professionalism. Yet, in her book she illustrated the wisdom held within the inner child and its skill at allowing those aspects of experience that are often so well obscured from the vision of our conscious mind, to float into consciousness through 'play'. Milner (1934) played games with herself in order to try to discover what she was really doing or thinking.

> "Just as I had discovered earlier that when I let my thoughts write themselves they had quite unexpected things to say, so I was now finding that whenever I managed to turn round upon my thought and catch it red-handed I was not at all sure of finding that amount of common sense which I had fondly supposed myself to possess."

In the first phase of this research, with the help of my therapist and through participating in activities such as Tai Chi, I learnt to expand my ways of knowing. I will say more about this later. In that process I discovered that the practice of conscious awareness, is paradoxical. It both widens the ability to pay attention to, and gather more information from, both in and out of ourselves and at the same time, it creates a greater awareness of the inadequacy of one's knowledge and develops a tentativeness about stating "reality". It is a humbling and humanising discipline (Torbert, 1991).

When I brought this wide focus to the facilitator’s role I was forced to acknowledge the limitations of my ability to know and to control the process that I was but **one** part of. Engagement with this wide focus allowed me to perceive that there were other agents and processes actively at work. It also allowed me to know that I could act intelligently even though I was unable to **think** about what was happening and to reason how to respond.

2. Contemplation

Solitude

is

an act

of love,

a kindness

to myself.

The Mirage (Anthony de Mello)

Contemplation is not a skill but rather a way of being with another, or with something, in a state of quiet relaxed alertness, watching and waiting for knowing to emerge. This is a process quite different to the more often used academic skill of analysis where knowledge is, is, as it were, wrestled from the object of study. This is instead a process of communion in which I cease to struggle to know but simply wait patiently and expectantly for knowledge to emerge. Judi Marshall uses the term ‘dwelling with". It is a type of meditative prayer, involving the whole person - physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual – and as such it is a regenerative process. M. Scott Peck (1987) describes it as "a life style rich in reflection, meditation, and prayer. *It is a lifestyle dedicated to maximum awareness."*

I have found it to be a way of gaining insight into situations that either I had not myself actually experienced, or that I did not understand with my conscious mind. This way of being runs counter to the dominant culture of active control. In today’s busy frenetic world, many of us have lost or never developed the capacity for being in this way. In a world that values doing we lose sight of the need to be, and of the fact that in being we connect with and gather information about our world that we would otherwise not have. In this mode of open engaged encounter we do not know how or when knowledge will arise. Anthony de Mello suggests that there is a need to place paradoxical ideas "in your heart and ponder on [their] meaning. This will cause its inner truth to germinate and grow. Do not force it open with your mind. That would only kill the seed. Sow it where the soil is rich. Sow it in your heart, and give it time." I found this capacity of "being with" and "participating in" a valuable sense-making ‘skill’ when working with the narratives uncovered in the course of this work. Mitchell and Lewther (1986) (quoted in Collins, 1990) say " the narrative method requires that the story be told, not torn apart in analysis."

In the biblical story in which God appears to Elijah, we are taught something about the need for contemplative spaces. In that story, Elijah looks for God in the whirlwind, in the earthquake, and in the mighty fire – all processes of huge and powerful activity but God was not there. Instead he finds him in the stillness. From that quiet place a small voice – a gentle whisper appears and he hears God.

In dealing with issues as complex as the unlearning and re-framing of a powerful oppressive system I felt the need to tap that wisdom of the Divine. I needed to find those quiet spaces away from the frantic and furious energy of the whirlwind, earthquake and fire in which I was able to hear that gentle quiet voice. In my living inquiry, I experimented with the creation of such spaces and with mechanisms for allowing the voice to be heard.

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3. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice was a key discipline applied to all of the research cycles and in describing the Action Learning cycles I explore some of the challenges encountered in the use of these 'skills' in this work. Under this heading I include:

a. Retrospective sense-making
b. Reflecting on -action
c. Reflection–in-action

a. Retrospective Sense-making

This discipline was described in chapter 1, so I will not reiterate it here

b. Reflection – on – action

In developing a reflective practice I was very much influenced by the work of David Kolb initially and then later by Donald Schon. In the early 80's while involved in trainer training I encountered the work of David Kolb (1984) and I was impressed by the importance of the need to continuously cycle between reflection and action in the process of learning. I adopted the cycle (see fig. below) and used it extensively in my work. As I worked with it, I began to see it not simply as a tool for learning but also as useful to effective problem solving.

Kolb's Learning Cycle

In training others to use it, I also began to realise that observation was in itself a complex skill within what I began to see as the group of skills involved in 'reflection'.
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It seemed that coaching was required to assist the inexperienced practitioner to identify *what,* in all that may be seen, was worthy of attention. In the training of trainers, participants on my courses would make presentations to a group of their peers. These presentations would be videoed and later, having received feedback from the 'audience', the presenter and I would view the video together. In this process the difficulty of problem identification became apparent. I observed that if I were simply to video repeated presentations and get the inexperienced presenter to look at the video before doing the next presentation, in most instances, the amount learned would be very limited. 'Reflection-on- action' was more than simply a process of reviewing (i.e. replaying with or without the aid of a video) a sequence of behaviours. From my experience in working with these trainers I began to understand that in developing reflective practice many very complex assessments and judgements are made along the way that are not evident to the inexperienced observer.

Encountering Schon's work was exciting. It provided me with a framework and language for talking about what I had been seeing and doing in my practice**.** Schon makes a distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

c) Reflection-in-action

This is a process that takes place in the here and now while there is still time for information gathered from the reflective process to make a difference to the task being undertaken. It is a process by which I make sense of, and try to understand and describe my practice. Schon (1995) makes the point that if a skilled performer tries to teach (and therefore in part, describe) her knowing-in-action to someone else, she must first discover what she actually does when confronted with a situation of a particular kind. He gives an example of a teacher and suggests that she might say, "I don't like the way you play this transitional passage. Let me play it so that I can see what I do."

This is what I was doing when I was involved in trainer training. In modelling what we called micro-skills we were taking apart our practice - acting in it - sometimes with commentary, so that the new trainer may observe what we did in practice. Also in observing, recording and jointly reviewing the new trainer's session with him or her we were ourselves trying to find out what she or he did in practice. And we were teaching the new trainers how to notice and find out what they did in practice.

Schon draws attention to the fact that, while in action, the expert practitioner is actively engaged in a conversation with the situation. She takes actions and then 'listens' to the 'back talk' of the situation. From this 'back talk' the next action is decided on. Bateson states that cognition resides in the whole system. The practitioner gathers information from other parts of the system through the 'back talk' or feel of various aspects of the process and on this information assesses what is needed next and makes decisions about subsequent actions.

Polyani (1967) describes this as tacit knowing. It is the information that we gather in the process of engaged action, and that we often find so hard to put into words or even to know how we knew what to do. Reflection-in-action is very closely related to conscious awareness. By raising our ability to be more consciously aware of our whole selves while in action, we make available to conscious thought greater

information about the situation and ourselves. We create possibilities for becoming conscious of the meaning(s) we give to a particular problem or situation; of the implicit strategies we apply in wrestling with it and of the assumptions we make about those strategies in order to determine appropriate behaviour for the situation in which we are engaged.

- *The Art of Reflection-in – Action*

Schon makes a distinction between what he calls 'technical rationality ' in which professionals apply prefabricated solutions to problems they assume to be generic. In this way of viewing the world, problems are clear, ends are fixed and agreed and theories learnt from books or schools of professional practice are applied to them. Reflective practice starts from an alternative view of the world in which problems are unique, and the 'ends' are "confused and conflicting." In such situations Schon says:

> "There is as yet no problem to solve… In the real world problems do not present themselves as givens. They are constructed from the materials of problematic situations, which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain. In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem a practitioner must do a certain kind of work."

It is this 'kind of work' that, though inferred in Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, was not easily evident to me, and which using the lens of Schon's theory became apparent as specific stages in a reflective process. Schon identifies the following stages:

a. *problem identification*

This is the stage at which we create or formulate the problem that is to be solved. In this process the practitioner applies her judgement to the situation. She tries to identify the critical features of the situation to which she will pay attention, and tries to discover what aspects of the situation are troubling her and/or why they bother her. Schon describes this as setting the problem. He says:

> "When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the 'things' of the situation we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them."

In thinking of problem identification as a discrete stage in the reflective practice process we open up to view a critical aspect of the process that is often taken-for-granted. We are able to reflect and question what we have selected as the 'things' of the situation. It allows us to examine the models of the world, assumptions, and stereotypes that are unconsciously influencing our judgement. Schon says that the reflective practitioner allows herself to "experience surprise, puzzlement and confusion in a situation which [she] finds uncertain or unique." This is a very different mode of being from that of 'technical rationality', where the practitioner adopts a stance of

certainty as she brings her textbook answer to the problems she encounters. The reflective practitioner is engaged in both **doing** different things and in **being** different in relation to the problematic situations encountered.

b. *'seeing as and doing as'*

In this stage the practitioner brings past experience to bear on a unique situation. Schon points out that in a unique situation rules from other unique situations are inappropriate. Therefore the practitioner builds up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions that she then uses to assist herself in solving the new problem. In doing this she "sees the unfamiliar situation as similar to and different from a familiar situation." In doing this she is able to act in the new and unfamiliar situation.

"Just as she sees the new problem as a variation on the old one, so [her] new problem- solving is a variation on the old. Just as she is able at first to articulate the relevant similarities and differences of the problems, so [she] is unable at first to articulate the similarities and differences of her problem-solving procedures. Indeed the whole process of 'seeing as and doing as' may proceed without articulation" (Schon 1983).

c. *On- the- spot experimenting*

Having seen the similarities and differences the practitioner moves to a process of alternatives testing. Schon identifies different ways in which the practitioner may test alternatives. In 'real life' the practitioner may use them all or many alternatives together. Experimenting stops when the practitioner attains the result or change she desires. Her interest in experimenting/inquiry is in solving rather than understanding the problem. This was borne out in my experience in the action inquiry cycles of the research. I found that the participants in the AL groups were often not interested in working with an issue once their problem had been satisfactorily resolved. This is I felt a limitation in using the Action Learning method of inquiry.

d. *The creation of virtual worlds*

The virtual world is a constructed representation of the real world. It is a space away from the real world in which we are able to "suspend or control some of the everyday impediments to rigorous reflection-in action. This enables participants to test out alternative solutions in a comparatively 'safe' environment.

4. Dialogue

Dialogue seems so ordinary and common–place, yet it was one of the cornerstones to my research. It was critical to my design, data gathering, sense-making and even to the process of writing - though I would have liked to have been able to dialogue with others more in the writing stages. Dialogue was an important process objective for my research as a) I was concerned to ensure the quality of the material generating, b) it was a means of empowerment and healing for myself and the other co-researchers. This was one of those situations where a decision was made intuitively and then in the course of doing, conceptual understanding of the rationale for my actions emerged. As I interacted with other women so the importance of dialogue in the research process became more apparent. At one stage in the Collaborative Inquiry group one of the women suddenly gained insight into the relevance of our method for the work we were undertaking. Through reflecting on our experiences in a variety of different ways, and at different times, we had been very gradually uncovering ways in which we protected ourselves in our interactions with others. Suddenly she commented:

"*How could we have done this work in any other way? Had you asked me if I masked myself in my relationships with other Black women I would probably have said 'No'. How would you construct a questionnaire to tap the information that has emerged from our conversations together? Would we have known what questions to ask?"*

Even now, I do not think that I would be able to construct a questionnaire for revealing some of the insights that were produced in our discussions. I do not know which *specific* questions were the important triggers for some of the insights. Essed (1991) suggests that in exploring racism participants need "space to qualify their statements and to be elaborate in their explanations." However our experience suggests that in this area dialogue is needed in order to *formulate* the questions that need to be asked.

Dialogue is a process. Buber (1958) says:

> " The meaning of what is communicated cannot be defined by one party, it must be discovered in dialogue."

He suggests that discovery emerges as we each bring the fullness of our unique self to our conversation. He says:

> "In spite of all similarities every living situation has, like a new born child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility …you."

I doubt that it is possible to catch sight of our survival strategies outside of the experience of interacting. On each occasion 'knowing' emerged **in** action. To know, we had to act and *then* notice what we did when in action.

In many instances once trust had been established, dialogue provided support. It empowered us to see things that ordinarily we might have been afraid, or even ashamed, to acknowledge. Patricia Hill Collins (1990), in her exploration of the politics of empowering Black women asserts that when Black women meet each other in dialogue processes of self -definition, valuation and respect take place. She says that "Self is found in the context of family and community." She refers to Paule

Marshall's (1984) assertion of the need to be able to "recognize one's continuity with the larger community". She says that this process of connecting with other Black women is neither narcissistic or trivial but enables self to be placed at the centre of analysis and a focal point from which other relationships can be understood. She refers to Claudia Tate's (1993) claim that:

> "It is the self in relationship with an intimate other, with the community, the nation and the world … you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups."

In dialogue we were able to maintain awareness of the paradox of both our own power *and* our powerlessness in creating our experiences. We experienced ourselves as both actors and acted upon, and controlling and being controlled by other people and forces.

Freire (1972) strongly advocates the need for dialogue in emancipatory endeavours. He says:

> " Dialogue … is radically necessary to authentic revolution […] to impede communication is to reduce men to the status of 'things' – and that is the job for oppressors, not for revolutionaries […] if they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others […] In this theory of action one cannot speak of *an actor*, nor simply of *actors*, but rather of *actors in intercommunication*."

Hooks (1989) says:

> " Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination."

By dialogue I do not mean idle chit chat, ritualised communications, or debates, but rather a process by which two or more people engage in conversation about an issue that is of importance and /or concern to both. Each listens to the other and brings knowledge, insight, and questions that emerge from the whole of the human system to the other. The aim of such conversation is to explore, discover, puzzle together, and share. It works best when one party does not assume, or was given the position of expert, but when we stand side by side in contemplation of the issue. Dialogue demands that each bring to the process mutual respect and loving care of the other together with an ability and willingness to give critical appraisal and rigorous exploration of the ideas or experience.

When we engaged with authenticity and integrity, our taken-for-granted assumptions were surfaced, observed, and challenged in the light of intellectual knowledge and espoused theories, and likewise abstract knowledge could be tested by our experiences. I found that it was most generative, and provided greatest possibilities for growth when we were able to hold the tension between theoretical and experiential knowledge and attention to one was not given emphasis over the search for the other. Buber (1958) states that "Abstract universal ideals must be realized in particular situations."

At its most generative, it brought us to points of wanting to move into new actions in which the ideas could be tested. It urged us to search for ideas that illuminated,

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confirmed, or challenged our actions. I was continually amazed by its potential for generating new and rich information, which cannot be attributed to any one of the engaged parties, but which emerges as a result of a quality connection. I attained this quality of dialogue in many of the cycles of inquiry but it did not happen automatically, or even easily. We often encountered the survival strategies, which prompted us to protect ourselves by withdrawing and distancing ourselves from others. Learning to trust our authentic selves to others was something that only happened gradually over time.

5. Quality questions

Peter Hawkins, a fellow management consultant, talks about the need to look for quality questions as we inquire into our organisations. He defines these as questions where:

- "You don't know the answer;
- You cannot immediately give a simple answer;
- There **is** no simple answer;
- There **is** no Yes/No answer;
- By grappling with the question we will all discover more than we already know."

These are questions that emerge when we stand in the middle of a paradox. They reflect both sides of a dilemma. They are the types of questions, which challenge our self-limiting mental models or assumptions, which Schon (1983) refers to when he talks about double loop learning.

Liberation requires a challenging of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, and inquiring into the experiences of Black women brought us face to face with the double binding and paradoxical situations encountered in our daily lives. Therefore in research of this nature the use of complex quality questions is critical.

Cycles of Engagement – Phase 1

This phase of the research involved three major cycles**:**

- **A Living Inquiry**
- **Collaborative Dialogue**
- **Action learning groups**

Cycle 1: A Living Inquiry

In starting the Inquiry by working on myself I intended to 'clear my lens' for perceiving the experience of others. I intuitively knew that without self-work the researcher may contaminate the outcomes. In my training as a facilitator of learning I had some understanding of our ability, as human beings, to shut out and deny information which we find painful. In 1985 when writing an article about Black women's experiences, mentioned earlier, I had gained insight into the degree of

‘undischarged’ distress I carried. I feared that this unresolved and unexplored distress might inhibit my ability to engage with others in ways that facilitated their exploration of painful and distressing events.

