CHAPTER FOUR


Co-Operative Inquiry into the Experience of Being White


> We can all re-dream the world, our lives.
> But the conception must begin now.
> The birth must begin now.
> We should consecrate ourselves
> To prepare ourselves for a new air,
> For a fuller future.
> The preparation would be rewarding,
> For we are each one of us saviours
> And co-makers of the world we live in.
> But we should begin now, here,
> Among one another
> And in solitude.
> From *Mental Fight* by Ben Okri


**Introduction**

Having decided to explore the issue of my own racial identity as a white 'western' person through my reading and through self-reflection, I felt that I needed the help of colleagues if I were to challenge my thinking more fully and deepen my inquiry. This chapter shows how a co-operative inquiry was set up for this purpose, including the criteria and processes I used for finding co-researchers. I describe the themes that emerged within the group and explore the impact it has had both on myself and other members of the group.


**Setting up the Group**

I wanted this co-operative inquiry group to provide a second person aspect (Torbert 2002) to my inquiry and help me to think through the issues. Partly in order to limit and contain the scope of the inquiry and partly to inquire into how being white affects myself and others as professionals, I made a decision to open the membership of the group only to white psychotherapists and counsellors. I chose not to limit the gender of the participants to women as issues of gender are not central

to my inquiry.  I also decided that, in order to be realistic about the time availability of both myself and other participants, I needed to limit the geographical spread of the group to the Bath/Bristol area. The notes I wrote at the time are included as Appendix 3.

These notes show how it was difficult for me initially to think about being white without thinking about relating to 'black' people'.  No doubt if human beings all had the same colour skin, some other way of finding hierarchical differences would be found. However, within this *racialised* environment, black people *experience* a lack of privilege and are very aware of it whilst white people are often unaware of their privilege, merely taking it for granted.  I do not hear black people saying that they cannot think about being black without thinking about white people whereas, in my experience, the obverse of this comment is nearly always made by white people.  I explore this more fully below.

Having reflected on setting up the group, written some thoughts about it which I have included as Appendix 3 and discussed in my PhD supervision group, I set about writing an advertisement for the group. I approached psychotherapy organisations in the Bath/Bristol area with this for their newsletters. This notice is included as Appendix 4

**Membership and Attendance of Meetings**
There was not a huge response to this advertisement. I could guess the reasons for this and it is fairly safe to assume that the question of what it means to be white is not of burning importance to most white people due to their unquestioned identification with the normality of their whiteness.

In the end five people joined the group.  Two of the members were graduates of my own psychotherapy training programme, one was from a psychosynthesis programme, and the other was a counsellor who heard of the group through a colleague. There were 7 meetings over 16 months.

Notes, which are included as appendix 5, were written after each group and sent to others on the following day. Names of participants have been fictionalised at their request.

**Power and Authority in the Group**

I am a fairly well known figure in the psychotherapy world, particularly in the South West area, and I was aware that this might affect authority issues in the group. This was compounded by the likelihood of authority being invested in me because I started the group. I tried to lessen the impact of this by suggesting that we meet in different houses. In the event we only used one other location, as participants were happier with coming to my home. I also felt torn between a sense that I needed to mitigate the impact of setting up the group with the sense that I was responsible for it. I had instigated the group and intended to write about it in my thesis so I felt an obligation to take on some of the tasks such as 'writing the group up'. The group seemed very happy for me to take a lead on such things.

It emerged, though, after the group disbanded, that they would have been happy for me to have taken more authority. The difficulty with power and authority in co-operative inquiry groups is recognised by Ospina et al (2004:66) who say: 'Democratic aspirations behind action research are much harder to achieve in practice than in theory.' However they recognise an interesting distinction when they say 'there is a difference between giving up privilege (a democratic aspiration) and giving up authority (a suppression of one's voice). Ladkin (2004) makes a similar point in showing that the issues are complex and not easily resolved. She suggests that we need to be aware of and include this complexity rather than think we can overcome it.

It was important to me that it was possible to remain dialogic in the group and did not want power and authority issues to get in the way. I wanted our explorations to remain open and inquiring without group

members being forced into fixed or compliant positions on the one hand whilst allowing robust encounter on the other.

**Recording the Group**

I decided to write an account of the group from memory (and a few notes taken at the time) and send it out to members for any thoughts or emendations. The group, and particularly one member of it, preferred not to have it taped. This means that my record of it is not a verbatim account but is endorsed by group members. I encouraged others to give their accounts, either from scratch, or in response to mine and examples of both of these are given below.

When recording the group I was concerned to ensure that all themes were included and, as far as possible, all the thoughts and reflections of different group members. I also included any interactions between group members that affected or reflected the group process.

