PART ONE

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL

CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

(How much simpler to let things do only
What they can do)
Being uncreative about what seems dark
And terrifying;
Preferring only what seems easy
And effortless;
Asking about the numbers of a philosophy's
Followers rather than examining
The efficacy of its ideas.
From *Mental Fight* by Ben Okri

Introduction

In this chapter I set out to look at the particular ontological and epistemological issues with which I have approached my inquiry and which emerged in the course of it. I have taken the two together so that what I hold to be true (my *ontology*) and what I understand of the nature of knowledge (my *epistemology*) can be clear from the beginning. How I understand my truth, my ontology, is important for my research but so is being clear about how I know it to be true, my epistemology. In this way I can work towards finding out more about the world I live in including my own place within it. The clearer I am about this epistemology the better I am in a position to think about how I might go about making discoveries. The way in which I go about making discoveries, my methods, is my methodology and the validity of these methods is consistent with the way I choose my methodology. These I explore in the next chapter.

Ontology and epistemology

In asserting that my own experience is a valid basis for my inquiry I have chosen to come to the CARPP rather than a positivistic research school because it values personal experience as a valid and vital part of any inquiry (Marshall 2001). In positivistic research 'objective' facts are

sought through the use of methodology which keeps (or attempts to keep) the researcher out of the frame for fear of contaminating it. Action research recognises that in so doing reality is distorted because it is not possible to exclude oneself from the field of inquiry (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001). This whole debate challenges the notion of 'truth'. With action research, the notion of 'objective truth' has to be abandoned as action researchers recognise that our subjectivity is always present. We cannot step outside to see the world in an 'objective' way.

And yet it is hard for me to abandon a search for truth. Although my ontological position is that truth is a slippery and problematic concept I find that I want to make an attempt to find it. For me the idea that something is 'true' is very powerful. It is like a homecoming, something I can rest upon. I find it tempting to understand 'truth' to be something very clear and simple, that cuts through the complexities of human life and shines a clear light on what is good and pure. I am reminded of Keats writing of a Grecian urn:

> Beauty is truth, truth beauty
> That is all ye know on earth
> And all ye need to know.
>
> *Keats*: Ode on a Grecian Urn

I like to think that this poem does say something 'true' about truth. Keats is not talking of a simplistic idea that telling the truth is just a matter of honestly recounting an 'objective' truth but speaking of the truth being at the heart of the matter. And yet concepts such as 'truth at the heart of the matter' and 'the heart of the matter' itself have been called into question by post modernists (Shotter 1993:66), who see all truths as relative and experience-reality as being contingent on context.

Whilst being drawn to the idea that, if you cut away egotistical concerns, a kernel of truth can be found, I am finding that what is true in one

circumstance or at one angle may not be so in another. Elizabeth
Whitmore (1994:97) points out that in research:

> 'We think that respondents are telling us the truth, that we are collecting
> information that is valid. We think that we know the 'true' meaning of what
> we hear and see. This is a sad illusion. The reality is that the economic,
> cultural, racial and gender differences among people are profound and
> extremely complex. To ignore this creates knowledge that is deeply flawed.'

The difficulty with validity that Whitmore refers to is true for any human
interaction as differences of the sort she refers to are always present. It
is particularly important for my study as, especially in Part 3 where I
focus on my work as a psychotherapist, I specifically explore working
across cultural difference. For this reason the kind of knowledge I am
particularly interested in is a knowledge that emerges between myself
and others. It is the kind of knowledge that 'works' for us for the time
being with the understanding that this could change and that others hold
other truths. As Shotter (1993:19) says:

> [knowledge about how *to be* a person] 'does not have to be finalized or
> formalized in a set of proven theoretical statements before it can be applied.
> It is not theoretical knowledge…………for it is knowledge-in-practice, nor is
> it merely knowledge of craft or skill ('knowing-how), for it is joint knowledge,
> knowledge-held-in-common with others. It is a third kind of knowledge one
> has from within a situation, a group, social institution, or society; it is what
> we might call a 'knowledge-from''.