Reason and Marshall (1987) state that researchers, in a bid for personal development, often choose research topics and processes that intentionally or unintentionally, activate old distress. Salmon (1992) talks about the need to "acknowledge the deeply personal roots of the research process." Yet choosing the process does not necessarily mean that we are ready to engage with the challenges that work may entail. (Maslow 1968) states that alongside our need to know, there is often a fear of knowing. Reason and Marshall (1987) continue:

> " The enquiry process … offers an important opportunity to move through and beyond old limiting patterns. Unfortunately, as Devereaux (1967) has pointed out, the usual response to the re-stimulated anxiety is defensive, so that we project our anxiety out on to the research situation, thus distorting our perspective in a way similar to the effect of countertransference in psychotherapy…. Yet this need not be so: if researchers are committed to the pursuit of rigorous critical subjectivity, if they are prepared and able to use their subjectivity as part of the enquiry process, if they have the skill and support to manage and transcend this re-stimulated distress, the response can be creative and developmental. It can be "That’s exciting."

My work in defining the research had alerted me to the extent of my defences. I was recognising that much of my professional life was lived protected by masks that defended my inner self. In hostile situations, where acceptance of me as a Black person was very much conditional, these defences seemed essential. Roger Harrison (winter 62-63) points out that our defences

> "Protect us from distorting information which does not fit the conceptual system, so that the system may remain quite unaffected by disconfirming experiences… For human beings conceptual systems are, in a very real sense, very nearly the most important survival equipment we have…. They keep us from becoming confused, upset and rudderless every time something happens contrary to our expectations. Frequently they protect our liking for ourselves and others when they fail to live up to our ideals. Defenses give life more stability and continuity than could ever be justified by reference to the contingency and complexity of real events alone. Defenses keep our relations with others more pleasant and satisfying, protecting us from our own and other’s anger and helping us to go on loving people who are less than perfect and sometimes less than human.
>
> At the same time, these same defenses block our learning, often dooming us to make the same mistakes over and over again… They can, in extreme cases, make so many kinds of information dangerous to our conceptual systems that we narrow and constrict our experiences, our feelings and our thoughts, becoming virtual prisoners of our own protection."

Though recognising the many ways in which self-knowledge threatened and scared me; I was still determined to explore my world and myself. I was conscious that other participants of the study might bring their own protective strategies to the work, and feared that, with a low awareness of self, I may collude with, rather than challenge, their ambivalence towards knowing. The enhancement of my conscious awareness - coming to my senses, and beginning to see, feel and know became high priority. In doing this I used a number of different vehicles:

1. **Journalling,**

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

2. **Therapy,**
3. **Widening my awareness.**

1. Journalling

My journals were the bedrock of this whole process. At the time when I started the practice of journalling I did not think of it as inquiry. It started out of desperation while living in Basingstoke, feeling isolated and trying to cope with the death of two of my best friends. I needed to express myself and did not have anyone to whom I felt able to do this. Tristine Rainer (1978) exploring the uses of journal in expanding creativity and self growth says "putting the pain in the diary keeps it from destroying a life". They were places to which I brought the raw experiences of life, which I did not feel able to express to any person. The highs and lows of life, unfinished issues, questions, new insights and dilemmas were brought to and emotions were ventilated on their pages. As the feelings evaporated the issues involved could be more clearly perceived.

In the research period they became places in which information generated in each cycle was recorded and made sense of. New insights were taken back out into my professional practice, and life generally. Over the years I enhanced my use of this self-awareness tool. I was greatly influenced by Tristine Rainer (1978) and by Marion Milner (1932). Their writings conceptualised what I had been doing intuitively, and gave me a language for talking about my actions. They also provided other ways of tapping and learning from everyday experiences. Rainer suggests that there were four basic purposes for a diary:

- ***Catharsis,*** a process of emotional release. In the early days this was one of the favourite uses of my journal.
- ***Description*** – a record on my perception of the reality I encountered in life.
- ***Free – intuitive writing*** – Rainer describes this as an opportunity for expressing "messages received from the unconscious [that] may sometimes contradict feelings expressed in cathartic or descriptive writing." I experimented with this method. I used allegoric writing, drawings and developed my skill in writing with my left hand. Left hand / right hand writing enabled me to find, differentiate and give voice to various aspects of my self. It enabled me to dialogue with myself and produced information of a quality that I seemed unable to tap by other ways of writing. It has been an important part of my inquiry process. It has also produced much creativity, energy, surprising insight, and fun.
- ***Reflection*** – This is where I stand back from the experience, observe, and make sense of the experience, using information gathered at any level. Rainer says:

> "reflection and description give voice to your more objective, rational self, while catharsis and free intuitive writing give voice to your more subjective, emotional , intuitive self."

From Milner I learned about catching your thoughts, giving voice to the internal sceptic / critic, and about playful engagement. Over the years I have made their techniques mine and it has played a major role in my sense making.

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

- ***Journalling - A process for healing the self***

During the first few years of the research when I was particularly threatened by the possibility of revealing myself to more than a very limited group of people, I kept two journals. One in which I recorded and worked with those situations that I perceived to be related to my professional life, and therefore assumed were relevant to the research. In the other, experiences that were perceived to be personal were recorded. Returning to those journals recently, I noticed that many incidents feature in both journals. In my private journal I would allow myself free expression, and then in my research journal I would describe the incident and record my reflections. Splitting of the self creates double work!! However, as I worked with the inner child and as she gained confidence and as I learnt to love myself she (the inner Child) became less afraid of appearing in public and the use of two journals gradually lapsed.

- ***A contemplative process***

I learnt most about contemplation in and through my journals. Over the years I have observed that if I have not journalled for a period I begin to 'lose balance' and I stop being able to 'feel' my self. When I am continuously engaged in activities and there is no space for deep reflection, contemplation and prayer I lose touch with my centre and become ungrounded. In such periods I can no longer distinguish what is important to me from what is not. In the words of a friend, I am less able to, "claim the space between action and reaction". Valuable learning from this research has been that it is in the gaps between actions and reactions that I am able to resist the tremendously high level of anxiety that is created when I feel trapped in a double bind and that triggers habitual responses. Contemplative journal writing has been one of the techniques I developed for both claiming that space and effectively using the space.

2. Therapy

It seemed surprising that my chosen therapist worked in ways that were congruent with my research principles, as I had not consciously considered this as a criterion in making my choice. Though clinically and traditionally trained she continuously challenged the assumptions of her profession developing alternative ways of working that honoured and valued the mystery and richness of the 'Other' in the therapeutic relationship. In the early days of our relationship I was challenged on many levels - even the environment was not what I had expected it to be. It was informal, we often sat on cushions on the floor, with tea and water available. To an observer we would have appeared to be friends in conversation, and sometimes it felt that way. I guess that I expected to be treated as a 'client' and not as the complex human being that I am. She continuously searched for ways of resolving the paradox of professional distance on the one hand, and closeness, intimacy and friendship on the other. I found this particularly challenging as a key survival strategy was the splitting of my personal and professional selves. I wanted to keep the therapeutic relationship firmly in the professional area of my life. Though I valued her loving care and empathy and began to realise that I was threatened by the possibility of getting to know her.

She worked from the perspective that knowledge about some of our most distressing encounters are held in our bodies, and can sometimes not be accessed through words. She was skilled in using Shiatsu massage, drawing, and sculpting alongside the more

usual therapeutic conversation. Initially I was sceptical. I trusted her and intellectually what she said made sense but I was afraid to trust this process. Then one day I arrived with my shoulders tense and aching. She sensed my tension and again offered the possibility that we could split the sessions between talk and massage. That day I left our meeting in a state of great disorientation. I could *feel* my body – not only because it felt sore from its first Shiatsu massage - but also because I was aware of it. As the hours passed and new insights emerged - I was surprised!

On another occasion perceiving a 'stuckness' of which I was unaware, she offered pastels and paper and got me drawing. From this emerged information about my fear of standing out and of being visible. She then got me working with a mirror. Simply spending time observing the woman that I was, looking in to her eyes - noticing and observing her, this too produced insights that I could not have anticipated would have emerged. She supported my use of my journal. Sometimes I took it along, so that issues started in my writings could be continued in our sessions, and reflections from our meetings could be shared with her and in the sharing provide opportunities for another level of processing.

I continued to be surprised at the power of seemingly innocent activities which, though so different from my prior assumptions about methods that prompted self-knowledge, surfaced information about important barriers to my growth. From these experiences I began to understand better the interconnection between body, mind and spirit and to see that illness or imbalance in one arena was reflected in the others and that disaffection in the emotions could be addressed by working on the body.

This seemed to be congruent with Milner's assertion that what she terms "blind or childish thought" is not based on facts and logic but rather on emotions, and as such cannot be easily identified by intellectual processes. She says:

> "When, however I was concerned with inner cognitions … then what passed before me was so ethereal as to be invisible unless I gave it form. I could not stand back and look at it, because I hardly knew it was there … when, however, it had no such concrete form I was so submerged in it that my thought could not see itself, with the result that I could not deliberately control it at all."

3. Widening my awareness

Of all the disciplines identified, conscious awareness and contemplation were areas in which I felt there was greatest need for learning and development. In my training and practice as a facilitator and consultant I had paid attention to, and highly developed the others, but I identified myself as most weak in these two areas. I began to discover that I was very much orientated to the 'thinking' sphere and less good at learning from my senses and feelings. In fact I had "survived" for so long by suppressing my feelings that I often did not *know* what I felt. I found that I began to develop abilities in these areas by engaging in activities such as Tai Chi, Alexander Techniques, a writing and body workshop and from learning to swim, and in paying attention to myself while in the process of doing these things.

My first challenge with Tai Chi was in learning to relax the mind. In those classes I realised how hard it was to trust that my body knew what it was doing even though

my intellect did not. I found myself struggling to consciously remember the sequences of movements and heard the teacher repeatedly advising us just to relax and allow our bodies to perform the sequence. In my Alexander Technique class I found this lesson being reinforced. On one occasion we were being taught to juggle – an art that I had not managed as a child. The teacher requested that we did not try to catch the ball but simply to allow it to fall into the other hand. As I observed myself I recognised how hard it was for my mind not to take control. It kept trying to calculate what my hands needed to do to enable me to catch the balls. In my swimming class again I learnt how difficult it was for my intellect to let go of control and to allow the body to know what it needed to do. I saw myself interrupting my success due to the difficulty I had in doing things that I did not intellectually know how to do. The *Moving into writing* workshop was specially designed to look at how we might integrate the intelligence of the mind with that of the body. A journal entry from that workshop says:

Sunday, 10 November

We played. We livened up our bodies - took our minds into our bodies and became aware of how they felt, allowed images of our feelings to emerge and then wrote, vividly describing those images. I was surprised by the outcomes, and also at how easily new information emerged. It affirmed for me that the body is definitely a source of knowledge and that it is a source that in the course of my life I have dammed and muted.

*As I moved my mind into my body, and the various parts of me started to wake up I realised that most of the time I occupied my body in a state of unawareness. It seemed to me that the numbing to sensation, the learning not to feel that had been one of my survival strategies over the years extends beyond my mind and that I am often out of touch with the physical me. This was not completely new knowledge. But on Sunday, as I stood in that room feeling the floor, experiencing the smoothness of the wood against the soles of my feet and the sensuality of that contact, I suddenly became aware of the dryness of the skin of my hands and I realised that I had not fully known that earlier. Later I felt the heaviness and stuck fullness of my stomach and middle area, and learnt something about my habitual state of unawareness that I had not known prior to that day. On Sunday I not only knew in my head that becoming fully human - learning to live life fully - demands a reconnecting and integration of the head, body and soul - I **felt** it.*

Another source of intrigue was the way in which I managed my learning and development. Writing about it here – in retrospect - I can see the themes that I was pursuing and the patterns that were being developed. Yet at the time of doing some of these things I was not aware of what I was doing. In the same way as it surprised me that my therapist was so suited to assisting me in my pursuit of wholeness, so I was surprised by some of the activities I chose to do. Reflecting on this soon after the *Moving into Writing* workshop, I wrote:

Journal Entry – November '96

At the start of the workshop when we were asked to introduce ourselves and to say what we hoped to get out of the workshop, I confessed that I had not

given any thought to that question. Attending had been a totally spontaneous act. A friend had told me about the workshop, and as soon as she said that it was about the combination of moving and writing I had known that I wanted to be there. I had not given any thought to the cost of giving up a whole day of my precious weekend -as I would usually do. I simply decided that I wanted to attend. I knew that it was important. As I said this to the group I experienced a similar feeling to one I had had during my first lesson of Tai Chi. It had seemed then that joining the class had been a somewhat casual act. I had decided that I wanted to have regular exercise and had a rather unfocused deliberation about whether to take swimming lessons or to learn Tai Chi. This deliberation was never seriously attended to, I carried the information about both classes around with me in my handbag for some days, and then on the week of registration I chose the evening that was most convenient to me. This happened to be the evening of the Tai Chi class. Having not given much conscious attention to knowing why I wanted to learn Tai Chi I was surprised by its relevance to the themes being currently explored at my current stage of development.

On Sunday it seemed that both Tai Chi and this workshop had been actively chosen by a process that was largely unconscious, but was nevertheless intelligent and considered. I guess many would label it intuition. It is a process that seems so random and unsystematic that I often devalue it as a valid process for knowing, deliberating and selecting. I am often surprised to find that decisions made by this process are not at all random but that they are perfectly valid steps in the pursuance of a goal.

This cycle spanned the whole of the research period. It was a process that continued even when I had taken time out of the research. Due to my commitment to my development and growth, and because of the methods used it is a process that still continues and it is likely to do so beyond the end of this thesis - maybe throughout my life.

- **What did I learn from this cycle?**

It is not an overstatement to say that this inquiry has transformed my life so it is difficult to sum up my learning in a few paragraphs. It infuses this whole thesis, however in Chapter 9 I attempt to identify some key insights that have been gained from my participation in this study.

Cycle 2 – Collaborative Dialogue

This involved two smaller cycles of dialogue with two different women whom I call Roseanne and Elly. These cycles chronologically overlapped with cycles one and three.

1. In dialogue with Roseanne

My engagement with Roseanne commenced very soon after I started this research. From this cycle I wanted:

- A "critical friend" to participate in thinking through with me the various research issues of both content and process that I faced at the start of this endeavour, and to contribute to the process through which I resolved a number of the challenges encountered early in this work.
- A space in which I felt safe enough to begin an exploration of issues that I felt were culturally "undiscussable".
- Another cycle of exploration into the experiences of Black women in organisations and the ways in which she responded to those challenges.
- **How we worked**

In our first meeting we explored:

  - What we each hoped to gain from our engagement
  - Ways of entering into the research topic
  - How we would collect the data
  - How regularly we would meet
  - Ground rules for effective working.

We met four times in the first year of the study, and then on three other occasions. In our first meeting we explored our notions of ‘thriving’ - Roseanne did not want to start with ‘surviving’. We took time to individually reflect - finding images, words and phrases that conveyed aspects of our meaning, and then we shared what we had each produced, looking for overlaps. We agreed to return to exploring our notions of surviving at a later date, but in practice we never did. I was surprised to find a high degree of overlap in our images of thriving (Chapter 9).

Our meetings, in the first year, focussed on planning for establishing a collaborative inquiry group. At that time I had been thinking about setting up a group to explore Black women's experiences in organisations and our strategies for coping with them. We talked about co-facilitating the group and of what was needed to ensure psychological safety in the group.

Our meetings stopped just prior to the birth of my first child in March 1990. We met again in November 1990, at the end of my first maternity break. On this occasion we explored fears which inhibited our development. We identified shared fears of:

- Sharing self with others and intimacy – revealing idiosyncrasies, weaknesses;
- Speaking own truth;
- Our own power and of our ability to impact;
- Going back into our own past and reviewing past relationships.

We did not meet again, in this way, for some years. Soon after our November 1990 meeting Roseanne became pregnant and I began to feel the need to search for ways for managing, within the much increased demands on my time and energy. I had by then realised that I could use the Action Learning groups as an opportunity for inquiry, so I abandoned the idea of setting up dedicated research groups and my meetings with Roseanne lapsed. Nevertheless she remained interested in this work and she joined my Collaborative Inquiry Group in 1992. In November 1994 and again in February 1995 she initiated meetings to explore particular aspects of issues that

occurred in her life that she knew to be relevant to this study. This relationship spanned most of the research period.