**The Group Process**

When I embarked upon the co-operative inquiry group I had thought that we would engage in experimental activities such as noticing our feelings about black people and then bringing them back to the group. However there was some resistance to proceeding in this way as group members were not keen to receive 'home work'. Most of the actions we took were therefore more focused on ideas brought to the group. The discussion that ensued was not abstract but was based in our own experience. This seemed to be important to us all. When each person spoke at the beginning, they did so in a way which described their own *experience* rather than opinions and this set the tone for future meetings. We wanted the group to touch us personally and for our discussion to be connected to lived experience and not just abstracted thoughts which emanated from a political or social stance. Examples of the kinds of topics discussed included:

- reflections on what in our personal lives drew us to the subject,

- whether and how we felt guilty about being white and
- the meaning that words 'white' and 'black' held for us.

We reflected on any changes we found in further 'action' that we took after the discussion.

My circulation of an account of the group helped to re-focus attention on the issues that arose and helped us to notice how feelings and attitudes changed over time (see below). In this way cycles of action and reflection were undertaken.

The desire on the part of group members for the group to reflect our feeling responses rather than rational opinions reflects the priorities of psychotherapists who tend to hold the value that change grows out of a connectedness to our felt responses rather than rational decision making (Rogers 1942:132).

I consider that the group was almost always dialogic and is an example of the use of dialogue in my research. The quality of listening was usually good as is borne out by members' post-group reflections (see below). Everyone reported that their experiences and opinions were well respected and related to. Sometimes there were misunderstandings but when these were picked up and articulated they were not only heard but we tried to learn the lessons from the misunderstanding. Several examples are given below, the most striking of which is the way in which I 'blanked out' one member's remarks about the universal nature of the meanings of the words 'black' and 'white'. It was important in this and other cases that there was not only a repair to the mishearing but that the meaning of the mishearing was reflected upon. This brings a higher order of reflection as the first level is to hear and correct a misunderstanding and the second is to understand as fully as possible the *meaning* of the misunderstanding

including any resistance to hearing it in the first place. This is explored further below.

As psychotherapists we were aware that the more intimacy there was between group members, the more profound the learning. I tried to foster this kind of atmosphere by being as open as possible myself. I suggested at the beginning that we all tell the group about any impulse or thoughts that had led us to come to the group. The level at which we were able to share intimate information in this first group was significant and set the tone for subsequent meetings. By speaking first I was able to model openness about my past experiences and ways I was perturbed by my present attitudes.

I was keen that we should be able to confront each other and not collude with unexplored assumptions. Modeling this approach was one way I encouraged a culture of openness. I welcomed challenges when I received them myself, such as suspecting that black professionals would not be as good as white ones (see below). I was keen that we found a balance between confronting assumptions and racist attitudes in each other whilst not treading so heavily on sensitive areas that it would be hard not to withdraw. I have found that this balance is found by remaining dialogic. My wish to 'confront assumptions' may be based on my own assumptions so I remain as open as possible to hearing the other point of view whilst also giving my own responses. This ensures that those on both sides of the dialogue feel heard. An example of this occurred on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2002 (see appendix 5). On this occasion a group member said that he thought it was impossible to talk about being white without thinking about blackness. He thought the group would have been more interesting if black people had been present. Although the group had been formed on my own premise that it was good to think about being white *without* involving black people I stayed open to his idea. He then 'had a go' at talking about being white in an experimental way. This remained an issue for this group member for much of the group and we engaged with it at various times. When the

group ended he reflected on his previous lack of awareness of the impact of being white on black people (see below).

**Inquiry Questions**

As I initiated the group and had been considering the question of what it is to be white for some time, many of the initial questions were my own (see appendix 3). However as we progressed, questions arose in the group although they were often implied rather than explicit. Having examined the reports of each group, I can see that the questions which arose in the group were:

Is guilt useful in exploring racism?
Can we find a way to talk about our racist thoughts?
Can we talk about whiteness without talking about blackness?
Is it racist to find black people 'interesting'?
What meaning does 'white' have?

I will take each question one at a time in order to explore how the group engaged with them.

*Is guilt useful in relation to racism?*
The subject of whether guilt was neurotic or healthy in relation to racism was much discussed in the group. I will not say much more about it here in a specific way as a whole chapter which includes thoughts and feelings of group members is devoted to the subject (see Chapter 5). However, looking back I think that guilt and shame were important issues in the group process. My notes show that we were more tentative at first when talking about being white than later in the group life, maybe for fear of being thought racist and also for fear of discovering this in ourselves.

It was always possible that we might have shamed each other by our responses to any possible racism discovered in the group. It was vitally important in particular to remaining dialogic when exploring these

feelings and assumptions. By listening well to each other in a respectful way (and thus being dialogic), no-one reported feeling shamed within the group (see below).

*Can we find a way to talk about our racist thoughts?*
An awareness that we had racist thoughts and that they disturbed us was a strong motivating factor in the group coming together. In looking at my notes of the first meeting (see Appendix 5) I see that:

> Richard said that he was 'aware of having feelings about people of other races and cultures that were disturbing to him.'

> Sue said she had been led to do the group by an experience of a conflict with a black colleague at work. She felt that unconscious feelings may have driven this response and had joined the group to explore this.