The concept 'knowledge-from' provides a way of resolving the
epistemological dilemma, as to whether truth is a fundamental or a
relative construct. I have found this perspective useful both in this study
and in my work as a psychotherapist that has become more and more
intersubjective and dialogic in nature over the last ten years or so (see
chapter 6). As the epistemological stance of understanding truth to be
emergent became more embodied in practice, it led me to understand
psychotherapy as an inquiry process in which the subjectivity of both

psychotherapist and client is acknowledged. This makes it very similar to an action research inquiry process. The process of allowing a sense of what is 'true' to emerge in the spaces between us seems to uncover what feels to be a basic truth whilst not denying its relational rather than 'objective' nature. Stolorow, Atwood and Orange say:

> 'We must attend to truth-as-possible-understanding and not truth-as-correspondence-to-fact.' (2002:119)

If we are to discover the knowledge that arises in the space between people, as in the psychotherapy relationship, it is often necessary to experience and acknowledge the differences that we find within that space. Skating over differences and rushing to find commonality can make the contact much more superficial, as the values and assumptions that underlie our attitudes will be hidden. Questioning these values and assumptions becomes all important – particularly in this inquiry which explores differences in races and cultures. In fact I could almost say that the work *is* about this questioning and that my methodology should be chosen with this in mind. This requires me first of all to question and understand the *way* that I think when faced with differences. Much of this study is an extended exploration of this as the 'action' I take lays bare both what I have thought unconsciously or out of my awareness and how my thinking changes in relation to my experience. An example of this concerns my work with The Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling (see chapter 7). I have found that in running a course called Working with Difference I colluded with others to make the course a voluntary one rather than compulsory, thus accepting that the course is not vital for the training of psychotherapists.

This way of understanding 'truth' underlies my use of dialogue in my inquiry which I explore further, below. My understanding about dialogue is influenced by Bohm who also is helpful here in his understanding of how the word 'thinking' relates to the word 'thought' (Bohm 1996:52). He points out that the word 'thinking' is in the present continuous tense. It is

therefore an on-going phenomenon. 'Thought' on the other hand is a word in the past tense. He describes it as a 'trace' left by thinking and that thoughts act 'automatically'. As a result of our thinking 'automatic' thoughts occur which underpin our ways of approaching life. These are the beliefs and values that we mostly hold without question[1]. They lead to assumptions on which our actions are based. In order to be true to my ontology and epistemology I must question these assumptions as this will help to make plain my beliefs and values and question their validity. Throughout my research I try, in common with all action researchers, to be aware of the beliefs, values and assumptions that underpin it so that the research will have integrity and so that I will 'critically communicate the inquiry process instead of just presenting its results and some reflections on it' (Reason and Bradbury 2004). This directly affects my methodology as, in order to ensure that I am able to carry out this process, I record processes that I go through, realisations I come to and important events that I experience in a diary or a note to myself or to others. In this way I am able to refer to them as a contemporary record when I write up the research.

Paradoxical nature of change

Central to my ontology, my practice as a psychotherapist and to this inquiry, is a belief that we cannot make fundamental changes through an effort of will. This is based on my experience, particularly of being in therapy, where I have discovered that conscious determination to change almost always breaks down in the end. I may, for instance, dislike the way I am subservient in a particular relationship. However hard I try, nothing seems to change. On the other hand, the more I understand what this subservience is about and learn just to notice and have compassion for my behaviour, the more changes are likely to happen. These may include being less attached to not being subservient.

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[1] This is similar to of Stolorow et al's notion of 'organising principles' (Stolorow and Atwood

The nature of change became important for my inquiry because in it I challenge myself and other white people to change their perspective on their whiteness (see particularly chapter 3). However, I notice that when I 'try' to change I find more and more subtle ways of not changing and know from my work with psychotherapy clients that it is true of most of us. This phenomenon is similar to what Beisser (1970) calls the 'paradoxical theory of change' and is something that I am aware of throughout my research. My research is carried out in the light of this paradox. Beisser says 'that change occurs when one becomes what he (sic) is, not when he tries to become what he is not' (Beisser 1970:88). This implies that a greater understanding of oneself leads to becoming more one's 'true' self rather than trying to attempt to become someone else.