2. In dialogue with Elly

Elly is a senior manager in a large Institute of Adult Education who, at the time of our conversation was inquiring into the experiences of Black women in Adult Education. Our meeting occurred as a result of having a mutual colleague who suggested that it might be beneficial for us to have a conversation. Prior to our meeting I had anticipated that this would provide another opportunity to test the themes I had been identifying in my work with the AL groups. She stated a similar objective. However when we met in February 1990 we explored our own experiences as Black women in organisations, and as researchers, rather than the content of our research, which of course then produced content for both our inquiries! We agreed not to structure our discussion, but allowed it to flow naturally. Following our meeting we reflected on our discussion, wrote about it, and shared our writings with each other.

3. What did I learn from this cycle?

From this cycle I learned about the dilemmas and challenges encountered by Black women in managing the variety of roles and responsibilities carried, in and out, of organisations. My conversations with Roseanne focussed on the interrelationship between the external and internal barriers in undermining the realisation of our potential. We looked at ways in which our power to make decisions about our own lives (in and out of organisations) are curtailed and severely restricted. We also identified our fear of experiencing our own power and our collusion in the maintenance of positions of powerlessness. With Elly, I gained more insights into the challenges of effectively managing the domestic roles attributed to women **and** the professional responsibilities of the manager. We explored the experience of motherhood for the career- orientated woman, and considered the stark choices with which we were faced, as we tried to utilise our potential outside of the domestic realm. Elly, like Roseanne, talked about experiences in organisations that confirmed the information gathered from the Action Learning cycles (see below).

Cycle 3 – Action Learning (AL) sets

This involved the running of four Action Learning programmes for Black women managers over a period of six years. This provided me with an opportunity to work closely with a total of 35 women, and to access considerable information about the experiences of Black women managers - observing at first hand the survival strategies at play.

The choice of the action learning method for this work was not mine. I had been commissioned to run a self-management development programme for Black women managers in a Local Authority, as one of their Positive Action initiatives. The organisation had been using Action Learning in developing its managers for a few years and wanted these managers to learn by the same method. During the first year of the first programme I realised that these events provided me with a good opportunity

to engage with Black women about their experiences, and to gather the information I needed. I spoke to the women about my project, they were interested and agreed to participate. This cycle constitutes my main stream of data about Black women experiences.

- **What is action Learning (AL)?**

My starting point in this programme was my experiential knowledge. I had participated for two years in an Action Learning programme and this provided a base for the conceptual knowledge I later gained about the method gained. I understood it to be an Action Research method and as such problem orientated (Mc Gill and Beaty 1992). By this I mean that the starting points in the learning / inquiry process are the problems /critical incidents / dilemmas that set members bring to the group. It is a method in which the relevance of the learning generated is easily identified. Participants work on their 'real life' every day problems. Solutions produced from the work in the Action Learning sets are applied and tested in the 'real life' context. Feedback from the testing of the solutions then produce the next learning/ inquiry opportunities. It was from these continuous cycles of action and reflection that our theories for action emerged. In this research method, the main purpose of inquiry is the improvement of practice with a secondary interest in generating knowledge. Schon (1983) states:

> " The practitioner has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better. He also has an interest in understanding the situation, but it is in the service of his interest to change"

This had implications for the inquiry aspect of the work. I often found, as Schon (1983) suggests, that willingness to explore a problem ceased once a workable solution had been identified. So the high relevance of the method is both a strength and a weakness. It keeps learning and inquiry grounded in the real challenges of our world and related to the living of our lives. However, in a culture of instrumentality where things are only valuable if they produce observable outcomes, it may inhibit us from searching out root causes and keep us prone to "quick-fixes" (Senge 1990).

- **Design of the AL programme**

Core objectives were to:

· Stimulate healthy self-growth;

· Increase managerial effectiveness;

· Create a readiness for making their contributions,

- Provide them with the necessary skills.

In the first few meetings of each group I paid attention to:

- *Building a relationship robust enough to support individuals through the confusion, uncertainty and emotional disturbances which experiential learning*

and Action Learning often produce **–** This was, on each occasion, one of the most challenging aspects of this programme. In these groups I came up against our defence mechanisms (see Chapter 8). Trust was not given easily and participants were guarded and wary about taking risks. So in the first few meetings I used a variety of introductory activities - in pairs, small groups and in plenary. These provided multiple opportunities for participants to engage in conversations with each other about a range of different issues, and to practise core skills, such as active listening and feedback. A prime objective was to establish trust in the group.

- *Encouraging active participation in our group process and a sharing in the management of the learning function* – I introduced the AL process (McGill and Beaty 1992); key concepts of AL and experiential learning; and models such as Kolb's learning cycle and Johari's window. We clarified our roles (theirs and mine) - introducing ideas of co-responsibility for learning and participation at all levels of the programme including group facilitation. We discussed and negotiated how we would structure each working day, agreeing dates, venues and timing of sessions etc.
- *Enhancing their skills as experiential learners, focussing particularly on raising their awareness of self in action and on their ability to reflect in and on action.*

  Participants were introduced to the concept of the learning journal, and asked to get and keep one. This was easier for those members who had kept diaries at some stage of their lives and could immediately see its value as a tool for learning. Others were wary of both recording their thoughts / experiences and of having to write. This was experienced as an added pressure. In each group there was at least one participant who remained resistant to this idea throughout. But whether journals were kept or not, the continuous conversations about them proved insightful. The objective was to develop a practice of review and reflection and this happened as they talked about what they might have written, and about why they had not yet started a journal!

  Each day ended with a review of learning and of the group's process. Participants were encouraged to identify one or two questions that they wanted to take with them into their practice and/or lives. This became part of our ritual for each meeting.

- *Assisting individuals to assess their effectiveness as managers and to set themselves clear learning goals for the programme.*We explored hopes, expectations of, and aspirations for the programme with consideration of how we may consciously or unconsciously undermine our learning. From this we agreed ground rules for effective working. Individuals were asked to consider what criteria they were using to assess the effectiveness of the programme. These, together with those of their line managers, the Head of Training and my own goals contributed to a template used at mid-point and at the end of the programme to measure our effectiveness.
- **Key features of the programme**
- **Paying attention to the physical and emotional needs**

Ian McGill and Liz Beaty (1992) in their guide to Action Learning state:

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http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_douglas.html

> "To promote an atmosphere of concentration and reflection, nurturing and energizing must be important elements."

I think that these are important on any programme, but I saw them as critical issues in the development of the Black women managers. Discrimination and oppression negates the needs of the oppressed person. We are treated as objects - machines for the production of work- and no or little attention is paid to our needs, unless we reach the verge of breakdown. Therefore in giving attention to our needs and in nurturing each other, we were performing acts of resistance. It is in personal acts that political beliefs are given form.

Initially, this was done in small ways, such as supplying alternative beverages to tea and coffee (we observed that many African Caribbean people did not like or drink milk) and providing African Caribbean or Asian food at lunch times. Many groups extended this by bringing in 'treats' for the group. It was also about paying attention to energy levels, to journeys we had to make and timing sessions to ensure that individuals did not get stuck in traffic jams, and about the giving of head and shoulder massages to each other when we were particularly stressed. This was not easy learning. We were women used to ignoring our own physical and emotional needs. Many women rarely gave themselves proper time to eat meals. They were often too busy to have lunch at work, and at home they ate on the run. We did not find it easy to express our needs when asked, and yet more difficult to ask for them to be met. During the programmes participants became aware of their physical, emotional and spiritual health, and acknowledged that these were legitimate developmental goals. In reviews of the programme, participants often mentioned their learning about valuing and caring for self as an important outcome.

- **Action and reflection cycles, in virtual and real worlds, for promoting learning and change**

Starting points for our work were the problems and dilemmas individuals brought to the group *and* the challenges encountered in working together in this programme. The action learning group was both the "real world' and a virtual world. It was itself a temporary organisation in which the nature and pattern of our relationships were 'real' and actions and reactions had 'real' consequences. At the same time, it was a virtual world i.e. it was a safe space away from the organisation in which we could reduce the complexities experienced in the working environment and experiment with responses to the challenges experienced 'out there', without fear of the consequences of our actions. There were feedback and learning loops between both of these worlds that allowed for the transfer of learning.

At the time of starting these programmes I had not encountered Schon's work. I based my practice around the Kolb learning cycle, yet I felt that the model I used was more complex. However as mentioned earlier, when I encountered Schon's concept of reflective practice he gave me a language with which to describe what I did. In my own work a lot of attention was paid to that process of observing and reflecting, that Schon's work validated and helped me name. Therefore I will use his terms in describing the process by which we both inquired into and learnt about the problems that were presented in the group. Solutions, whether to problems from their 'real'

working lives, or from the ‘reality’ of our relationships in the action learning group, were experimented within our virtual world.

- **Our use of Reflective practice in Action Learning**

This discipline had been described earlier, so here I will focus on the specific ways in which we designed for, and used it by:

i. *Creation of reflective spaces*
ii. *Reflection –in and –on practice*

i. ***Creation of reflective spaces***

In any day of work there were many reflective spaces. These were:

a) *The ‘check in’*

This served many purposes. It was a space in which we:

- Re-established personal contact with each other and found out about the particular physical, emotional and spiritual needs of each individual.
- Reflected on where we as individuals had arrived at the end of the previous session, reviewed learning objectives and questions taken from the last meeting into our working and social lives, and considered what had happened and been learnt in the interim.
- Shared insights from our learning journals or talked about why they had not been started!
- Generated issues for, negotiated and planned, our agenda.

b) *Individual work*

In this we used a ritualised process of working. At each meeting each participant had dedicated time in which the group’s attention was focussed on the issue(s) with which that individual worked.

c) *‘Time Outs’*

This is a method learnt from my colleague/ friend Susan Weil. It was a mechanism that allowed us to deal with issues about our way of working /relating, (rather than content) that bothered a group member in the ‘here and now’. Anyone could call "Time Out". Having called the time out, the perceived problem would be stated e.g. "I am feeling that we have gotten stuck", or " I do not feel that all members are being heard". We would then take a minute or two to individually reflect on how we had been working together. Individuals, were then required to consider in what way they may be contributing to the problem, and to decide if there was anything that they could do, or not do, that might improve the situation. After this short reflective period we returned to the task - acting on our individual insights.

d) *End of day review*

The last 45 minutes of each course was dedicated to reviewing what had been learnt, how we had worked together and to identifying action plans for the interim period - back at work.

i. Reflection in and on practice

Whether working on a problem brought to the group from the workplace, or on an issue that emerged from our own temporary organisation we undertook the following steps:

- *Problem identification / problem setting*
- *Generation of alternative responses*
- *Experimentation in virtual worlds*
- *Selection of favoured solution*
- *Application in real world*
- *Problem identification / problem setting*

I found problem identification to be a critically important step to the problem-solving process. The way in which the problem is perceived influences the solution that is sought. Often the problems were signalled by very painful emotions. The problem and the emotions often became closely identified and perceived as one and the same thing. In such situations the tendency was to find a way of stopping the pain. This left the individual very vulnerable to "quick fix' solutions or to defensive responses that suppressed the pain - pushing the experience out of reach.

Therefore problem identification with a group of Black women managers (or I would argue with any oppressed group) was not the coolly objective, analytical process that is so often described. Many of the experiences of these women were racialised, and gendered and so were the problems. Within the problems were messages that communicated other's perceptions of Black women managers as different and therefore to be treated less well, excluded and attributed low value. These were messages that created great pain. Other problems contained tangled and conflicting messages that confused and hurt. Therefore many of the situations encountered triggered survival defences and made the participants want to ignore, deny and mask some of the problems faced.

Consequently, problem identification was sometimes a long process, started one week and returned to in subsequent weeks until the individual felt able to face the 'real' difficulty. It demanded the creation of an environment where individuals felt safe and understood. The challenging of a perspective too early on in this process tapped into familiar experiences of not being understood. The door that was being gradually opened was shut again and an opportunity was lost or at least deferred. It often required first the ventilation of the emotions in which the problem was cloaked, so that the issues that were the source of the pain may be identified.

Another important and difficult part of this first step was problem setting. I observed that situations involving Black people were perceived to be " 'race' problems" and therefore different to those experienced by white or 'normal' staff or 'normal' managers. I perceived both the Black managers and their line managers 'bracketing' the Black person's experiences and problems into 'special' categories. This led to the

assumption that managers must then have special skills for dealing with these "'race' problems". They became extraordinary in a way that other problems were not perceived to be. Schon (1983) helped me to understand a puzzle that I carried for many years. I could not understand why managers (Black and White) competent in many other spheres became so confused and helpless when confronted with a situation which involved a Black person. I knew that there might be fears of being labelled by others as 'racist', or having to themselves confront their own racism. However these answers seemed inadequate for what I perceived. They did not seem to explain the difficulty that I observed both Black and White managers had in bringing their experience to bear on the problem. I had found that on many occasions I would instinctively ask the individual and the group to change the people in the situation and to make them all White or all Black. In doing this, they were then able to perceive the critical issues of the situation.

One example of this was a situation that for many months was an extremely hot issue in the organisation, and which like a snowball, rapidly grew in size and polarised Black and White employees in the organisation. I heard the story from many perspectives. It was told to me by two of the Black managers on my programme who were at the centre of it, by their line managers and by the Head of Training and Personnel who was perceived to be implicated in the problem.

The organisation, in line with its Equal Opportunity policy, had developed strict guidelines about the advertising of vacancies, and the selection and recruitment of staff. A senior management position had recently been advertised, and two members of the programme had applied for the job. One woman, who had all the necessary credentials but lacked confidence about her ability to do this more senior job, had worked on this issue in the group. Schon (1983) makes the point that confidence and competence are closely linked. He says:

> " An individual has a "competence tank" whose level rises and falls depending on his perception of his status in the company.
>
> Credibility, commitment, confidence, and competence are interdependent, in this sense:
>
> > " The more credibility I have, the more confident I can be."
> >
> > " The more confident I am, the more confident I appear."
> >
> > " The more confident I appear, the more I am seen as credible and competent."
> >
> > Conversely,
> >
> > "If I lose credibility, I may lose confidence,"
> >
> > "If I lose confidence, I appear to be incompetent and I lose credibility."

This woman was competent but had regularly had her credibility questioned and often she was not attributed the status commensurate with her role. This is a common experience of Black managers reflected in all cycles and in the work of others (Quartey, 1990, Davidson, 1997, Dickens and Dickens, 1991). After working on her

confidence in the group, they both applied and were short-listed. It was at this point that the problem erupted.

There were only three applicants (the two managers on my programme and the Deputy – a White woman who had been 'acting manager' for over a year). It was generally assumed that the Deputy would be appointed to the position when it was advertised, however, the Deputy's application had not addressed some of the essential criteria for the job, so she had not been short-listed. She was angry and soon there was a strong and vocal body of staff aligned with her. The problem was defined, as one of 'reverse discrimination' and it became apparent that the two Black managers were perceived as both the source of the problem **and** the holders of the answer to the problem. It was thought that the withdrawal of their applications would resolve the problem. The pressure on these women was great. Many of their colleagues stopped speaking to them, and they were starting to feel responsible for what was threatening to become a big dispute.

Before continuing with this as an illustration of problem confusion when Black people are involved, I want to draw attention to the double binds in which these managers found themselves. As they considered what to do, it became apparent that they were in 'no-win' situations. To withdraw was to accept liability for a problem for which they had no responsibility, and also to lose an opportunity for career progression, and personal, managerial and financial enhancement. To continue with their application was to risk a) the acceleration of the psychological pressure being put on them, b) the possibility of an industrial dispute and c) finding themselves managing in an extremely hostile environment - should one of them be successful in getting the job. Having explored this dilemma in the group the managers chose not to withdraw their applications and the group decided to support them in keeping to this decision. Eventually, after many months, one of the managers was appointed and had to manage, as we had anticipated, an extremely unfavourable environment.