> I gave as an example of my own hidden racism that I was 'frustrated' by a black friend's lack of need for 'help'.

In the first group that Anna attended she said:

> she was aware that one of her prejudiced attitudes was of finding black people 'interesting' in a rather academic, objectifying way.

In the following group we noticed that, although we had personal experiences of competent and clever black people, we carried, usually just out of awareness, a sort of hierarchy of cleverness in relation to race.  Exploring in this open way was quite difficult as we were owning to prejudiced thoughts and feelings that we would normally keep to ourselves. As time went on it seems to me that we became more confident to talk in this way as it became clearer that two conflicting fears would not be realised: we were not going to be shamed by describing racist feelings, nor would such explorations lead to a confirmation of racist attitudes. Instead, naming what was real would

lead to an increased ability to 'see' otherness as enriching..

Although I had not consciously become aware of these two fears before the group started, I think on reflection now, that they were influencing me and seemed not to be founded as the group continued. We were able to take attitudes out of the cupboard to look at such as 'is it okay to find black people 'interesting?'. This was founded on an open, dialogic process in which we *responded* rather than *reacted* to other people's thoughts. Although we did not all come to the same conclusion about this it is clear, from my conversations with people after the group, that they found it helpful to explore responses which are normally kept under wraps. Cycles of action (taken outside the group as well as talking about our experiences within it) and reflection (on these experiences) led to further action (opening up awareness which had not been previously known about which led to potential new action in the light of this awareness.)

*Can we talk about whiteness without talking about blackness?*
I engaged with the quandary of whether we can talk about 'whiteness' without talking about 'blackness' in Chapter 3 where I look at the meaning of the word 'white'.  It was also explored in various ways within the group and, as I mentioned above, became a matter of disagreement between us. As the group had been formed to think about whiteness without the presence of black people I was aware that I could be defensive as the whole question could challenge the *raison d'etre* of the group. After several groups in which this was touched on and I struggled with the possibility that I might have led the group into a foolish endeavour, Richard wrote an email which included:

> Personally I'm looking forward to the day when we can admit that being white has no 'meaning' – it's just a physiological quirk resulting from the evolutionary process.

I replied:

> The thing I think is missing from what you said is that we do live by the benefits of being 'white' and on the whole don't do a lot about it. ………………You say you feel 'anxiety, disappointment and fear at the human tendency to split and project' but you don't include yourself as culpable in any way for the way 'whites' have done this to 'blacks'.

Having thought hard about Richard's challenge I felt able to say something from the heart which was a challenge to him but I knew from the robustness of the dialogue between us that he could 'take' this kind of challenge. Although Richard thought that it was not possible to think about being white without thinking about being black, he seems to have changed his mind about this (see below) after the group disbanded. Later in the same email Richard also drew a parallel between white people and heterosexuals which I thought was very telling. Heterosexuals are in a similar position to white people as their sexuality often appears to them as the norm rather than somewhere along a spectrum of different sexualities. For me I think there has been a 'drip, drip, drip' effect of talking about whiteness so that it has become more and more natural. Getting used to speaking in this way in the group was a significant factor in this shift.

*Is it racist to find black people 'interesting'?*
The question of whether it is racist to find black people 'interesting' was one that concerned us. Some thought that showing this interest revealed a natural and inevitable curiosity about anything apparently different to ourselves whilst others thought it was objectifying.

At the start of the group I had an uneasy feeling that finding black people 'interesting' was racist, without really being able to put my finger on why, as objections about 'natural curiosity' were evident too. Factors on both sides of this dilemma were explored and it was not so much resolved as a dilemma as better understood.  I told the group that I had

previously facilitated a women's group of which I was a member, in exploring how childhood experiences of 'difference' may affect them now in adult life. Several group members reported touching accounts of innocent curiosity concerning differences between their own bodies and those of others.  There were also clear examples of fear of difference in quite young children, particularly of smells and tastes.

Of course curiosity and interest in someone who is different to oneself is fine. We came to the conclusion that what is not fine is when, through fear or for any other reason, we do not relate to or acknowledge the essential humanness of another human being in a meeting with them.

*What meaning does 'white' have?*
The question of what meaning 'white' has for white people led on from our dilemma about trying to think about being white without thinking about our relationship to black people.  We decided to ask a few people of our acquaintance to associate to the word 'white' and see how they viewed it. The answers given to me were as follows:

| *Interviewee 1* | *Interviewee 2* | *Interviewee 3* |
|---|---|---|
| Blank | Sheet | Snow |
| Pure | Hair | Spiritual |
| Clear | Snow | Paper |
| Chef | Cloud | Heat |
| Paper | Leeds United | clear |

| *Interviewee 4* | *Interviewee 5* | *Interviewee 6* |
|---|---|---|
| Blank | Bright | Wall |
| Black | Colour | Clouds |
| Skin | Nothing | Wallpaper |
| Pale | Cat | |
| Snow | Sky | |

| Interviewee 7 | Interviewee 8 | Interviewee 9 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Yellow | Green | Black |
| Blue | Sky | Paper |
| Green | Space | Chalk |