My more recent epistemology questions the idea of a 'true self'. It implies a modernist idea of the self as being coherent and unitary rather than a post-modernist view in which our sense of self is understood within a context (Shotter 1993:95)[2]. I think it also implies something important about the contradictory nature of change, so this way of understanding change is congruent with a post-modern epistemology. I am reminded of what Whitehead (1999) refers to as a 'living contradiction' when his espoused theory is contradicted by the way he acts in his life. I have learnt that it is impossible not to be judgmental but that I can, by compassionate encouragement of myself, *witness* this judgmentalness. So I might notice my behaviour by thinking, for instance, 'Oh look how I am feeling ashamed about………..' thus challenging myself without continuing the cycle of accusation and blame. It is also similar to the notion of 'internal supervision' (Casement 1985:49) in which a psychotherapist undefensively reflects on experience during a session (See chapter 6).

1992)
[2] Modernists tend to say that we 'have' a 'self' where a post-modernist would talk about a 'sense of self'.

In psychotherapy this attitude is sometimes described as 'one foot in and one foot out'. The two feet still belong to the same body but two places are inhabited at the same time. This is not to be confused with an emotionally cut off stance where one's client or oneself is regarded from an emotionally distant place. There is a very important distinction here. Although regarding oneself from an emotionally 'cut off' place can seem to be about self-reflection, it encourages us to see ourselves as a sort of commodity. I have a client who often uses diagnostic labels to describe herself and even says, for instance, 'self is depressed' rather than 'I feel wretched'. Although she may be reflecting on herself she is not allowing an experience-near way of expressing what she feels. When she does she discovers very raw feelings that she is only gradually able to approach. We have found that this happens because she no longer makes an artificial separation between herself and her feelings.

Wheway (1999) describes something similar. He sees this 'being' with oneself and the other as similar to meditation. He says:

> 'Being, I think is another word for Spirit. At times what happens in therapy, its content, may not look very spiritual; but the process, for both therapist and client, in my belief, is a spiritual one – if you will, it is a karmic yoga, a path of action that leads to enlightenment – not one grand enlightened condition, but enlightenment now and now and now. It enables us to be selves – to be both immanent, to be that is, present with ourselves, and transcendent, that is less and less attached to these selves as they emerge from our storytelling.'

> (Wheway 1999)

He is describing something that accords with my own ontology – a way of being present in my own experience and, *at the same time*, not being attached to my sense of self.

Reflecting on my own experience in this way is also significant to the epistemology of my study. Understanding that a simple determination to

change does not usually lead to change is of vital importance and central to a conclusion that I draw towards the end of this study. Often being determined to change means that we do not accept ourselves and this leads to us unconsciously digging in our heals. I show how I have found that the non-defensive use of reflection on our experience, as we experience it, within dialogue with others, can work best when meeting across difference in culture (see below in this chapter and chapter 7).

Non-dualistic thinking

My stance in relation to change also implies an ontological position in which the world is not seen dualistically. If we have a non-dualistic stance, change is not seen as a matter of making a simple decision to change or not to change. It is much more complex than that. This more complex non-dualistic thinking is important to my inquiry, as it is in action research generally. Dualistic thinking has informed western philosophy over many centuries as I show below and eventually allowed the west to proceed with a project of colonisation which is justified by seeing the colonised as an inferior type of human being.

To question dualistic thinking it is helpful to understand what Bateson has described as an 'epistemological error' (Bateson 1982:454). This error occurs when we understand individuals to be the basic unit of society. He suggests that it is rather the '*organism* plus *environment*' (Bateson 1982:459 italics in the original). His notion arises out of a philosophy that embraces a pre-Newtonian view in which the subject is not seen as separate from the object. Newton and Descartes established the modern 'scientific' attitude that legitimates this way of cutting off mind from matter and body from soul and sees 'man's' (sic) place in the world as separate from nature. It is a stance that sees 'mankind' as in dominion over nature, including our own errant unconscious thoughts (Freud 1973:109). While a non-dualistic stance is important to me and other contemporary psychotherapists, particularly the Intersubjectivists (See chapter 6), earlier psychotherapy theory and philosophising was in tune with its times, at the end of the Victorian era,

in having a firmly dualistic stance. This seems to me to be important to mention here, as mainstream psychotherapy theorising tends to be unquestioningly dualistic in nature, particularly as Freud certainly saw human psychology in this way (Freud 1973).