To return to the issue of problem identification and problem setting - in this situation the anxiety and guilt that these women were experiencing made it difficult for them to face the issue objectively. In fact the pressure to ease the pain by going for a 'quick fix' was great. It was easy to believe that by withdrawing they would solve the problem. It was hard to see that it was not **their** problem and that the solution of it did **not** lie in their hands. In 'unpacking' this rather emotive problem I found Schon discipline of "seeing as" very useful. These were all managers with a lot of experience of recruiting staff. I asked them to remove the issue of racial difference and to consider the situation as one in which the applicants were all from the same racial group. As we "set" the problem thus, its critical features became visible. They now saw that the deputy manager had a responsibility for the quality of her application form, and that the organisation, in allowing the position to remain vacant for so long, had created an expectation that the acting manager would be made substantive. This was in line with the old recruitment practices. Also it became visible that the organisation was not actively taking responsibility for the problem and in doing that they were allowing these two women to be 'scape-goated.'

Viewing this situation as a 'selection and recruitment problem' rather than a "'race' problem", they began to perceive themselves, and others, as having the skills to respond to the situation. Racism clouds the perceptual lens of managers making it

difficult for them to identify the ‘things’ of the situation, and the notion of a "‘race’ problem’" causes dilemmas to be perceived as intractable and to overawe managers.

- *Generation of alternative responses*

As mentioned above, we usually found that once the problem was located, the generation of alternative solutions is comparatively easy. I used ‘brain-storming’, and other creativity exercises (de Bono 1967) to extend our repertoire.

- *Experimentation in virtual worlds*

I used a variety of techniques to create ‘worlds’ in which solutions could be tested. In the recruitment situation mentioned above I scripted a simple critical incident, containing most of the features above and asked two of the managers to explore it aloud while the rest of us listened. After a few minutes of doing this I interrupted the process and asked the observers to share insights gained into the situation, and any observations about ways in which the managers approached the task that they perceived as either helping or hindering their understanding of the situation.

We worked like this for some time, changing the inner pair as they got stuck, or wanted to move out of the limelight or as an observer had new ideas or an alternative approach that could be explored. In this process we used role-plays, role reversal, telling the story of the resolution of the problem - as if it had already passed, and other techniques.

- *Selection of favoured solution*

The next stage of our cycle was the selection of the favoured solution. This was the stage at which the ‘owner’ of the problem moved back to centre stage. After the recounting of the incident or dilemma, the problem was usually worked on jointly. But at this stage it was important that the ‘owner’ of the problem was asked to select the solution in which she had greatest confidence and felt able to enact.

- *Application in real world*

This was both the final stage of one cycle and the starting point of another. The ‘owner’ of the problem then took the solution back to her situation and applied it. In doing this she tested it, and identified the degree of its appropriateness. She then brought back to the group an account of what happened and her reflections on it. If the problem had not been satisfactorily resolved this started a new cycle.

- **What did I learn from this cycle?**

Learning from this cycle was diverse and at a number of levels. I was conscious of learning from both the content of the work undertaken in the groups, and also from the process of relating to the challenges encountered, to their organisations and to colleagues in the AL group. I learnt about a lot about managing diverse workforces in a context of Institutional Discrimination; about Black women’s experiences in

organisations, and I observed patterns of responding to these situations that I was beginning to identify as coping/survival strategies. In Chapter 8, I select incidents from their/our experiences and 'unpack' them exploring the messages sent and received in the interactions, and consider the nature of the organisational context created out of the accumulative impact of the individual experiences.

1. ***Themes of Black women's experiences***

- *Only Black manager in contexts where this was experienced as a contradiction in terms*

The stereotypical image of the manager does not extend to include women or Black people, **and** stereotypes of the Black woman do not include abilities and skills at managing or organising nor are we scripted into powerful roles. This resulted in the managers often being perceived as "odd" and experiencing overt and covert pressures to continuously prove their competences, and to 'fit in'. The receiving of contradictory messages about themselves created in the managers feelings of dissonance and made it difficult for them to maintain identities as 'Black', as 'woman', and as 'manager'. Examples of the construction of this experience are given in some of the incidents explored in the next chapter, and this theme is picked up again when I look at the issue of identity.

- *Token – representative Black*

The experience of being 'token' Black manager is directly related to being the 'only' Black manager. From one perspective it might be seen that the 'token' experience is a direct outcome of the reality that there were so few Black managers in the organisation. It was therefore very easy for them to become the 'representative' of the group. They were often chosen or invited to perform 'special' tasks and duties not on the basis of their abilities and qualities but because they were Black. In this way they were treated as if their main expertise or their area of professionalism was in 'race'. It was a process by which only one small aspect of the person was acknowledged and main aspects of their identity were denied.

This brings into view another facet of the problem and we see that it is related to the dominant racist and sexist ideologies which assumes that Black people and women have nothing worthwhile to contribute. Therefore the varying abilities and qualities of the individual women are overlooked and it is assumed that the most valuable contribution that they might make to the organisation is to that of the representative Black person. From the examples in Chapter 8 it will be seen that in this process the uniqueness of the individual is negated.

Turning the issues as prism in the light, once more we observe that the token relationship is partially maintained by organisational structures such as the policy requiring that all recruitment panels should include a Black person. It encourages White staff to see the presence of Black managers on recruitment panels as simply an issue of 'political correctness', and perhaps unintentionally, feeds racist notions that as Black people they do not have a valid contribution to make.

- *Paradox of high visibility and invisibility*

Linked to the issues of both ‘only Black manager’ and also ‘token’ is the issue of high visibility. The role of the token is often a highly visible one. They appear at every working party, meeting, conference – wherever there is a need for the ‘Black perspective’ to be heard or forthe organisation to demonstrate its anti-racist policy. Colleagues often perceived these ‘special’ tasks as privileges unfairly offered to Black people, yet in practice they did not fundamentally enhance the Black managers’ status. Many of the women in the AL groups, having been initially flattered, soon became disillusioned and began to see these as additional, rather than ‘special’, tasks that increased their workload and made it difficult to manage. These duties were often additional to their normal roles and responsibilities and it was left to the individuals to fit them into their normal work schedules.

The Black women managers expressed feelings of being watched, scrutinised, and of performing under a spotlight in which the slightest mistake was magnified and perceived as proof of their unsuitability for the job. While being highly visible there was a contradictory experience of invisibility. A common complaint was that their unique abilities and potential and actual contributions were not being seen.

The experience of being both highly visible **and** invisible produced adaptive, protective behaviours that unintentionally increased these managers’ workloads and stress. A common response was to try to prove themselves. It was as if by working harder and by producing ‘yet another piece of work that could not be faulted’ they would be able to prove their individual abilities and their competence as managers. Their high visibility, their awareness that any mistakes took place in a very public arena and would be perceived not as being due to personal shortcomings but as ‘proof’ of the incompetence and inability of **all** Black people, reinforced the idea that they had to work three times as hard.

- *Credibility /competence questioned and undermined*

Part of the process by which they were treated as token was by the constant questioning of their competence. This was done in a variety of ways – many of the stories told in Chapter 8 illustrate this experience. Often managers complained that they were not trusted by their line managers to deal with situations that would routinely be handled by officers at that particular level. They were often more closely managed than was customary for their levels of experience and status. A common complaint was of having their letters vetted and re-drafted in their line managers style - even though already well written but in another style. The issue of difference was a critical one for these Black managers and their line managers to negotiate. They often complained that there seemed to be no space for things to be done differently. It was always assumed that to be different was to be wrong. On one occasion a White line manager, speaking to me about the challenges she experienced in giving adequate support to a Black woman manager (not a participant of these AL groups), spent some time describing the physical appearance of the woman. It soon became apparent to me that the line manager felt that others’ perceptions of the manager’s incompetence was linked to her physical appearance. It seemed that this woman who took great pride in her appearance, wore fashionable and expensive clothes to work. In the line manager’s view, although she was never inappropriately dressed, she did not fit in and so "she could never do any thing right".

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

The stories in Chapter 8 indicate that their status was challenged by their staff – Black and White. Their claims were also experienced in the course of our work together. We were often not accorded the same respect that is automatically given to a group of managers of a similar status.

- *Reduced Opportunities*

The perception of Black managers as tokens and as therefore "incompetent until proven otherwise" together with the attribution of expertise about issues of race meant that they were often relegated to ‘race jobs’ and seen as suited mainly for working with Black people. Managers received conflicting messages regarding this issue. On one hand they were often restricted and relegated to work related to ‘race’, and work associated with Black people often attracts low status. On the other hand formal as well as informal actions were taken to keep Black people apart. It was often assumed that Black people could not be trusted to be professional and not to unfairly privilege other Black people so there was often anxiety about placing us in positions of power over other Black people – whether staff or users of services. For these, and other, reasons the number of positions deemed to be suitable to Black staff is reduced.

Once again this experience was produced and maintained by a collusive process. There were many situations where, in our attempt to ensure our survival, we withdrew ourselves.

- *Excluded*

Many of these managers felt themselves to be on the fringe – not quite part of the sections and Departments in which they worked. Often they were not part of the social or professional networks in their work-settings. Communication difficulties were common, most managers had difficulties in getting information. In fact one of the early issues tackled in the later groups was the setting up of alternative information systems. Having had a number of experiences in the early groups of telephone or written messages not being received I learnt that it was important to be able to contact managers at home! Breaks in the communication system which produced feeling of exclusion were also an important contributing factor to their increased work-load. Not being able to count on getting information through the normal formal and informal channels they had to work at setting up alternative systems to ensure their effectiveness. It also meant that they did not have the support networks that many of their other colleagues took for granted in undertaking their work. Examples of this can be seen in the stories explored in Chapter 8.

However, the managers themselves also contributed to their exclusion and isolation. Having learnt that they could not trust the people around them, a protective strategy was the creation of clear impervious boundaries around themselves. In many instances they actively chose not to socialise with their colleagues, establishing clear demarcation lines between their personal and private lives. It was a strategy re-enacted many times in these groups, and it was one of the challenges to creating ‘engaged participation’ in our inquiry/learning process. I return to this issue when I consider what was learnt from the process of our work.

- *Managing multiple roles and overload*

In or out of the organisation, all of the women in this study, whether married or single – with or without children - were extremely busy, managing multiple roles and with large workloads.

The combining of caring responsibilities – whether for adults or children, with a professional role was particularly challenging, and when young children were involved it became almost impossible. This is a theme that featured highly in all cycles of the research and I explore further in chapter 9.

As we explored the issue of overload we noticed that though in many situations we were indeed the "mules of the world" (Zora Neale Hurston 1937), we were also active contributors to our overload. These women often found that when compared to their colleagues they carried much heavier workloads and despite the imbalance it was often the case that any new work was given to them. They were also asked to take on additional tasks, related to helping the organisations learn about racism and in identifying or responding to the needs of the Black community. There were also, often implicit, demands from Black staff and from the Black community that they take on additional roles. From Black staff there were expectations of emotional and practical support in negotiating the challenges of the organisation. Many of these managers were mentors – in and out of the organisation. To the Black community they were bridges for facilitating communication with the Council. In addition to this, many women played active roles in their churches and/or in the community. Some were involved in more than one voluntary organisation. The notion of needing to make a contribution to our community was strongly felt.

For complex reasons, many of the women played pivotal roles and carried heavy responsibilities in their families. It seemed that the construction of the female role in the Black family was a big contributor to their situations. But it is also that they were women with considerable skills in negotiating the system who were able to act as decoders, guides, interpreters and advocates for families and communities at the margins of the dominant system. One woman's comment, on a day when she was particularly stretched seemed to be applicable to many of them. She said,

" Everyone wants a piece of me."

However the extent of the workloads carried were also partly contributed to by us. We identified that our anxieties about making mistakes in situations where we were so highly visible and/or our awareness that others were depending on our success meant that every job had to be done to a high standard. As mentioned earlier, in our effort to survive we often, knowingly or unknowingly, increased our workload.

- *High stress and fatigue*

A persistent feature of all the AL groups was the extreme tiredness that was so evident in our meetings. This was a setting in which there was enough safety for women to feel able to relax their guard and to allow themselves and others to know just how tired they were. Our meetings became space of regeneration. Dr Holly Atkinson (1985), exploring women and fatigue says:

> "Fatigue is an excellent gauge of well being because it is a very hard symptom to mask. The only way to get rid of it is to treat the underlying causes."

She identifies discrimination as being a cause of chronic fatigue. She says:

> " The list of stressors resulting from discrimination could run on and on, they all drain women of energy in a myriad of ways. And the fatigue that results from the stress is the type that will not go away with a night's sleep, because we cannot make the problem of …discrimination …go away overnight. Both discrimination and the fatigue that come from it are chronic problems."

The issue of fatigue is I believe a critical issue for Black women.

- *Having identity questioned*

From the research, it is clear that to be a Black woman manager is to have your identity questioned, verbally and non-verbally, on a daily basis. Black staff at junior levels may treat her with a mixture of suspicion, ambivalence and pleasure. There were many stories of the various ways in which their pleasure was expressed but at the same time there were also indications that her appearance at a senior level was not credible. There was a belief that they could not be genuinely 'Black' **and** a manager in a White mainstream organisation. Verbally, or non- verbally, Black managers were required to prove to Black people at junior levels or in the community that they had not "sold out." Paradoxically they were asked by the dominant group (often implicitly) to prove that they were not Black if they were to be accepted as a manager/professional.

Required to prove their identity in such contradictory ways created feelings of disturbance and was an issue that emerged in all groups. It raised questions such as:

" *Does succeeding in a very White, male culture mean that we must have sold out*?"

Issues of identity disturbed many members of the groups and were raised on many occasions. It was often approached from the assumption that a choice had to be made. Some women tried to resolve the confusion experienced by strongly identifying either as a manager or as a Black woman. Identity is, I believe, an issue that many Black women struggle with. In the groups it was raised in relation to - being of mixed-race parentage; having a White partner; being of African Caribbean descent **and** born in England; being an older Asian woman **and** an active feminist. The issue raises a number of questions that are of concern to Black women as we move across racial, cultural and religious divides, and as we choose to move out to the scripted roles attributed to us. Below the issue are questions of self–definition that are quite hard to give voice to, but which need to be raised and addressed before we are able to move on. Questions such as:

- ***Who am I?***
- ***How is my identity determined?***
- ***Who decides and on what basis?***
- ***Is my identity singular and fixed? If so, how do I choose? What are the consequences of my choices?***
- *Displacement and alienation*

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http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/c_douglas.html

This theme, though connected with that of identity, is about the direct effect of some of the choices made by our parents or ourselves as we struggle to survive. It is an issue that had its source outside of the organisation, but that affected these Black managers' relationships and opportunities in the organisation - in diverse and diffuse ways.

Many of the women talked about alienation and distance between themselves and their children, parents and/or siblings. These estrangements had been produced in a variety of different ways. For the mixed race women in the programme the issue was described as one of identity and centred on the extent to which siblings identified with the Black or White parent. This seemed to produce a sense of "we are so different". Differences were talked about in the light of types of activities in which they participated or friends with which they identified. The mixed-heritage women who stayed and participated fully in the programme (two withdrew at early stage of two different courses) all had Black fathers and White mothers and identified most closely with their Black parent.

For one older Asian woman, alienation and distance was produced by her commitment to her own development and to the empowerment of other women. This had placed her on the margin of her own family and community. She was a divorced woman and in her formal role she supported voluntary and community organisations which in turn supported vulnerable women and children. In her private life she acted as a focal point for women making sense of critical dilemmas in their home lives. Her family, and particularly her brothers, were concerned about her activities. She often talked about the suspicion with which her brothers and community leaders treated women encountered in her home. She was perceived as not good company for other women. This perception seemed to be at odds with the perception of the women in the community who seemed to greatly value her support, advice and counsel. She perceived her position as very vulnerable and took great pains to maintain distance between her home and work life. She worked a long way from her hometown and despite the length of the journey to and from work she welcomed the distance from home. She constantly searched for ways to maintain both her familial and community relationships *and* her commitment to the empowerment and liberation of women. For her privacy and secrecy were highly valued survival strategies.

For a number of African Caribbean women the source of the problem was in the splitting of the family that took place when one or both parents 'left home' and came to England. The wounds to family relationships and the fissures that occurred as a result of those actions run deep. The issue of being either one of the children left behind or one of the ones 'born here' seemed critical. It was an explanation provided at many times when issues of family difficulties arose. An example of this is Abbey who felt that after so many years she had still not recovered from moving from the position of 'eldest' of the family born in England, to being a middle child when her older sisters and brothers came to join the family. She talked about becoming silent and an "observer" rather than an active participant. She was still not well connected with her older brothers and sisters.