We can see that the answers do not show a clear positive view of 'white'. (The only mention of, specifically, 'positive' words were given to us by interviewees 1 and 3, as I have shown above. One person mentioned 'pure' and another 'spiritual'.) In his book, Dalal (2002:135) insists that the colour white symbolises purity and goodness in western culture whilst 'black' symbolises 'evil' (see chapter 3 regarding Dalal's research (Dalal 2002:142 and 143) on the meaning of 'white' in The Bible).  When I was able to talk to Dalal himself about this phenomenon at a lecture in which it was discussed, he expressed the view that people who had been asked were defending against their racist associations (see above). This was refuted in the White Group. Several people within the group thought that the colour white had some negative associations such as 'wishy washy' and the colour black had positive ones such as being intense and mysterious. We were aware that Dalal would regard these as rationalizations and finally Anna said something which cut below this. She said:

> that she thought our bad feelings about being white [because it might be wishy washy] were nevertheless built on a basic sense of confidence that comes from being part of the dominant race.  Judy was very taken by this and said she could feel in herself what that meant.  We also went on to speculate that the opposite was also true – that black pride may be built on a less secure base.
>
> *November 28<sup>th</sup> 2003*

This last point seems very important to me and fundamentally shows the effect of the power difference between black people and white. Whatever

we might say about different attitudes to the words black and white, it remains that the words are likely to impact more on black people as they experience being in the less dominant position.

Between this group and the next I attended the conference at which Dalal made the comments mentioned above. I described my discussion with Dalal to the group which was written up in my account and goes on to say:

> Judy had said she had thought about [his contention that those who responded to being asked for associations to the word 'white' were defending against more racist responses] but a context for asking the question had not been given. Farhad [Dalal] had said that most people would immediately have thought of 'white' having to do with being white skinned. We explored this a bit and were not so sure about it. It had definitely felt as if that had not occurred to the people we had asked. [Of course if you decide that this thought is unconscious there is nothing else one can say!] We wondered if associations to 'white' were changing in today's culture. [As I am writing this I am thinking that people today often have a more complex response to the idea of being 'good' in any case. Maybe there is a more questioning attitude to splitting good from bad in a definite way and that 'good' is often hypocritical. If that is the case then the way 'white' was seen in the past as being pure and unsullied doesn't have quite such a hold.]
>
> *13th Feb 2003*

The questions that arose from the group from this aspect of my inquiry are as follows:

- In today's western society are the words 'white' and 'black' losing the associations that they have had to the words 'good' and 'evil'?
- If this is the case does it say anything about racist attitudes?

- May it also have something to say about a more ambiguous attitude to 'good' and 'evil' as concepts?

It seems to me that an action that would, in the past, have been categorised as 'good', may now be seen as being more ambiguous. Post modern thought tends to accept more complexity (Hebdige 1996:176) and, in spite of tabloid journalism and some politicians who seem to divide the world very clearly into 'good' and bad', maybe this attitude is more prevalent in today's society than in the past. For instance a woman who steals to feed her child would not be judged as harshly as one who steals to feed her heroin addiction. (For further discussion of non-dualistic thinking see chapter 1.) When we talk of holding extreme attitudes on either side of a dilemma it is often said that the attitudes are 'black or white'. I have always understood this to mean that the attitudes are opposite to each other, just as 'black' and 'white' are opposite. The question of whether skin colour is also evoked when we use this term is also one to consider. I certainly find myself not using the term 'black and white' to indicate opposites because of its possible racist implication.

In order to explore this further, and to provide another cycle of action and reflection, I decided to ask some of my respondents what they thought about the colour white. In this context I asked Alice whom I interviewed following her responses to my questionnaire on the subject of shame and guilt in relation to racism (see chapter 4):

> J   I wonder if you have any associations to the word white?
> A  If you say whiteness to me it tends to say to me brightness and light. I am very interested in photography and white is the spectrum that includes all colours so whiteness is an image of brightness and light.
> J    Right yes that is interesting. There is also a thought that in our culture whiteness means purity and goodness and truth. Does it have that sort of association for you?

A    I think less so now than it used to. I think as a child the phrase whiter than white seemed to be around but I think that has faded now.

J    Do you know what that is about, that fading?

A    I think possibly it might just me maturing.

J    If you're maturing then….

A    Then I've realised that there is probably no such thing as whiter than white. Everything is just varying shades of grey.