Most psychotherapists tend to see the flourishing of the individual rather than that individual in the context of the group to be the aim of their work (Sue and Sue 1990:35) thus creating a split between the individual and society. Freud was a gigantic figure in psychotherapy and his influence still provides a touchstone for many psychotherapists today. They have developed his thinking further but the inherent dualism between self and environment has not been seriously questioned until the intersubjectivists came forward with their radical new proposals. Before describing their work in detail I need to explore a critique of dualism.

Origins of dualism

A dualistic stance seems to have arisen in the 'western' world as part of what Elias (1998:279) calls the 'civilising process'. This brought about an epistemology that makes artificial dualistic separations. I have found it useful to understand how this dualistic attitude arose as it helps to show how, for westerners, dualisms which include self/other, male/female etc also include civilised/primitive, black/white, us/them etc and lead to people identifying with one group whilst rejecting those they perceive to be on the opposite pole. This way of creating dualisms is important to notice, not only because of its relevance to my epistemology, but because this splitting process affects relationships across difference in race and culture and so is relevant to both the process and the content of my research.

To understand more about this non-dualistic stance I will explore some of the complex factors involved in the origins of dualistic thinking. Before Descartes and Newton articulated a rational place for 'man' in the universe, a dualistic way of thinking was already present within western culture (Elias 1998:280). It has been an integral part of our 'civilisation'

for thousands of years, and is clearly seen in the texts of 'western' religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - where God chose 'man' to rule the earth. Elias (1994:47; Mennell and Goudsblom 1998:30) showed how the 'civilising process' has gradually put constraints on our ways of thinking and acting so that 'acceptable' behaviour distinguishes the 'correct' from 'incorrect' and edits out of our thinking that which we consider to be 'animalic' (Elias' word). This 'civilising process' has provided the building blocks of the dominant western culture which prevails globally today as it has for many hundreds of years (Elias 1998:68).

Abram (1996:145) takes us even further back to when language stopped being onomatopoeic to find the roots of dualism. Onomatopoeic language connects us more fully to the 'things' we name thus helping us to be more connected to our direct experience. The process of symbolisation was very much part of a 'civilising process' and has taken the western world further and further from the 'natural world'. Words now stand for something else, thus making a separation between our speech and our experience.

The psychoanalyst, Daniel Stern, (1985:162) who researched infant development, was of the opinion that the coming of language created an inevitable separation between ourselves and the immediacy of our experience. He described four 'senses of self' (Stern 1985:26) – the *emergent*, the *core,* the *subjective* and the *verbal*. Before the verbal sense of self is developed, the baby develops a sense of its own subjectivity and learns that it is possible to share this with others in a direct way through the mother's (or other carer's) attuned responsiveness. The ability to know the other in a direct way tends to be lost when the ability to symbolise comes concurrent with the development of a verbal sense of self. Stern does not consider that each sense of self is superseded by the next one but that each one is added to the last, thus our emergent, core and subjective senses of self are still available to us even after the verbal sense of self is developed. He

points out, however, that the verbal sense of self is so powerful that it tends to dominate the others and cuts us off from more direct experiencing (Stern 1985:177).

Effects of dualistic and non-dualistic thinking
Plumwood (1993) shows how dualistic philosophy subtly ensures that dominant ideas are kept in place by associating the more powerful side of dualistic structures with each other. These keep the female on the weaker side of this difference (as 'female' is perceived as less powerful than 'male') but also puts those outside western culture in this same weaker group. She says:

> 'in systematised forms of power, power is normally institutionalised and 'naturalised' by latching on to existing forms of difference. Dualisms are not just freefloating systems of ideas; they are closely associated with domination and accumulation and are [western culture's] major cultural expressions and justifications." (Plumwood 1993:42)