Other African Caribbean women talked about strong bond with " my Grandmother who brought me up". In the context of the Caribbean, alternative sources of mothering were provided by aunts, older sisters or cousins or even family friends, but for the

women in these groups it came from grandmothers. When leaving the Caribbean for England the distress experienced from the second loss of a mother was great. Women talked about the difficulties they had experienced in reconnecting with their mothers. Some resented their mothers, blaming them for either leaving them in the first place and /or for detaching them from a woman who had now become 'Mother'. Some talked about the resentment they had felt at people who they experienced as strangers exercising such control over their lives. One woman, who had managed to re-frame her relationship with her mother, and now described their relationship as close – "like sisters", confessed that she still viewed her grandmother as her real mother.

1. Themes emerging from our process

Generating information about racism and sexism is extremely difficult and problematic. I would argue that sexism and racism are types of abuse, and as such, the shame and silence, which traditionally shrouds incidents of other types of abuse, are also draped over incidents of racism and sexism. Many of the incidents shared in the process were hurtful, demeaning, negating and humiliating. They undermine our sense of worth and self-esteem. Consequently they were not easy to talk about.

- *An Issue of Trust*

One of my greatest assets for this work was the degree of match between their experiences and mine. I approached the work as a Black woman with experience of management in Local Government and other large institutions, who was prepared to acknowledge my personal struggles with the racism encountered in organisations as well as my commitment to my development and growth. Although my competence and reputation as a management developer was important to them, I believe that their trust was initially gained because they believed that I understood their experience. On one hand, I was different - most of them had never experienced a Black person in the role of management consultant, and I was told on many occasions that seeing me in this role made them proud. However, on the other hand I was just like them. As I walked through the door, into whichever building our meeting was being held I was just another Black woman. I, like them, would have to deal with the White receptionist who refused to ever get used to our presence, and persisted in behaving as if she had not seen us previously and as if we were in the wrong place. I too, would have the eyes of other hotel guests follow me from place to place, communicating to me the strangeness of my presence there. In this way I was no different to them. Sometimes as a group member entered the room, closed the door and either laughed or fumed, at *yet another* ridiculous or outrageous encounter - I did not have to be told what that was about. I **was** part of it, I shared the laughter, I felt the rage in those moments. We knew each other intimately.

Mama (1995) says that she won co-operation with her research participants because she was identified as a 'daughter of Africa' in one instance, and in another she was a 'Black woman met at the local Black woman's centre'. Similarly, establishment of my trustworthiness was initially on the basis of the degree of commonalities between us.

Later my participation in the process and willingness to talk about my own experiences was important in maintaining their trust. Yet, I was often conscious of the fragility of the trust given. An example of this was an experience with Group 3, on the

first occasion when I established my difference by challenging a survival strategy. One of the group members (Frances) was experiencing great work overload, and she had talked on more than one occasion about the fact that as soon as she managed to get on top of her workload, more work would be given to her. She was extremely tired, and she had reached a point where she was concerned by the stress symptoms she was observing in herself. As we worked with her problem, I realised that she searched for alternative responses, but did not consider the possibility of sharing her concerns with her line manager. I suggested this as a possibility. As I said it there was a laden silence. The group stared at me and then one said "I can't believe that you said that - you know that is the last thing she can do". In that moment I experienced the group as having a crisis of trust.

The challenging of survival strategies that are clearly no longer working for us was important to me, so I kept to my challenge. I tried to explore with the group the ways in which the response being generated masked the real problem, and kept Frances trapped in a downward spiral of overload and fatigue. As we closed the issue that day, I did not feel that I had been successful in getting them to consider a change of response. In fact, I was not even sure that I had been heard. It felt as if the main issue that had been worked at that day, and continued to be worked at for a while after, was trust. I knew that the trust initially given had been eroded and that I would have to work to rebuild it. For the rest of that meeting and the following meeting I chose not to challenge too much. I maintained my point of difference, but also chose to let them know that I understood the reasons why she felt that it was too risky to say that she was over-laden, and assured her of my continued support whatever she chose to do. That incident illustrated to me the superficiality of the trust that I had been given initially. It was apparent that it had to be carefully guarded and regularly built on.

Another point at which trust was often tested was on the issue of confidentiality. In this programme, one of the ways in which this quality was assured was through my sustained and direct link with their line managers. However this aspect of the programme design consistently raised concerns about confidentiality and about my trust-worthiness. With each group I experienced the period before and after my first meeting with the line managers as sensitive. Questions and concerns raised clearly expressed their ambivalence about the closing of this triangle that would take place, through my meeting with their line managers. Until the meeting had taken place and they had received feedback from their managers' reactions they were, understandably, tentative in their response to me.

I have often wondered if the issue "Black woman manager a contradiction in terms" was unconsciously activated on each occasion that I, as it were, crossed the line from the Black women's group to that of the line managers. Was I not as a Black woman capable of managing the challenges of dual loyalties? Did the colour of my skin or the experience of discrimination make me incapable of behaving with integrity? I am sure that all of the women concerned would have been very hurt had I voiced such questions yet it felt that in this interaction my loyalty, integrity and identity as a Black person were in question.

This issue of trust also affected the choices open to me in recording the research data. In the first groups I felt that there was such a high degree of ambivalence and mistrust about the motivations behind the programmes that I decided not to ask for permission

to tape our sessions. I feared that it might interfere with their ability to feel safe in disclosing. A tape recorder was used on two occasions – once, with two different groups. In each instance this happened **after** the groups were well established, but only in relation to a specific discussion about what it meant to be a Black manager. In those discussions details of the specific experiences were often not recounted, so managers were less vulnerable. As mentioned earlier, in these cycles data was recorded on flipchart and mainly by journal accounts.

The location of our meetings affected what information was shared, and the ease with which these women were able to engage in this work. There were instances when our meetings took place in a council building that was let to a voluntary group, that was also frequently used by other Council departments and groups. I observed that when we worked in this building, participants were more guarded, and less likely to be open. Comments such as "You have to be careful - walls have ears" were often made. Participants were most relaxed and shared most fully on those occasions when we were residential and in hotels unconnected with their organisations.

- *Pain and energy involved in fully engaging with experiences of racism and sexism*

I observed that there were many times when experiences were categorised in ways that assumed common knowledge and experience, yet I often did not ask the individual concerned to specify the actual experience. There was a common acceptance and expectation that individuals would be asked to be more specific about the experience when "taking their turn" to 'working on a problem', but outside of those spaces sharing of experiences were often less precise and left unchallenged. Reflecting on this, and asking myself why I did not push for further details on those occasions, I realised that in not doing so I was protecting myself, and others, from having to face fully up to the distress of many of our situations. I found many of the stories distressing, so when statements such as "putting up with rubbish" or "being patronised" or "put down" were made it was easy to let them pass.

Dr. Holly Atkinson (1985), in her book "Women and Fatigue", says

"Where there is struggle there is a great energy drain. Too few women realise that their chronic fatigue, in part, is a direct result of discrimination [...] These issues can be very painful, and in many women, they are driven beneath the surface, the real feelings are suppressed, but they do not go away. Unaware, women struggle with them anyway and that takes energy."

These groups were very much havens in which recuperation, recovery and re-energising took place but they were also very challenging and demanding. As the facilitator of this process a major challenge was to judge when our withdrawing from an issue was a collusive process to avoid and deny and when withdrawal was recognition of our need for rest, or of the need to focus on us. In this work I have learnt that preoccupation with racism, as with other relationship problems, can be a way of avoiding encountering ourselves (Lerner 1989). In our anxiety to resolve issues that distress us we focus our attention outwardly, and as a result neglect the building of a healthy selfhood – which is in itself an important act of resistance.

- *Shame of crying*

This issue is connected to the previous one. Our ability to express and inquire into our experiences of racism and sexism in the organisation was affected by our fear of crying. It was perceived that by crying we present ourselves as weak and, in this way, shame ourselves. This anxiety about crying recurs throughout the research. There were many instances when I was told "I have decided not to say very much today because I am determined not to cry." I interpreted such comments as an indicator that the degree of trust in the group was high enough for the individual to openly acknowledge a coping strategy. In many instances those comments acted as invitations for reassurance of safety and of confidentiality and engaged empathetic dialogue. On receiving such assurances, and usually much later in the session, the woman involved would open up and share with us the experience that was causing her distress. However, more frequently these women did not admit to feeling of distress but used the excuse of not needing 'space', being tired or just not feeling very well as explanations of their withdrawal. Quite often a woman would say that there were no issues she wanted to bring to the group, that she was quite willing to miss her turn, and offer her time slot to anyone who felt in need of a larger space. Over the years of working on these programmes, and also as I began to identify my own masks better, I began to recognise such statements as possibly an indication of greatest need. Therefore I rigidly stuck to the principle that each person took her turn. If there were no issues on which she wanted to work then she could do a review of her learning from her experiences. The discipline of allocating specific space to each person, during each meeting, assisted us in staying engaged with these issues, despite the pain and the many habitual responses that help us hide, mask and so avoid facing it. Facing up to the damage caused by discrimination is a critical part of the liberatory process (Freire, 1972, Fanon 1967, Lipsky 1978)

However for some women the challenge of interrupting their normal survival strategies proved to be too difficult and they chose to withdraw from the programme. I observed a pattern of absence following a period of deep sharing and disclosure - particularly if the woman had also cried. On three occasions women never returned to the group after such experiences. One of these women later said that she felt that she was not at the right stage in her life for such a progamme. She described herself as "not being ready".

- *The rapport - detachment dialectic*

I also realised that the collusion that stopped the expressing of these experiences was also about establishing and maintaining rapport and empathy. It felt as if, by asking for individuals to specify the experience of racial discrimination (except when clearly it was a requirement of my role) I risked being perceived as not knowing about such experiences. There was a pressure to assume shared knowledge that in retrospect, I realised sometimes inhibited my ability to more fully inquire.

- *Focusing on the oppressive system - focussing on self*

This question of how much attention is paid to the uncovering and revealing of the experience of racism is, I think, a challenging one. It leads us to the problem of how do we create spaces for self-development and self-actualisation. Dealing with racism

can very easily become self-absorbing. It would have been very easy for us to have spent our whole time focussed on expressing the various distressing incidents and encounters. Yet of equal importance is the need to shift focus - to recognise the anxieties triggered by these experiences, to explore alternative ways of responding to the problem and to go below our anxieties to identify the source of the problem. Systems thinking indicates that the patterns of relationships are held in place by the congruence between the action and reaction. Therefore in changing relationships it may be important to shift the focus away from the disturbing behaviour to understanding our own responses and to developing new ways of responding.

Managing this dialectic in the Action Learning groups I chose to split the time available between dealing with the problems brought from the working environment and participating in activities which assisted them to learn about themselves. Of course, in practice this was not a neat division. In exploring work-based problems we also encountered many opportunities for learning about self, and in exploring self, participants discovered new choices and alternative ways for responding to the organisational challenge. An important learning was the need to keep hold of **both** ends of this dialectic.

For people whose work experience is one of being different to and isolated, the urge to experience sameness is great. There was a great unstated pressure to remain in rapport. Knowing this intellectually, did not however reduce the shock and pain I experienced at the first appearance of difference in a group. Each time, it brought me face to face with feelings of rejection and abandonment from one of the few groups in which I experienced an unquestioned sense of belonging. As mentioned earlier, trust was fragile so this fear was not altogether without foundation. All times when I needed to assert my difference, particularly in those early stages of the life of a group, I experienced myself in a double bind. On one hand there was my commitment to acting with integrity and to speaking my truth, then on the other I was reluctant to interrupt the sense of unity and empathy that I experienced in these groups.

Suspecting that the depth of information shared with me took place because I had been able to "prove to them" that I understood, and knew intimately some of the situations they encountered it was difficult to risk breaking rapport. On each occasion that this occurred I was not sure that I would manage to negotiate this dialectic successfully. Managing to maintain rapport while establishing our differences was also extremely difficult for the group. It was a difficulty encountered in many cycles of the research, including the Collaborative Inquiry group (written about later).

I suspect that for people, for whom alienation is the norm, the prospect of rejection from a group that offers the prospect of inclusion triggers great anxiety. Therefore this may be a challenge for black women as a group and maybe for oppressed people in general. An invitation to express differences in a situation where life learning indicates that difference equates rejection, constitutes a double bind. The use of a participative research method for empowering people who have been historically oppressed is paradoxical.

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Cycles of Engagement – Phase 2

This phase included two major cycles:

- Confirming and disconfirming initiatives (cycle 4)
- A collaborative Inquiry (cycle 5)

Cycle 4 – Confirming and disconfirming cycles of engagement

In the period of this study there were seven opportunities, presented by my work as a trainer / consultant, to test the information gathered from the AL cycles. In some events my objectives were explicitly stated, while in others I held private my intention, and listened carefully to the Black women with whom I worked for similarities and differences in their experiences. Following each event, I reflected and wrote about it. All of these experiences have influenced my understanding of the challenges with which Black women are faced in attempting to develop their human potential. However in this Chapter I mention all the cycles, but I focus mainly on information gained from three of the initiatives in which I explicitly stated my intentions to the participants and gained their co-operation. These are:

1. Workshops on a Personal Development Course for Black women;
2. A focus group for Black managers in Local Government about their management development needs;
3. A workshop at a Women in Management Conference;
4. Other cycles (only briefly described)

1. Workshops on a Personal Development Course for Black women

I was involved in the designing and running of 3 courses for Black women professionals in Central Government between 1994-1996. Women attending these courses were at junior and middle management levels, and were all committed to their development and /or career progression.

The 5-day course aimed to:

- *Enable ethnic minority women to enhance both their personal skills and organisational understanding in order to improve their effectiveness in the workplace.*

Within this, an implicit aim was to encourage participants to see their everyday life and work experiences as important sources of knowledge and to empower them to name their own experience. Therefore there was an extensive overlap between my inquiry and the objectives of the course.

I was one of four trainers involved in the development of the course, but my role in the three courses varied, depending on the match between my diary commitments and the course dates. On one course I was one of three course tutors working with the group for a whole week. On the other two courses, I joined the group after it had been working together for a day. On these courses I learnt from formal as well as informal conversations and interactions. They assisted me in gaining a better understanding of the internal and external barriers to black women's development, and to the issues. The information produced was very similar to that gained from the AL cycles and from other women in the study. Though the details and contexts of the stories varied, many of the issues raised by the stories, and the emotions communicated in the telling of these stories were the same. However, this was one of the few cycles in which I further tested the notions of 'surviving' and 'thriving' generated in collaboration with Roseanne. The data communicated in this thesis comes from the third of these courses as I did a more extensive exploration of these issues of surviving and thriving with this group.

- ***How we worked***

Methods used in accessing this information varied depending on the stage at which I joined the course, the relationship already established with them, and on the level of trust and rapport established in the group. On the event where I was a course tutor for the whole week work on these issues was phased over the week, while on the third event I joined for day two only. On all events my concerns were:

- *To establish trust and rapport with the group*
- *To ensure that individuals had a conceptual framework for recognising institutional discrimination*
- *To inquire into their own experiences as Black women working in organisations*
- *To communicate the information gathered in the course of my research.*

I established common ground with the groups by highlighting that part of my career had been spent in their sector Central Government, and on the third event, in the same Department as two participants. I presented myself as another Black woman committed to her growth and development, and struggling to find / tackle the various barriers encountered externally and internally. I expressed my intention to learn both with, and from them, as well as to communicate the specific knowledge held about the issues with which we were concerned. On the courses where I joined after the start, I arrived prior to my session in order to participate, as an observer, in the debrief on the previous session. I adopted an active listening mode - seeking clarification where meanings were alluded to but not specified, and checking my understanding by

summarising. This gave me a chance to interact with them informally prior to my workshop.

Joining this course in this way, allowed me to gently 'ease' myself into the group in a very natural way. It enabled me to get a sense of the various personalities and of their openness or otherwise to personal development, and to prepare the group for working in a way where experiences were inquired into, and meanings sought rather than just accepted or assumed. It acknowledged the pain and difficulty often encountered in talking about the experiences of discrimination, and that it was much harder to do this in the presence of strangers. The establishment of trust was in all cycles of the inquiry an issue, which assured the quality of the material produced. A recurring piece of feedback about these sessions was that it had stimulated the noticing and questioning of occurrences that they had previously been taken for granted. The events were consciousness raising.