*9ᵗʰ January 2004*

It is interesting that in this conversation Alice talked about a development in her thinking from seeing white as indicating or symbolising goodness and purity to more ambiguous meanings and that she thought this might be about how she herself is maturing and/or a change in the culture.  I also find it interesting that in a later part of the same conversation she said that blackness was 'obviously' associated with darkness. She is seeing black in the way a physicist or a photographer might here as being 'a complete absence of light'. Dalal who says that a physicist would describe the colour black as being an optical event when no light is present', takes issue with this point saying that:

> The word black automatically conjures up a picture in the mind of the colour black. Similarly, the sign dark signifies the absence of light, and so the sign dark is now full of the meaning 'absence of light'…………As we have seen, absolute darkness is *beyond imagination* (italics in original), for how can one ever imagine an absence? Even as we try to imagine it, the associations of the word lead us to create something dark-like in our minds, that is something black (Dalal 2002:139).

He goes on to say that *''Black' is the symbolic representation of darkness'* (italics in original). His point is that we associate evil with darkness, darkness with black and black with 'black' people.  Alice seems to have

provided an example of the association of dark with black. However, even if we do, perhaps naturally, conflate 'black' and 'dark', a point made in my conversation with Alice seems more satisfying to me: that absolute blackness and whiteness do not in fact exist.  We can think this thought because we have become more able to think about ambiguities. *This same thinking,* and not because there is any real connection between the meanings we give to blackness and whiteness and the different colours of human skin, allows the projection of these meanings on to 'black' and 'white' people.  This greater ability to think about ambiguities frees us to find a variety of associations to the word 'white' that were not connected with purity, goodness and brightness.

These thoughts about the meanings behind the words 'black' and 'white' were again thrown up in the air when I came to interview members of the white group after it had finished (see below).

**Post-Group Reflections with Group Members**
Having explored the different questions that arose within the White Co-operative Inquiry Group I decided to do two more turns of action and reflection cycles. One was to return to individuals within the group and ask them for further reflections on questions that arose for me out of the group exploration.  The second turn of the cycle of reflection was to return to my original questions and see how far they have been answered or at least addressed.

I had follow-up conversations with all four of the other participants in the group. Two of these were taped interviews, another was written up from notes after the meeting as this person did not agree to a taped interview and the fourth was conducted by email.

*Anna*

It was my conversation with Anna that put a new light on our associations to the words 'black' and 'white'. She had read through a draft of this chapter and was very struck by the way that I had completely missed out one of the points she had made in the group. This was that, contrary to the apparent opinion of Dalal (Dalal 2002:ch 8), the words 'black' and 'white' have similar associations across many cultures to those often found in western culture. She also thought that my apparent refusal to acknowledge this point was evidence of prejudice on my part. She said:

> 'I do think there is a prejudice in here. The prejudice is about we in western society associate white with good and black with evil and its part of our heritage. Dalal makes a very strong point of it being about western society. The point I made is 'come on this is not just western society. These are universal associations, including among Africans'.'

I was very struck by the fact that, not only had I not included it in the account of the groups but that even now I had no memory of her telling me this. The fact that I had not taped the session and therefore been forced to see this omission is maybe regrettable but if I had taped the session, the extent of my reluctance to see it would not have been revealed.

Anna was an anthropologist so knew from field studies that the words 'black' and 'white' held similar meanings in African settings. She also showed me various passages from books on relevant anthropology so I have been able to study them since then.

Jacobson-Widding (1979) showed that people in the Lower Congo regard the colour black as 'definitely connected with evil-doers' (p 187). He said that the colour white, on the other hand, is connected with 'right,

righteousness, innocence, justice and social order' (p 218) as well as 'the means of attaining right and justice' such as 'reason intelligence, understanding, clear-sightedness, capacity for investigation etc.'. They belong to the world of social order and with the matrilineal principle (p 218). They are all considered to be 'good' and 'socially approved'.(Jaccobson-Widding 1979).[1]

Turner (1966) shows some comparative data about the associations of different peoples to the words 'black' and 'white' across various cultures worldwide. In Madagascar black is associated with what is 'inferior, unpleasant, evil, suspicious, disagreeable and undesirable' and white with 'light, hope, joy and purity' (p 72). For the Yoruba (in Nigeria) 'black is associated with night and night with evil' (p 73). In the Malay Peninsular a midwife puts a strip of black pigment from the eyebrows to the tip of the nose 'for the protection of women against 'the Blood Demon which stops a woman's courses and so prevents her bringing healthy children into the world'. (p 74) He goes on to say 'White is generally an auspicious colour, among the Sakai and other Malay peoples (p74). For the Cherokees (Native Americans), 'black is the colour of sorcery or witchcraft' and white 'represents peace and happiness' (p 75)[2].

I was shocked at having apparently completely blocked Anna's input to the group in which she showed these associations to the words 'white' and 'black' . She asked me why I thought I had done it. I said I was not sure but wondered if it was because it muddied the waters. Maybe I had thought that it might be more straightforward to think that these

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[1] Red is also considered by Jacobson Widding and other authors but I will only consider the meanings surrounding the words 'black' and 'white' here.