If we take a non-dualistic epistemology on the other hand, we can constantly question the way we live in the light of experience rather than accept dualistically fixed ideas. We are therefore less likely to leave dualistic assumptions unexamined. Once we have accepted a non-dualistic epistemology, ways of knowing are freed from their binds. This way of knowing helps us to challenge the simple dualisims that can dominate our thinking and lead to us projecting on to others our difficult feelings and experiences, thus not having to own these experiences ourselves. Maybe this way of splitting ourselves goes some way to explain the way the west seems to be so unquestioning about the way it dominates globally. Plumwood points out that:

> 'by means of dualisms, the colonised are appropriated, incorporated, into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity.'
> (Plumwood 1993:41)

Challenging dualistic thinking and allowing my own thinking to go beyond this way of splitting into 'good' and 'bad' is very important for the epistemology with which I approach this study. I constantly need to recognise when I make simple dualistic assumptions. In chapter 6, for example, I describe my work with refugee clients and know how easy it is to make simplistic assumptions about their lives based on dualistic thinking.

Conclusion

In both my practice as an action researcher and as a psychotherapist my ontology leads me to understand myself as being part of a co-created universe which is non-dualistic in nature. My epistemology flows directly from this: knowledge is co-created in a complexly pattered web of relating. Methodologies must be chosen with this in mind.

It is important to underline here that the content of this study is inextricably linked to how I study it. I study 'whiteness' and it is dualism that keeps whites in their place of power and, as they are on the powerful side of a black/white dualism, is also central to positivistic research. In challenging white supremacy, I am also challenging dualism and choose a non-dualistic epistemology to do it. To do so I need to recognise life as a 'seamless web' (Bateson 1982). Bateson acknowledged that, because we are human and think in the way that we do, we must inevitably apply analytic scissors to this web in order to live the life we can understand and reflect upon (Bateson and Bateson 1987:145). By this he meant that, although all is connected and whole rather than in parts, we, being human, inevitably see the world in separate pieces – we cut the seamless web in order to understand it.

These scissors cut more easily in some places than others so that, for instance, we recognise a tree from non-tree by applying these 'scissors', just as we recognise 'being in a session' with our clients as opposed to 'not being in a session'. The boundaries we put round 'being in a session' allow us to explore in a certain way which we could not allow

outside the session time. The cutting of the cloth here helps us to find a reflective space. Similarly, the concept of 'race' is one which has been cut out by these analytic scissors. However I am here challenging the notion that it is useful to cut the cloth in this way as many of the assumptions behind this cutting lead to pain and untold injustice. A very good example of this difficulty occurred in South Africa during apartheid where it was found that it was far from a simple matter to assign 'races' to people. Many apparently 'white' people were classified as 'black' as they had 'black' relatives.

A more holistic way of understanding experienced reality and our place within it, has been described by Reason (1994) as a 'participatory worldview'. The usual boundaries between different activities in our lives tend to break down when viewed with the perspective of this epistemology. In particular I understand that *I cannot view any part of the world without myself affecting it.* This idea is central both to my work as an action researcher in this study and as a psychotherapist. When reflecting on my work I view it with this in mind so that I know that any experience I have is profoundly affected by my own presence and perspective. How I understand this for myself is that I do not *do* research, I *am* research. I cannot say that part of my life is especially reserved for research. My life is an inquiry (Marshall 2001:433) and any part of it may be interesting and relevant enough to reflect upon and write about in this study. The 'analytic scissors' may choose various activities as being more relevant such as doing this writing, taking part in a co-operative inquiry group, reading about methodology, working with a client who is an asylum seeker from Somalia or running a course called *Working with Difference* but anything such as walking down the street and noticing that a thought I have is based on a prejudiced assumption or is designed to bolster a favourite presupposition is also a valid part of my inquiry.   What makes it research is an inquiring and reflective attitude and a formal process of presenting it beyond my private thoughts.

These thoughts on my ontology and epistemology indicate the profound change which I have undergone since being exposed to Bateson's work and that of the intersubjectivists in particular. They are the fertile ground from which my methodology arises as well as the related reflection on validity. It is to these that I now turn in the next chapter.