On the first two courses exploration was prompted by the use of the question - *"What does it mean to be a Black woman in your organisation?"*

Individuals spent a few minutes responding to this question and then their responses were gathered from the group in a plenary session, written on flipchart, and explored. On the first event this session took place after dinner. Soon after starting I realised that this was **not** appropriate material for a late evening session! It soon became apparent that we were opening up sources of distress and I wondered whether they would chose to avoid the pain by resorting to tiredness. They did not. After a slightly hesitant start, it became apparent that they were talking about issues of great meaning and concern to themselves, and it was difficult to pull the session to a close at 10.30 p.m.!

Next day we discovered that, as we had feared, some of the women had not been able to sleep very well, and a few arrived still distressed. One trainer gave counselling support to those women who were upset. While the session continued with women working in pairs and trios recounting some of the incidents that had been triggered by the previous night's session, and helping each other to understand the discriminatory process, and to explore alternative responses to these situations.

On the third course the prompt for the first activity was:

- *"I once heard Maya Angelou say that her objective was not simply to survive but to thrive - what do those terms mean to you? Can you think of an image that for you sums up the states of surviving and thriving? How do you look and act when/if you are in those states?"*

Participants were asked to spend 15 mins working individually, and then to meet with two others and share their responses. Each trio then produced two flipchart sheets of their joint responses.

Having debriefed from that activity participants were asked:-

- To decide whether they felt that, generally speaking, as black women we were surviving or thriving;

- *To tell one or two stories of times when they were in a state of surviving and one or two of times when they were thriving.*

Working in their pairs and trios they told their stories. When we returned to plenary participants were invited to share some of their stories of surviving and thriving. The day ended with a short learning review in which participants returned to their small groups to identify insights, issues, questions emerging for them. From these workshops I learnt that despite the changes in organisations, and in the physical environment in which the organisations were based there was a depressing consistency in their experiences. I observed how important it was to the women in these workshops to learn that their experiences were **not** personal but related to the collective. Data gathered from this cycle is included in Chapters 8 and 9.

1. **A focus group for Black managers in Local Government about their management development needs**

In this cycle I worked with 16 Black managers (at middle and senior levels, 12 women and 4 men in Local Government, in the Greater London area). This was a small-scale research initiative commissioned by two Local Government umbrella associations, to explore the management development needs of Black men and women managers in Local Government. It produced information about:

- *The factors perceived by these women and men to contribute to their effectiveness and survival, in their organisations, and*
- *The contribution they perceived their organisations to have made to their effectiveness.*

An unintended by-product gained was the understanding that Black men managers and Black women managers not only have different experiences in organisations but that they *talk* about them differently. The Black men in this group were less willing or able to specify the differing aspects of their experience. It highlighted the need for Black men's experiences in organisations to be researched. It seems that that experience may be even less known than that of Black women!

The workshop was co-facilitated by another Black woman, a Black man and myself. Our design was influenced by our concern to:

- *Quickly establish trust and rapport in order to get full participation from the group;*
- *Identify similarities and differences between the experiences and development needs of Black women and Black men professionals;*
- *Give maximum "air time" to individuals;*
- *Record the material generated;*
- *Assure confidentiality*

Therefore, we decided to use an introductory activity, in which all participated. In this way we (facilitators) were able to talk more deeply with a small number of people and to gain the trust and confidence of the participants. It also gave us a good opportunity to properly understand particular concerns and expectations brought to the inquiry.

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As we had anticipated, a critical concern was confidentiality. The group feared that due to the small numbers of Black people at senior levels in Local Government at that time, they could be easily identified. They were not prepared to simply take our word that confidentiality would be assured, so this became an issue of group discussion. Eventually they agreed to severely limit the use of a tape recorder. It was agreed that it could be used for plenary sessions, but even then only on the condition that the tapes were held by me, as the external consultant. They did not trust that if they remained in the possession of either of the sponsoring organisations, the there was not a high risk of confidentiality being broken. It was agreed that small groups would note key themes, issues, and questions from their discussions on flip chart sheets. These were then presented to, and explored by the full group.

The research team considered the possibility of participating in the smaller groups in either the role of facilitator or observer, but finally decided not to join the groups. The other two members of the team were representatives of the two umbrella organisations, and as such created anxieties in some group members. Although it is possible that had it been a longer research initiative we might have been able to win the trust of the group, working with the constraints faced we decided to forgo the possible added gains, and to allow the groups to work on their own. It was agreed that we would 'visit' the groups to gain a 'flavour' of the discussion and to deal with any questions and concerns. Except for the introductory activity, all small group work was done in single sex groups.

Recognising that some information about discrimination is held at levels that are not conceptual (Essed, 1991) we started the small group activity by asking participants to select from a large number of photographs, two or three pictures that in some way reminded them of the experience of being a Black manager in Local Government. They then met with one or two others, shared their pictures, and talked about the reasons for their choices. Pairs and trios then identified areas of commonality, and these were recorded on the flip charts. To add greater rigour to the activity each small group were asked to consider their lists in the light of the following question.

- *"What is there about these experiences that seems to be specifically about being Black managers?*

Information from this activity was brought to the plenary and explored together. The data produced confirmed that generated from the AL groups and informs Chapter 8.

1. A workshop at a Women in Management Conference

In 1992 I was asked to run a workshop at a 'Women in Management Conference' - about developing Black women managers, drawing on my learning from my research. It was agreed that I would gather information from the workshop about the responses to the session. Twelve women - Black and White, attended the workshop.

- ***How we worked***

I introduced the aims and objectives of the workshop, and then gave an opportunity for pairs and trios to discuss their own expectations and needs of the workshop and to feedback to me. From that I established the extent to which our varying needs and

expectations could be dovetailed and what was outside of the brief of the workshop. I then presented my research data and facilitated a discussion.

- ***Recording of data***

In this group no concerns about confidentiality were expressed. There was little sharing of personal information, most of the discussion stayed at the intellectual level. I had arranged for the session to be taped, and the group readily consented to this. After the event I realised that some of the most important data, had been gained through the subjective experience of being a facilitator/participant at the conference and wrote about it in my journal. This data informs chapter 8.

1. Other Confirming and disconfirming Cycles

Space does not allow me to elaborate on each of these cycles, so I will briefly state what they were and their particular contributions to the study. As mentioned earlier all of these cycles confirmed the experience produced by the AL groups. The design and methods used in each of these cycles varied, but in each my concerns were:

- To build rapport, trust, and active participation within the group;
- To create a working environment that encouraged and supported the search for quality questions, exploration, inquiry and for the taking of risks and the making of mistakes;
- To facilitate any distress arising in the course of our work.

1. ***Personal effectiveness course for Black staff and women in a Central Government Department***.

   This cycle produced great insights into the contradictory messages sometimes produced by organisations and the confusion and dysfunction produced. I found this event particularly challenging because of the despair, powerlessness and helplessness experienced from the group, however from this engagement came understandings about my response to those feelings in others and about the challenge of empowering others. Learning from this cycle informs Chapters 8 and 9.

2. ***Team building for a Governmental Agency***

   In this cycle I worked with a mixed (Black/White) team who were experiencing difficulties in working effectively across the boundaries of race. From this cycle I observed the paralysis that takes hold of many White people when issues of race are raised, and the strategies used to silence Black people when they speak of their oppression.

3. ***Women in management course for a Probation Service***

In this cycle I attempted to engage the group in recognising and exploring the specific nature of the Black woman's experience. It had been requested by the organisation that when looking at gender issues we acknowledge the different experience of Black women, so it seemed an opportunity to communicate the information emerging from my study. However my main learning was of the defensive anger that so often emerges from White women when Black women declare their difference. It was also interesting to observe that the only two Black women managers on the course disassociated themselves from the research data, and from me, though one of them later on in an informal setting made contact with me. She expressed her puzzlement about what I had done. She said that prior to my session they had been a cohesive group in which race was not an issue, but I had now created a split in the group. This denial of difference and concern to fit in and be assimilated is a common survival response – and one I knew intimately!

Cycle 5 – Collaborative *inquiry (CI) group*

This cycle was designed to:

- *Further test the material gathered with women who themselves were paying attention to their own experiences and responses, and had been involved in the development of other Black women;*
- *Further develop the notions of surviving and thriving;*
- *Identify and explore our common survival strategies and consider their implications for our growth;*
- *Provide a space in, and through which, our growth may be encouraged.*
- **Introduction**

This was an extremely successful and valuable cycle of the inquiry. It achieved all of the objectives outlined above *and* it produced outcomes that though spoken about, in practice I experienced as surprising. I had always 'known' that the nature of this work was such that the content would be reflected in the process, but as is so often the case, the experience brought fresh insights and a different level of insight. This was the cycle in which I gained the best view of our survival strategies, and in conversations with women who were similarly committed to finding those strategies, I was able to raise them to the surface and explore them.

It was a cycle that produced a wealth of conceptual knowledge. However, over the years it was to our experience of working together that I returned most often in my reflections. This was the aspect of the work that, in my view, had produced the most important insights, and that had been so influential in helping us understand ourselves, and the nature of the challenge in which we were engaged. This was the cycle that was least impacted upon by external forces e.g. organisations. It was a space in which we met each other – not 'in role' but initially as Black women, and through which we began to understand that the term 'Black women' was in itself a mask. In this process we began to understand that to make contact with each other, we must go beyond that, and discover the uniqueness (and loneliness) of our individuality. We started our engagement with explicit statements of wanting to be ourselves – with honesty and integrity - and in the process of our collaboration we discovered that some of the

strategies by which we ensured our survival made the attainment of such relationships unlikely! *This* is the story that I want to tell.

I struggled to find a form for communicating the insights gained and eventually decided to recount the 'story' of our engagement or " *How we worked*", and in telling this story to pay attention to:

1. The personal experience of undertaking this inquiry;
2. The attention given to preparing for the endeavour;
3. The challenge of participation for oppressed people;
4. Learning about Collaborative Inquiry.

Therefore at intervals I will interrupt the story, and reflect on the experience. My reflections do not indicate insights and knowledge held at the time of this work. They were formed from our discussions in the group; later conversations about these issues with individual group members; and from my own reflections as over the years I have returned to this work.

- **The experience of undertaking this work**

Towards the end of 1991, having gathered, and made sense of quite a lot of data about the experiences of Black women managers and professionals in organisations, I was now ready to move into the second phase of the work.

I decided that six would be the ideal group size, and between October and December 1991 I started talking with individual women with whom I wanted to work. The first five women approached expressed delight at the prospect. Our first meeting took place in February 1992 , and we met on six subsequent occasions. The group was never formally terminated and I was left with a contract to continue the work, - "at any time, and in any way that would be helpful to the project."

The group's process was interrupted as a result of my pregnancy and the imminent arrival of my baby. We had hoped to fit in a two-day residential in the Christmas / New Year period, just prior to the arrival of the new baby, but in practice it proved impossible to find dates that we could all make. Therefore it was agreed that I would re-establish the group when it seemed possible for me to incorporate this into my life again.

At the time I thought that I would be able to do this within a few months of PL's birth. In practice this proved difficult. This was my second pregnancy during the course of this research project. I had learned quite a lot about the challenges encountered in fitting research back into my life after a baby. This time around, I thought about and created a strategy for achieving this. However part of my personal learning from this research has been about accepting, and coming to terms, with the fact that we cannot totally control our lives, and that any long-term planning needs to be done in the context that the unexpected and unforeseen may drastically alter that plan. In this case the unexpected was the serious illness of my mother-in -law, and my husband's sudden departure to see her - leaving me with a toddler and a new baby! So despite my strategic plans and great commitment to the recommencing of the group, it did not happen until later in the year.

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In September 1993 I wrote to all members of the group asking if they would like to re- convene the group. All - except one member - said 'yes'. An eighth meeting of the group took place on 29 October 1993. There was still energy and enthusiasm for this work among most group members, and I have received requests for the regular meetings to be re-instated. However with all the other demands and pressures on me and on my time, it proved impossible for me to fit these meetings back into my life - so no further meetings took place. Therefore the group was not formally concluded.

Reflections

This cycle held, for me, great personal learning that moved beyond the content of the Inquiry or even the process of generating the data. It focussed my attention on the continuous and extreme challenges encountered, as we (Black women) attempt to find and use our potential. This cycle is also a story of me struggling to hold research and family priorities in balance. Throughout it can be seen glimpses of the 'strong Black woman' determined to both survive and thrive **despite** adverse circumstances – a survival strategy that recurred repeatedly and that had to be raised to the surface and carefully examined identifying ways in which it undermined my well-being (Chapter 9). In retrospect, considering that P.L. was born, a few days late, on the 12th Of January 1993, I am amazed that we even attempted to plan a residential in the Christmas/ New Year period! It also reveals some of the many ways in which I learnt the limitations of my ability to unilaterally control my life and discover the 'magic' of non-resistance and submission.

- **Considerations in constituting the inquiry group**

An important concern in planning for this initiative was, how might I create an effectively functioning inquiry group. I decided that most critical to effectiveness was a) establishment of criteria for selecting the right people and b) clear identification of objectives related to successful group process. I considered that there were many Black women managers and professionals with the type of experience I wanted to tap. However, it seemed essential that collaborators were able and willing to work in line with the criteria identified for a successful group process, (see below), this became the basis on which I invited women to join the group.

Reviewing my extensive network of Black women I was quickly able to identify potential women for the group, and over a period of 6/8 weeks had long face-to-face or telephone conversations outlining my proposal, and requesting their involvement in the research. The first five I approached accepted. This was in many ways not surprising, as during the period of doing this work I have found that whenever I talked to other Black women about the project they were extremely interested. Nevertheless I was surprised by the fact that they wanted to give their time to it. On reflection, I realise that the surprise springs from one of my old survival mechanisms. I learnt from a very early age that it was best not to expect help from anyone and to fear being in need of help and being dependent!

- **Criteria for success**

I felt that I needed:

- *A group that would form and perform quickly* – I looked for women who were experienced and effective group facilitators.
- *Peers* - I wanted women:-

- with an in-depth knowledge of the process of institutional discrimination; an understanding of the concept of internalised oppression and experienced in developing Black women.
- actively pursuing their own journeys of personal development.
- with whom I could experience myself as an equal rather than as a teacher, facilitator of learning, mentor or role model.
- who could 'stand tall' beside me neither threatening nor being threatened.
- who were endeavouring to use power constructively – I had experienced many groups in which power was not amicably shared, but competed for in destructive ways, and where the ethos was one of abuse and oppression. I wanted to try to avoid this. It was important to me that there was congruence between the content and process of the work. I was aware of the potential of CI groups to become collusive. This seemed particularly likely for a group of women who spent a large part of their lives in isolating contexts. I felt that a quality outcome was dependent on our ability to create an ethos of critical reflexivity. I thought that our internalisation of oppressive behaviour might undermine this possibility.
- able to give one afternoon every 4 to 6 weeks for a period of about a year.
- able to identify what they wanted or could get from participating in such a group – the attainment of shared ownership was important to me. Therefore I was explicit about the hopes and expectations I brought to the group and invited others to share theirs so that we could consider the compatibility of our objectives. This formed part of our discussions prior to the first meeting and in the first few meetings of the group.
- *A 'safe' environment* – I wanted to ensure the psychological safety of the group. I was aware that this work was likely to stimulate old pain and re-open unhealed wounds, so I decided to recruit women with counselling and group skills. I was concerned that participants should enter the inquiry with awareness that it may disturb their worlds. In choosing women who were already engaged in their own development I was making the assumption that they were prepared for this. However it seemed important to explicitly state this. For me safety was also about the creation of a space in which there was permission to make mistakes and to get things wrong. I was very conscious that I was engaging in an endeavour in which I had little prior experience. I had a certain amount of conceptual knowledge of the method but I too was a learner. I needed a group in which there was acceptance that we were **all** co-learners, co-researchers and co-subjects.
- *Willingness to work within the Co-operative Inquiry approach* – reflecting on my own struggles in letting go of my internalisation of the values of traditional research it seemed critically important that prospective participants should be aware that this research was based on a different research paradigm. Therefore in my initial conversation with each woman I described the Co-operative Inquiry method, and a paper about the methodology and my research goals was sent to each woman prior to our first meeting. I did not anticipate that they would have experience of working in this way but it was important that they should be willing to entertain the redefinition of valid and effective research.