[2] Since writing this chapter I have read in Bonnett (2000 p10 and 16) that people have been colour-coded as 'white' in the Middle East and China in the past. White skin indicates an elite, particularly as it suggested that the person did not have to work under the sun. Hall also pointed out that in Zaire 'white' is associated with death. The word 'Mpoto' is used to name the 'place where white people come from' and this transalated literally means 'the land of the dead.'

associations were purely Western. Using only western sources show white society in a bad light with black people clearly victims of our prejudiced assumptions.

Two thoughts emerge on further reflection. One is that the source of this information comes from anthropologists working in the sixties and seventies when there was less understanding of the slant that western people might put on information about other cultures. Whereas I am sure this does not completely invalidate this data, I would feel happier with it if I had been told about it myself by members of those particular nationalities and cultures.

My other thought is that, if the significance of these colours are similar throughout the world, this makes the use of the words 'black' and 'white' to describe people with different skin tones even more significant. Anna's understanding was that these are universal, archetypal symbols for evil on the one hand and goodness or purity on the other. It is shocking to think that the world is divided into 'black' people and 'white' people when these words evoke deeply held, archetypal associations, not just for those in the West, but for all peoples. It makes me wonder whether deciding to say 'black is beautiful' or 'white is wishy washy' has anything but a most superficial effect!

*Eleanor*
My post group meeting with Eleanor did not face me with similar challenges. I found it very moving, particularly the way in which she had allowed the learning from the group to touch her. She had started by thinking the group might be intimidating but actually found it 'inclusive, nurturing and supportive'. In particular it helped her with her work in an inner city school. In her words she said that she had begun to

'realise how far I am trying to get a grip on my student's world when in fact I need to stay even more with who I am and when I get things wrong it is done with a good heart and with the best will in the world and somehow it is going to be okay because it is 'respect' (she used the vernacular hand gesture). '

Eleanor must be doing something right as young people queue outside her room to see her for counselling.

*Richard*

Richard sent me responses on the email to my questions which gave his answers specific focus. He had originally not understood how the group could be of value without black people in it. He reiterated that during the group and commented on it in our email correspondence (see above). He now said that:

> 'Since the group disbanded, I have increasingly seen that my inability to elucidate on the experience of my own whiteness is itself a manifestation of a complacence so deep that I am only just recognising its existence. In a multiracial context I suppose this sense of belonging to the group that has a confident certainty of its own acceptability is what I would bring, consciously or otherwise. This does not seem a particularly honourable or helpful legacy.'

And

> 'At the time I often felt an essential weakness of the group was that it had no non-white members. I'm quite astonished at how far my sense of this has shifted. I now see how the shadow of whatever racism I may carry would have been conveniently covered up by the interesting dialogues that would no doubt have arisen in a

mixed-race group.’

It is interesting and encouraging for me that insights about this have continued since the group stopped meeting. Richard said that he did not generally work with non white clients. However one client:

> ‘was a highly educated Indian who had been married to a white man and had lived a culturally ‘white’ life as an adult. I don’t know whether her life experience might have de-emphasised the skin tone difference in the intersubjective field between us.’

I thought this was an extremely interesting point. I have found myself in a similar position with a client who had an Indian father. I did know that race could be an important theme for her but my knowledge of that was a little theoretical. When she denied its importance I let it drop until she became full of rage at a bus driver who called her a 'black bastard'. Unpicking the delicate threads of race in a situation like this is not easy but no doubt very important.

*Sue*

Sue preferred that the interview was not taped and so I made a note of the meeting directly after it finished. She has read and concurred with this.

The first thing she mentioned was that she thought the theme of guilt and shame had dominated the group. She noticed that we tended to go round in circles with this theme but had interestingly thought that this tends to happen when one feels guilty or ashamed. She remembered saying 'Awareness good – wallowing bad' and my saying that I must write that down.  She asked if it had not struck me that way before. I said that I thought that the important thing was to learn from it rather than simply wallow in it and Sue agreed with this.

I said that I remembered how she had pointed out at the end that she had felt 'different' to others. Sue said that this 'difference' involved feeling less 'intellectual and affluent'. This led us to discuss our own experience of being with others when we feel 'different'. We both agreed that it is not enough and does not really help to be told one is 'accepted'. We need others to recognise the difference too. We thought it was interesting, in view of the subject of the group, that what happened to her was a parallel process to black people in white society and yet this was not picked up until the end of the group. In concentrating on our similarity – our whiteness – we did not see or acknowledge the differences in other dimensions of felt identity.

Talking about our own difficulties when we have felt 'different' led us to reflect that the group, in spite of not at first recognising this parallel process, was very tolerant of different opinions and people owning to 'unacceptable feelings'. Although the group could be quite challenging at times, it was also allowing and accepting.

We also spoke of the relevance of this to difficulties Sue had had with a black colleague in a multi racial environment. We reflected that her present work place was very 'white' and we wondered why that was. We thought that maybe, as the town was traditionally very 'white', work needed to be carried out to encourage the black communities that did live there to make use of resources to which they were entitled.

Reflecting now on my post-group discussion with Sue, I am struck again that a parallel process occurred under my nose, as it were, and, in spite of usually being sensitised to this phenomenon, I did not notice it. Although, in theory, Sue could have mentioned feeling different herself earlier in the group's life, it is understandable that she did not do so as her position of

'difference' also led her to feel more vulnerable. There were clues that I or other group members could have picked up on - Sue was quieter than others and was not known to group members before we started to meet. Maybe my own focus on our 'whiteness' and my anxiety to make sure that the group was researching this issue was a factor in leading me not to having more lateral vision. Of course the methodology does allow for attention to group dynamics. Heron and Reason advocate

> 'the creation of a climate in which emotional states can be
> identified, so that distress and tension aroused by the inquiry can
> be openly accepted and processed, and joy and delight in it and
> with each other can be freely expressed.' (Heron and Reason 2001)

From my conversation with Sue (and others) it seems that we did achieve a group where feelings could be expressed to a large extent, and she did bring up this issue before the group finished.  However, in not being alert to Sue's sense of 'difference' before the end we limited the whole hearted-way in which she could participate and, amongst other things, lost some valuable information for the group by not recognising a parallel process. The learning from this will help me to be more alert to this possibility on another occasion.

**My Own Further Reflections**
My own reflection on the co-operative inquiry process, four months after it finished, is that it provided me with a place in which my ideas could be held and discussed with others who were interested in the same area.  We were able to approach some difficult territory such as our own prejudice and explore it in a way which was new for all of us. It was possible to speak about our prejudices without having to hide them so that the underlying feelings and attitudes could be explored. At the same time we usually did not collude with these prejudices as we could disagree, such

as over the meaning of 'white', without attacking each other.

When we started we thought that it might be impossible to talk about whiteness without talking about blackness but this became more and more possible as we continued. Certainly we went through a process which, at least for some of us, led us to feel much more conscious of being white and what that means within a racialised environment. This process can be understood more fully by taking into account the fact that we were psychotherapists and counsellors. We were used, from our training and practice, to free floating discussions in which we encourage ourselves and others to dig below the surface of anything that arises. We do not readily 'take positions' without questioning them and we are used to owning negative or shameful thoughts whilst trusting that they will be received in the spirit of inquiry rather than blame. From the beginning I tried to model this mode of being by being open myself and inviting others to do likewise and modeled non-shaming responses to others. In the beginning I invited everyone to share what had led them to come and started by owning my own sense of shame and guilt about being white, citing some ways in which I could see my own racial prejudice.

Certainly the questions we had at the beginning were preoccupations of the group right up to the end.  Although questions of this nature are never completely answered I did, for myself with the help of the group, reach tentative conclusions. Here are these conclusions followed by further inquiry questions or wonderings:

*Can we talk about our racist thoughts?*
I discovered, by engaging in exploratory dialogue, that we can talk about racist thoughts, particularly when we share an understand that we do so in order to learn more about our ourselves and our racism. *I wonder how far they can be resolved by voicing them*

*Can we talk about whiteness without talking about blackness?*

In that these terms only exist in relation to each other, of course we cannot. We did find that we could talk about being white without reference to black people if we understood ourselves to exist within a racial context. *How can I continue to be sensitive to my whiteness within a racialised environment and talk to others from this sense of awareness?*

*Is it racist to find black people 'interesting'?*

When this interest does not come from a 'superior' position in an institutional sense there is nothing wrong with finding anything 'interesting'. Insofar as it is impossible for a white person not to come from a superior position, maybe this is at the root of our discomfort with it. *Could black friends benefit by my 'interest'? What would happen if I allowed this interest and gave it a positive value?*

*What are the meanings behind the word 'white'?*

There were some differences of opinion in the group about meanings that lie behind this word but it seems to me that positive associations do lie behind the idea of whiteness and it does seem that these associations hold good across many cultures. *I am still not clear about whether or not the word 'white' is always* unconsciously *associated with white skin as Dalal suggested*.

**Was the research valid?**

In order to check how for the research was valid as a co-operative inquiry I have used Heron's validity procedures (Heron 1988). I have used each validity procedure he suggests as a heading to my reflections below:

*Research cycling*

Several turns of the cycle were evident in the inquiry. A number of research questions were identified and initially engaged with and reflected upon based on real experience in our lives. Our reflections on these questions were returned to in the light of further reflections later in the group. For myself I also reflected further about the meaning of the word white in two ways – one by asking interviewees for their thoughts and by talking about this with an author who had written on the subject (Dalal 2002). These experiences were brought back to the group for further discussion. I used post group interviews for a last turn of the cycle.

*Balance of convergence and divergence*
The group was both supportive and affirmative of group members whilst also not being collusive. There were several quite passionate disagreements, on the meaning of the word white and on the usefulness or otherwise of guilt and shame, for example, but no-one felt personally put down or injured by these.