Reflections

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I am struck by the amount of planning that was put into this cycle of the inquiry. My journals indicate that I carried a high level of anxiety about this cycle of the work. I was extremely conscious of the degree of disturbance that such work might create, and I feared that someone may enter this work unaware that it may demand of them an order of change for which they may not be prepared. I had myself experienced feelings of vulnerability and de-skilling as I had worked with some of these issues and therefore I probably felt an inappropriate level of responsibility for the people I would invite into this work.

Reflecting on the degree to which I planned this initiative I perceive survival strategies of unilateral control and perfectionism at play and wonder if I was experiencing the ambivalence of wanting to know and fearing knowing that Maslow (1968) talks about.

- **How we worked**

Thoughtful selection of the group members, and open discussion about my content and process objective was, I believe, an important step toward the attainment of a successful outcome. However, the challenges of achieving an effective working group could not be avoided and had to be faced time and time again as we tried to work together. The work done prior to our first meeting placed these issues on the group's agenda, and made concerns of group process of equal priority to the content being generated. We were alert to the fact that the issues that were the subject of our discussion were likely to be reflected in our ways of relating to, and working with, each other. We saw this as a challenge to which we had to pay close attention.

How we worked was an outcome of the specific methods used *and* the dynamics that are produced when Black women interact together. I was particularly conscious of this in the AL groups and in this cycle of our group process i.e. how we did what we did was not only influenced by the methods used. It is in itself data - about our ways of responding to situations, about how the experience of surviving is constructed, about the mechanisms we use to keep ourselves from going under and providing insights to possibilities for thriving.

In communicating how we worked I will use Tuckman's (1965) popular model of stages of group development - as *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, and *performing*.

- **Forming**

At the start of the meeting, there was a sense of quiet expectation, and anticipation of a good, and worthwhile outcome. We were all very busy women, balancing a number of different roles, so it was a great sacrifice to give up a Saturday afternoon, but it was commented that our commitment to this work was such that we had all come. Aisha had not had a prior commitment at the time of agreeing dates, but had wanted us to continue without her rather than defer the start.

As the initiator of the Inquiry I took leadership responsibility during the first meeting and provided a structure for our initial meeting. In structuring the meeting I gave attention to:

- *Building a robust yet flexible group by establishing good working relationships and creating a climate conducive to exploration, challenge, learning re-defining and re-framing.* It seemed that these were important if we were to a) challenge some of the very mechanisms that had enabled us to 'perform' well over the years and to succeed; and b) cope with the anxieties and fears that might be played out in the group as we worked with our masks

It was agreed that in the first 2 or 3 meetings I would take the facilitator's role and that the issue of sharing facilitation would be addressed later in the life of the group. The main aims of our first meeting were:

1. Introductions - What do we want this group of people to know about us? How do we ensure that Aisha (our absent member) is able to join easily?

2. 'Making connections Activity' - to help us get to know each other better.

3. Exploration of the Collaborative Inquiry method - We planned to discuss the paper I had circulated prior to our meeting as a starting point.

4. Review the session - both in terms of what we had got from it, and also in terms of how we had worked together. I suggested that we might consider adopting the practice of reviewing at the end of each meeting as a means of making sense of the information we generated.

- *Introductions*

Our introductions centred on our families, life goals and purposes, and the reasons that brought us to this group. We connected as Black women and mothers, we did not talk about what jobs we did or about our professional status. It seemed that rapport and empathy was very quickly established, and rather surprisingly, we moved into exploring the issues and to a degree of disclosure that was unusual for such a new group. Time went unnoticed.

- *The Introductory Activity –'Making Connections'*

I explained the activity and the rationale for it and checked their willingness to participate. I declared my preparedness to abandon that activity if there were objections to it, and to use any other mechanism that would better achieve the objectives. The group agreed to continue with the proposed activity.

The activity was the creation of a simple visual depiction of our group – at the point of starting - prior to us bonding. I thought that we could construct a sociometric map (Porter and Roberts 1977) of the existing links and relationships among the group. I was concerned that we could be sabotaged by cliques or hidden alliances or by others' fantasies about relationships that maybe did not exist. I had relationships of differing nature with all of the women, and wanted to clarify the nature of those prior relationships with regard to this endeavour. I also hoped that in physically depicting

the links between us we would be constantly reminded of the absent member, and of the need to 'reserve her space'.

Our names were put on a large piece of paper (including Aisha's), and we spoke about and made public the prior relationships and connections that existed among us depicting those links on the paper. We planned to start the activity and to continue it, at our next meeting, when the group was complete.

Despite the fact that the need to have connections declared had also been identified by a group member, other than myself, I had a lot of difficulties in getting the activity understood. On so many occasions we had to interrupt the process, to explore how it worked, so I concluded that I had not adequately briefed the group. I was intrigued that despite my experience at successfully instructing groups to do much more complex learning exercises, the briefing of such a simple activity had proven so difficult. We progressed in a rather jerky way - sometimes with high energy and engagement and then we would become stuck trying to work out the mechanics of the exercise. We did not get very far with it at that meeting and agreed to continue next time.

- *Exploration of the Collaborative Inquiry method*

Our discussion about the method did not work in the way that I had hoped. Most people had not yet read the paper, so I found myself doing much more talking than I had anticipated or wanted to do, and there were not many questions.

- *Review of the session*

We ended with a review of the meeting. In this session we reflected on a) our hopes and expectations from the project; b) how we had managed ourselves c) the experience of working together.

a) *Hopes and expectations*

The sharing of what we wanted from the research group was very brief, as we were rapidly running out of time. Wants expressed were:

- Reassurance, nurturing, development, learning

- Intellectual stimulation

- To be able to cry - to express distress.

b) *How we managed ourselves*

It was agreed that in the future we would:

- continue to note-take but also tape our meetings,
- manage our time differently, in order to allow more space for reflecting and sense-making in the group

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- A number of people commented on how much they had gained from the afternoon, and one person talked about being very aware of the "power of the group".

c) *The experience of working together*

From reflections on the process of this first meeting (both during the meeting and later) the following issues emerged:

- *Management of distress*

As a part of her review Claire said that she wanted to cry, but was conscious that we were out of time and that she would soon be on her way home, so she was mentally pulling herself together to go home. This comment reminded me of the fact that I had always been aware of the power of such a group to disturb coping mechanisms and to release distress. I was concerned that this had been expressed at the point when there was no space to deal with it. Offers to stay behind and talk were made but the woman concerned was herself in a hurry to get away. I was unable to personally respond to this woman's need as I had a commitment to get one of the women back to the station, as the meeting had finished later than planned, and she was in a hurry. I was conscious that as a new group we had not yet established the level of trust that might have made it likely for Claire to accept the support of another member in dealing with distress. Also as the initiator of this process, I felt a moral, though possibly unrealistic, obligation to ensure that group members did not leave meetings feeling distressed. So I left with a sense of not having been able to discharge a responsibility and with a determination to ensure that next time I would be more available.

- *Empathy and rapport*

There seemed to be a disjunction between the objective, and observable achievements, and the subjective, psychological and emotional impact of the first meeting. In spite of the stickiness of the introductory activity, and the fact that we had not covered our agenda, in the week following our meeting, all members of the group rang to say what a rewarding encounter it had been. The main source of wonder was at how quickly we had moved to levels of intimacy and disclosure that in our experience it normally took groups many meetings to reach. Avoidance of intimacy and disclosure was one of the research themes identified from the first phase of the study, so this may explain the source of wonder.

This meeting reminded me of the first meeting between Roseanne about 18 months previously. At that time too the discovery of similar patterns of experiences, and shared meanings; and of finding a level of understanding, and empathy that we had so rarely encountered was wonderful. Reflecting on the group's process I wrote in my journal:

Feb1992

I am aware of the high level of disclosure that has taken place very early on in the life of the group. This seems very unusual - what has caused this to happen? To what extent did the process influence this? Or is it just to do with

the people involved? Are we just people who disclose a lot about our selves very quickly? Somehow I don't think that this is likely - it is certainly not true of me. It seems incredible - a group of strangers - in some instances an hour previous to the disclosure only the names of certain members of the group were known? Is this a feature specific to bringing together black women professionals - who are usually so isolated and longing to find others like us? What is the safety net?

Patricia Hill Collins says:

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- **Storming**

This next stage of the group's development took me by surprise, despite my years of experience in working with groups, I had somehow thought that in this group we had missed the storming stage. We seemed to have moved so quickly into a disclosure and sense-making that it seemed that we had moved very quickly to the 'performing' stage.

In retrospect I realise that the second meeting was the one at which a process of destabilisation took place. In this meeting individuals experienced themselves as different, isolated and in conflict with others. Our discovery of difference emerged from our discovery that five of the six of us had been powerfully affected by the

mental breakdown of Clementine, a Black woman manager who had been a close friend and colleague for a number of years. Writing about the second meeting in my journal I said:

Feb 1992

" I found the meeting very exhilarating, a bit like standing on a mountain top with the wind blowing against your face. There was a sense of needing to stand firm against the wind in order not to be blown away, an awareness of danger and safety – both at the same time, and of the tingling of your face and of a feeling of being ALIVE!!"

This meeting was an extremely important one in the life of the group. It was one of the few meetings at which all members were present and though we did not know it at the time the events of this meeting were to influence the rest of our work together. For these reasons I am taking space to give a fairly full account of that meeting.

- *What happened*

The meeting started with the welcoming of Aisha. I had had a conversation with her after our first meeting and notes of the meeting had been circulated to everyone, so she arrived with some knowledge of what had happened previously.

- *'Making Connections' Activity - continued*

I re-introduced the '*Making connections'* activity and Roselyn continued it by introducing Clementine as a connection between herself, Claire and myself. For a period of about two years the three of us had set up and run a network for Black trainers. In that period we had worked closely and intensely and had got to know each other well, and she was one of the women with whom I had had many conversations about the issue of Black women surviving and thriving in general and about this project in particular. Roselyn disclosed that she had experienced Clementine as being present in the group during the first meeting, she said that she hoped that in expressing her feelings she would be able to come to terms with her absence from the group.

This set up great resonance in the group. The sounds of agreement on the tape indicate that Claire, and I too, had been experiencing her presence. However, to my surprise two other members, Roselyn and Aisha, also felt that their lives had been strongly impacted upon by the occurrence of Clementine's breakdown. We had not known of these connections. Roseanne interrupted the 'rules' of the activity by 'taking the pen' from Roselyn (though she was not a named connection), and disclosing the disconnection, separateness and vulnerability she had been experiencing in relation to the group that day. However, she said that with the naming of Clementine, as an absent member, she said that she had immediately become reconnected. She said that on that day she was feeling particularly identified with her. Although objectively she knew that there were many connections to other people in the room the strongest pull on that day and in that period of her life was to Clementine, someone outside of the room. She said:

"*Today I am very aware of the masks that we wear, of how fragile we are and of our vulnerability and of the need to take care of ourselves so that we do not reach that point of burn out. Today I am aware that we can all get there"*

Later Aisha admitted that she too had arrived feeling anxious and unconnected, but that she too had been immediately drawn in through the naming of this connection. She said:

" *She symbolises a lot of Black women - our sisters. It is as if through knowing her something about me became more real. In seeing how easy it was to go from being highly competent and together to just snapping reminds me of our fragility and of the fact that it was actually not a sudden process – but it appeared to be so due to the masking."*

Aisha and Claire wanted her to be represented on the chart. They thought that the work might be done for her.

" *If it helps another Black woman from getting to that stage it would be worth it."*

We talked in this way for quite a few minutes, unaware that in our connectedness, Fleur, the sixth member of the group, had been completely silent throughout. She entered the discussion by stating that she was feeling confused. She said that she had been thinking:

"Do I feel vulnerable? When was the last time I felt vulnerable? Do I understand what people mean when they say that they are vulnerable?"

She followed these questions by telling us about theories of family therapy that she had been reading, and by telling us that she had chosen a 'life story' which was not about vulnerability and she was choosing not to "buy in" to the group. She said that she recognised that in doing that she was choosing to "break rapport" but "it is part of my survival – not in the sense that I feel that I am threatened but it is about being more generative. It is about living not just simply existing."

This intervention changed both the group's agenda and the level at which it had been working. After a pause questions about meanings were put to Fleur. From here on we talked about the *concept* rather than the *experience* of vulnerability. We talked about vulnerability as being in paradoxical relationship to power, and that the experience of one did not negate the presence of another. We agreed on our ability to choose how we perceived, gave meaning to and talked about something. Fleur stated that she could not in any way identify with our discussion. She said:

" I can't even experience it because to name it and to acknowledge it means that it exists... I know what breakdown means in a conventional sense, according to the dictionary, but it hasn't meaning for me as experience any longer. The word has no meaning so in order to be part of the group I need to get back to that meaning and that would be going back some years to a time when it did have meaning."

I expressed my pleasure that Fleur's had taken the risk of being 'different' as I perceived cosy collusiveness to be a potential weakness of Co-operative Inquiry, especially for a group of oppressed people. At the same time I acknowledged being confused by her statement that she did not know the experience of vulnerability. This

triggered a discussion of the meanings we gave to this term and we took turns exploring the meanings it held for us. We used stories and incidents from our experience to illustrate the meanings it had in our lives. Four of us had shared our meanings when Fleur interrupted the process, with a statement that "like a fly on the wall" she had been observing our process and wondering how we constructed meaning. She then introduced an activity. She said that she would give us a word and asked us to respond to it, noticing what thoughts and feelings emerged from that word. There was a range of responses to the activity. Most people complied with the new process, but Roseanne chose to opt out of the activity.

At the end of the activity we moved into a review of the process. Four people voiced concern about our mode of working. Claire wondered about our ability to speak our truth and admitted that she had not said much of what she wanted to say. Fleur wondered whether the group would be able to "take her" and expressed the concern that she was on a different 'wavelength' to the rest of the group. Roseanne and Roselyn stated that they were feeling oppressed by words and begged for other ways of expressing. Aisha talked about the experience of being different and of perceiving the emergence of two 'camps' each defending their positions. She said:

" It felt like being challenged in not a good way, that then helped me explore and think a bit more. There is something about when that happens to me with Black women that makes me struggle to work through it. Part of the struggle is wanting that connectedness and wanting to be liked and to like. Maybe part of it is establishing how I want to be, my boundaries, and will I really fit in here."

This was an anxiety raising meeting for everyone, although that was not openly acknowledged.

Reflections

Our second group meeting has always fascinated me. It was a meeting where most of the meaningful interactions were conducted below the surface and process was more significant than content. It was an extremely difficult meeting. After the meeting most members acknowledged feeling controlled and threatened yet on the surface there was little indication of strong emotions. No voices were raised, a high level of facilitation skills was demonstrated as we enquired into others' meanings and seemed to listen rationally to each other's perspectives. In retrospect I see this as a good example of us utilising the facility to 'mask', which in Chapter 8 I identify as one of our survival strategies. At the meeting I was unaware of much of what took place between us and even of my feelings. In my review of the session I talked rationally about my performance as facilitator and group member. It was many hours later that I realised that the meeting had disturbed me.

- *Discovering fear*

I woke at 2.am the following morning feeling very tired yet unable to sleep and very full. I decided to write. From this process insights arose and I began to understand what had taken place at the meeting. I wrote about my surprise during the meeting that my main response to the trigger word given by Fleur was bodily, and that I had not been able to recall any thoughts -just a tingling and vibration in my body. This

was unusual, as I tend to be more aware of my thoughts than of my feelings in my body. Suddenly I recognised those bodily sensations as feelings of fear. I realised that I had feared being manipulated. I wrote:

"I am aware that we are very powerful and skilled women and of the potential for that power to be abused. Most of the time this feels exciting, but on this occasion it was scary. Why did I feel this on this occasion? I find this puzzling.

It seems that it may be connected with the way in which Fleur so powerfully interrupted the story that was being shared by the five of us. In stating that she did not know what it meant to be vulnerable she seemed very distant from me and in my awareness of my own vulnerability I felt very open to being hurt by her. According to the story of my life to be vulnerable is to be human. What does it mean if she never experiences herself as open to being hurt? Could she be wounded? Does she feel pain? Was she saying that she had redefined what it meant to be hurt or to feel pain? Or was she invincible?

During the whole meeting I found myself struggling to get some sense of her. I could not. I could hear her but I could not feel her. This too is scary… her inscrutability to me made me experience her as powerful and me as vulnerable."