*Balance between experience and reflection*
Maybe the balance between experience, or action, and reflection, during the time that the group was running, was more towards reflection than action. What we hoped to change in ourselves were our attitudes and assumptions which naturally led to reflection rather than out-in-the-world action. However we hoped that our reflections would lead to action and we can see from my post group interviews that it had in some cases. Richard was able to review his approach to a client and Sue noticed an increase in the number of black clients coming to see her. I have also found that my research has helped me in understanding my place in the world as a white person which has affected my relationships with others including my clients (see Conclusion). No doubt the learning that came from the group experience and which leads to action is subtle, is hard to quantify, and may carry on affecting our actions into the future.

*Aspects of reflection*

Most of the reflection was done within the group though group members did reflect between groups and brought that back for further thought. Some of the reflection I undertook was with others outside the group such as with my interviewees.

*Falsification*

The challenge we provided for each other did serve as a falsification procedure. The most striking example of this is Anna's correction of my note taking in her assertion that the words 'white' and 'black' had universal archetypal meanings. If a further cycle had not been undertaken at the end this piece of learning would not have occurred. The challenge of each cycle of reflection brings the potential for falsification or affirmation.

*Balance between chaos and order*

There was a certain amount of 'chaos' in the group as certain suggested tasks were not undertaken and the group tended to go off on tangents when certain topics held energy for the group. However the group met regularly and stayed focused on the topic of their experience of whiteness. Near the beginning it looked as if we might be waylaid by talking about racism in a wider way but we did successfully refocus in spite of whiteness seeming like 'nothingness' to us. This process started by my bringing attention to it and, as time went on, others helped to keep this focus. We discovered that initial difficulties may have reflected the depth of our taking whiteness for granted. We clearly needed to make an intellectual and emotional effort to get to grips with what we hold outside awareness and unquestioningly.

*Management of unaware projections*

Sue's difficulties with feeling vulnerable in the group were not discovered

until the end and this would have been better uncovered earlier. For me, ambivalence about taking authority was maybe more present than I was aware at the time. The discipline of action and reflection cycles might have improved if I had taken more authority, but something of what arose spontaneously might have been lost. These difficulties did not seriously impede the task of the group which managed to stay in good communication most of the time.

*Sustaining authentic collaboration*
The group were very engaged with each other and supported each other in their own individual inquiry as well as trying to engage with questions together.

*Open and closed boundaries*
Most of our exploration was between ourselves as a group. However others were sometimes consulted as in the exercise about the meaning of the word white and my conversation with the author, Dalal and his challenging hypotheses on whiteness.

*Coherence in action*
The action we have all taken may take some time to come to fruition. Each of us took away a more complex sense of our whiteness and that has started to affect how we are in a diverse society. My post-group interviews with group members do show this, though less clearly in the case of Anna where both of us became caught up in the interview in my not hearing an important point she made in the group.

*Variegated replication*
I hope that my writing about this inquiry will lead to others doing likewise. For me, the very task of reflecting on being white in as open and clear sighted a way as possible is part of my political contribution to changing

myself in my environment.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown what I learnt by joining with co-researchers to understand more about my racial identity as a white person in the context of the journey that we all took together. Forming a co-operative inquiry group was certainly productive for my inquiry as it has helped me to become more conscious of my racial identity as white person and what this means in terms of my privileged position in society. Working with others helped me in two ways. The first is that it provided me with support in a task that can otherwise be a lonely undertaking. Not many white people consider this issue and, I suspect, may even ridicule it as 'politically correct' nonsense.

The second is that it provided me with people who challenged my assumptions and ideas so that I was obliged to look at them more closely. One example of this is my assumption was that 'black' and 'white' were symbolized as 'good' and 'bad' only in the west. This is clearly not so as anthropological evidence shows (Turner 1966; Jaccobson-Widding 1979). However, through robust dialogue in which contrary points of view were raised, I was confirmed in my notion that guilt and shame could be productive feelings for white people. With the help of this dialogue, I now have a more complex way of understanding the place that guilt and shame could have for white people in understanding themselves within a racialised environment (see the next chapter). They are a prod to become more conscious of how dominant nations have used 'black' people.

If I were to set up another co-operative inquiry I would be clearer about the issues of authority in the group and more clearly own the authority that the situation inevitably gave me. I would notice and comment on group dynamics such as the difficulty that Sue had about feeling different. I could

have set up clearer tasks for the action/reflection process though there may have been losses in this too as more of my attention may have been on the group process and less on my own experience and learning.

I certainly found the group to be less 'neat' in terms of the processes of action and reflection than is described in the literature (Heron 1996). I was helped in my understanding of this by Ladkin (2004) who describes the complexities of co-operative inquiry groups where a peer group has been initiated by one member who is engaged in a more formal research process.  She confirms the difficulties arising from this process, 'normalising' some of the anxiety the sheer complexity of the task involved for me.

The next chapter picks up on a major theme that came out of the co-operative inquiry group – that of guilt and shame concerning racism in white people. My explorations concerning this area were present for me before setting up the group and were concurrent with it. The group provided one context for this inquiry.