- *Control and resistance*

As I wrote I began to identify that there had been a lot of covert challenge in the group. The 'Making connections' activity though explicitly negotiated with the group had been resisted in a variety of different ways, until eventually I abandoned it. This resistance was laughingly acknowledged in the review. They commented on my determination to keep the activity going despite the various attempts to subvert it.

I realised that I had been resistant to Fleur's activity and to her un-negotiated interrupting of the group process though I had not challenged her. I observed that everyone except Roseanne had complied, but in telephone calls from other group members in the following week I discovered that all other group members had resented her interventions.

Roselyn talking about this meeting two months later said:

I experienced the second meeting as quite controlling and I was quite angry. I observed myself struggling to find ways of resisting being controlled. I found myself wondering why I had gone along with things that I did not want to do, when I am normally quite capable of just refusing to take part in things I do not want to engage in. It seems that there was an unspoken code in the room saying that we were Black women and that I should be supportive I was not operating in the code of challenge and I did not seem to have the tools to challenge in this situation."

- *Survival of the group*

In the week following our meeting most members of the group telephoned me and spoke at length about their concerns about what had taken place and about their

indecision about whether to continue with the group. At a later meeting many members said that they had thought that it would have folded after the second meeting.

- *Emerging issues*

For the next four meetings we returned to issues that arose from this meeting's content and process and worked with them in different ways. In reflecting on the process we identified that in this meeting we had encountered the following issues:

- Wanting closeness and intimacy - yet fearing that we may not be liked, accepted and understood;
- Wanting to maintain the sense of 'alike-ness' experienced in the first meeting and instead finding our differences. With Aisha's presence we were no longer a group of mothers and as Black women we were discovering that we had very different visions of the world.
- Wanting structure, direction and purpose yet fearing loss of our own control, domination and suppression;
- What does it mean to experience competition and challenge among Black women;
- Wanting to be authentic yet fearing attack and rejection. We questioned whether we had been honest with each other. I too asked that of myself. Eventually we decided that we had offered to each other the information that we were aware of, but in situations where we are 'masked' and disconnected from our feelings this may only be a very partial truth!
- Tension between those who wanted intellectual stimulation and those wanting experiential knowledge. These poles were most represented by Fleur and Roseanne. At the second meeting Fleur indicated that she was considering leaving but it was actually Roseanne who withdrew. She never expressed a clear decision to leave, but she just did not attend any other meetings.
- **Norming**

Despite the fact that I am able to associate certain meetings with these stages it is also true to say that there was tremendous overlapping of these stages. The group commenced performing from the very first meeting and processes of 'norming' took place in many meetings. However it was in the 3rd, 4th and 5th meetings that most attention was given to identifying how "Collaborative Inquiry" worked in practice; negotiating and agreeing roles and ways of working. In these meetings my role subtly shifted. The group started to actively take responsibility for identifying what was needed and for generating 'solutions'. I was no longer the 'thinker' making proposals that were approved and then challenged. In these weeks attention was given to the following:

- *Need for psychological safety and relationships that support challenge*

As a group of experienced facilitators and trainers we started this inquiry aware of the need for psychological safety. Nevertheless it was some weeks before we understood what we meant by this. We knew that the group did not feel safe, but we did not know how to make it so. It was in the 5th meeting that a degree of insight to this issue arose. After a long exploration of the experience of resistance and challenge in the group

Roselyn made an intervention that acted as a summary for our exploration, produced an Aha! moment and moved us to another level of relating. She said:

"*The issues of trusting and fearing manipulation has resonated with me. I felt that I had not contracted to put myself in Fleur's hands in that way. I realise now that that I had felt it, but not been able to put it into words. The resistance to the 'Making connections' exercise, indicates that there was clearly resistance about what we were willing to contract ourselves into doing. However for all the reasons discussed earlier around maintaining coziness, this was not challenged. Now it seems clear to me that the issue was also about mistrust and that it would have been the same whoever had done that. It is becoming clear that if we are to work in the way in which Carlis suggested - that is not just as a theoretical piece of work, but rather we experience the process and try to make sense of it, we will be entering into unknown and uncharted territories. Depending on the depths to which we go we may find ourselves in areas that we cannot make sense of for ourselves - that scares me. I know that there are skills in that group but nevertheless I am anxious about how it will be handled and will I be looked after in the process. At the moment I have been taking care of myself and resisting when things become uncertain or I am not sure if I am safe".*

This was the stage in the life of the group at which we were able to 'name' our anxieties. We were able to acknowledge that we did not hand over control to anyone easily. We expressed the realisation that we had learnt to protect ourselves by taking control of our environment. Fleur's interventions in the second meetings and the experience of powerlessness had deeply disturbed a number of us.

Having at last been able to give voice to our anxieties and fears about being in the group we went on to own that although we had talked about honesty and authenticity but we had not been honest. For a while we rationalised this as we had done on a number of occasions previously. We said that our lack of honesty and openness with each other was not surprising as many of us still knew very little about each other. It was claimed that in the second meeting we had "plunged straight into what turned out to be a very challenging exploration of a difficult subject" and overlooked proper introductions. We decided that we needed to find out - *Who we are and what do we want?*

My notes indicate that this information had actually been shared in the first meeting, but our needs had not been satisfied, and it felt as if we had skipped this process. However this time our avoidance was interrupted by the question "How will we know that we have the quality of relationships needed to be able to take risks and to challenge?" A discussion followed, but it was Aisha's decision to risk declaring her frustrated wish to get close to a number of us, that triggered a shift in our ways of working with, and relating to, each other. She had preceded her intervention by " I am wondering whether to take this risk". We invited her to take the risk, and she said that she perceived herself to be different to many of us and that she often felt intimidated by different group members. She then spoke directly to each person giving feedback about the struggle she experienced in trying to establish a close relationship. This marked a shift in our relationships, produced insights about our yearning for, and fear of intimacy, and led to us being able to openly review with Fleur our feeling about the events of the second meeting.

- *What type of group is this?*

This question recurred many times, and in different ways, in the early stages of the group.

We addressed it in a number of sessions - each time understanding better what was the question we were trying to formulate. At the end of our second meeting we recognised that there was a struggle at play. Some members wanted a place for the generation of intellectual material/content and others who were resistant to working at the production of theories and wanted to use the process as an opportunity for development. In our third meeting we decided that it was to be a group concerned with both things and that we wanted to try to hold within the group the difference that was being represented. We thought it essential that we should learn about working with difference, but our experience in the second meeting had illustrated to us just how difficult and emotionally challenging such work could be. In our 5th session it became apparent that the difference in the group was related to the way in which each individual had chosen to handle the split between the personal and professional. We had for various reasons developed self-identities around one or the other points of the dialectic and had highly developed skills at one end or the other. It seemed to us that it may not be possible for any of us to comfortably, and skilfully, work at both intellectual and emotional levels. Roselyn very lucidly described our challenge. She said:

"I believe in that philosophically, [the need to maintain both ends of the dialectic in the group] but things have happened to us, over the years of our lives, which have meant that we have either developed one aspect of ourselves or the other. I am in a process of change. I do not know myself where I am, and I am trying to discover at the moment who I am. So you are quite right about the tension between the therapeutic and the intellectual.

At times when it becomes therapeutic I may withdraw. I may become scared - thinking that I do not want to engage in it. On the other hand I may engage at a head level to make it OK. … I go in and out of this, and I am not sure if I can hold the two - hold the tension all the time. My sense is that there are a few of us in the group who would find that difficult. We are either at the point of being quite therapeutic or at the other point of being quite heady. This is our struggle. It feels that that was part of what was happening during the second meeting. It was so explosive because of this very struggle.

This is why I find it exciting […] We have to give the process a chance - to allow time. Sometimes we may get the balance and at others we won't. We won't ***all*** *be at the same point at the same time. It is a bit scary not knowing. When we are in the struggle of trying to hold the tension between the personal and the professional, and between the therapeutic and the academic, and the theoretical and the practical, some of us might get scared. Others may hang on in there, while others may resist those trying to hold it, because of whatever it provokes in us - pain or whatever.*

My concern is how well developed are we as individuals to handle this struggle? […] I am personally very interested in the quest of trying to find the balance. I have started therapy training, with this goal in mind. I want to integrate this learning into my work. I would like to experience trying to achieve this integration in this group. It would be helpful if when I go to one end or the other, others help me by pulling me back. I want to be challenged when I am seen to be at one of the extremes".

Challenges of working with the co-operative inquiry approach

The group was excited by the political principles of this approach, but found it challenging.

- *An emerging method*

Claire, from a scientific background who was then engaged in total quality management, often joked about her struggle to get us to set clear and achievable aims, determine success criteria and set targets for our attainment. In our third meeting, she identified that our way of working was not chaotic " We are creating new forms as we go along, so it is only in retrospect we are able to say how we worked to uncover whatever we find." By the sixth meeting having experienced our ability to return to process and content issues left unfinished at earlier meetings she said that she was reassured to see that we are systematically working at issues even though our method was not always evident.

- *Research not a means to an end*

We said " the benefits and outcomes are on-going and are being experienced by different individuals at different times." "The research raises personal issues for us - it is allowing us to work on ourselves as well as produce data."

- *Using a method that leaves threads hanging*

Our notes of the 4th meeting reflected on this issue. It says:

" We are challenged by the use of a method that involves leaving threads hanging- uncovering many issues - but only being able to deal with one or two at any meeting. This poses problems for individuals and for the group. Leaving threads untied and unfinished has not been easy for some people. We felt that we needed to keep checking with each other how we are coping. And it could be frustrating for the group to have to return to issues that no longer feel live

- *facilitators for intellectual and experiential processes*

This links with our awareness that some group members were more comfortable and more skilled in working intellectually while others were better in dealing with emotions. By the 4th meeting we were very aware that there was a tremendous overlap between our own personal development issues and the topic we were researching, and we had encountered the challenges this posed us. We identified the need to make processes visible and to work with the "here and now" as well as with making-sense of past experience. We decided that people comfortable and skilled in working with emotions might best facilitate the experiential processes, with its pain and distress, while the ‘intellectuals’ might be the best facilitators of our conceptual analysis. We did not know how to arrange for this in advance but trusted that if we were working well the appropriate person would move into the role. In practice this happened and leadership and facilitation shifted around the group.

This experience and exploration raised questions for us about the challenges that inquiry into these issues pose to the individual.

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

- **Recording and communication of data**
- Key themes and questions were 'parked' on a flipchart at each meeting as a reminder that we wanted to return to them again.
- Individuals took their own personal notes.
- A period of reflection on the questions and insights emerging from each meeting and on our process of working, took place towards the end of each meeting
- Meetings were taped and I had the task of reviewing the tapes and writing notes for the group. This was one task that the group refused to share in! Sometimes tapes were fully transcribed, at other times, mind maps or abridged notes were produced from the tapes. Often I included as an addendum, personal reflections produced from my reviewing of the tapes, feed back from the group indicated that these comments were valued and often became starting points for another level of dialogue about the issues. These were circulated to each member prior to the next meeting. Each meeting started with a review of issues emerging from the previous one, and out of that process our agenda for the current meeting was set.

  In being the only one to listen to the tapes and in writing the notes I was always conscious of the possibilities of overlaying my own interpretation and skewing the process. My decision to keep my reflective comments separate from the record of the meeting was an attempt to address this issue. However, about just prior to the sixth meeting I realised that I needed to help with transcribing the notes and raised the issue with the group, with a suggestion that I might pay someone to transcribe the tape. In the process of this discussion I raised my concerns about the possibilities of unconsciously skewing the material. Colleagues mentioned that to date there had not been any instances when they had felt that I had misinterpreted or misrepresented their comments, and that they had assumed that it was each person's responsibility to ensure that their meanings were accurately communicated and recorded. It seemed important to have this assumption explicitly stated.

- **Performing**

By our 6th meeting we were paying less attention to organising ourselves and most of our time together was focussed on the issues in hand. Notwithstanding, this proved to be a high performing group and even by the end of the first meeting we had generated insights into quite a number of our coping strategies. Themes to which we gave most attention were:

- **Domination by fear** – we recognised that much of our behaviour was influenced by our fearfulness, and was designed to protect us.
- **We wear the mask** – there was a growing awareness of the extent of our masking and of the challenges that posed to participation and to establishing effective relationships, and attaining intimacy.
- **Our fear of being controlled** – through our experiences with each other we realised that we were extremely sensitive to the possibility of being controlled and dominated and that we used a range of strategies to try to protect ourselves from that experience.

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- **Our yearning for intimacy** – in working with each other we began to realise how much we longed to be seen by others and to be accepted for who we are. However, our internalisation of inferiority and our life experience of rejection have also created a fear of closeness, and a tendency to mask. Our masks make the achievement of intimacy unlikely.
- **Fear of vulnerability, weakness and helplessness –** in this group this was a particularly strong issue that appeared in many forms. In working with it we realised that not only were we afraid of finding this in ourselves, and used different masks to hide this even from ourselves, but were also afraid of seeing it in others.
- **Fear of being strong and of standing out –** this was a shared theme that threw up many contradictions and to which we planned to return, but did not have the opportunity to do so. Many of us recognised that we had been taught in our families to be strong and independent and recognised the capable, competent Black woman as a mask in which many of us invest, yet we tended to inflate others and to deny and hold back on our own abilities. We perceived that this happened most when we were with Black people. Are we afraid of being attacked? Many of us had had experiences of being pulled down and undermined by other Black people? Is it linked to our values of equality? Do we interpret standing out as being better than?
- **Learning to hold back, to withhold our experiences and to be silent –** using the experience of one of the participants and her teenage daughter, we explored the way in which these lessons are taught to young girls, and then reflected on the processes by which we too had learned these lessons. In doing this, we saw the double-binds with which parents struggle. We observed the pressure to teach our young ones to fit the stereotypes in order to protect them from the pain and punishment that we know ensues if they are unable to fit in. At the same time we were conscious that so much creative energy and liveliness is dammed and shut down in this process (Taylor et al 1995).
- **The overlay of gender, racial, cultural, religion, class stereotypes** – as women emerging from and interacting across many cultures we recognised that we carried within us a wide range of injunctions that controlled our behaviours. It seemed that often we got caught between them all. This was another issue to which we would have liked to return.
- **Difficulty in valuing self and paying attention to our own needs** – many of us identified a difficulty in recognising our needs and in asking for them to be met. We perceived this to be linked to our fear of weakness and to the mask of the independent strong Black woman.

Breaks

This project as a "real-life" inquiry was impacted upon by all the various factors that challenged, and disturbed my life in the past ten years. It was not like a piece of scientific research protected from the vagaries of life. The fact that it has survived

throughout this period is in itself evidence of its relevance and value to my life. It has made valuable contributions to many of the changes that have taken place in my life over this period. At the same time it has been affected by these changes. The breaks in the research, (almost as long as the period of engagement) were not part of my initial design but the plan was adapted in response to pressures that at the time of starting I could not have anticipated. Ironically, the breaks in my research were an unintentional outcome of the research process. As I became conscious to all parts of my self I was able to identify and own the emotional needs that were not being satisfied. This led to marriage and then to the birth of two children. These radical changes though desired and immensely satisfying produced disorientation and new challenges of a scale that I had not anticipated and made the maintenance of research in my life too difficult for me to manage. So around the birth of each child I took time out.

In these gaps inquiry took another form. I became totally immersed in the challenges of living. This was an opportunity to gain experiential knowledge of aspects of Black women's experiences that I had previously not known, and which have enhanced, illuminated and grounded my study. Some aspects of the research continued. I journalled, continued with therapy sessions and engaged in collaborative dialogue with other Black women. The information generated during this period had been instrumental to my learning. In the breaks learning was fast and furious, and issues talked about were encountered in glorious technicolour, and in these spaces lie another thesis, that may one day be written!

Closing Remarks

In my search for methodology and in my selection of method I have attempted to ensure that there was congruence between the values and principles that motivated me to undertake this inquiry and the research procedures and processes. I was engaged in research *as* social change rather than *about* social change (Romm 1997). In a concern to ensure the quality of the inquiry there were many cycles of engagement which provided me with repeated opportunities to test the 'soundness' of the data generated in dialogue with individuals, and groups of Black women, in ways that stimulated the heightening of their awareness of discrimination and of their own power and responsibility in the process. Another concern was the development of my own knowledge and skills as a researcher of covert and not easily observed interpersonal processes.

In the next chapters I explore selections from the data in greater depth, and identify the insights gained into the nature of the challenge in moving from surviving to thriving.