2 Developing an inquiry practice

2.1 Framing

As I identified in Chapter One, my aspiration is that this thesis may contribute to dialogue around the challenges (and the opportunities) presented by the ecological crisis, and around the choices we might make in seeking to respond to these. Thus key methodological questions for me are the following: How can we as inquirers go about creating knowledge of value in making sense of the current planetary conditions and in bringing about human and ecological flourishing? What methodology is appropriate for generating knowing that is valuable and necessary in learning to think and act in more appropriate ways with regards to these kinds of challenges?

In this chapter, I show that an important aspect of my doctorate studies has been that of developing a practice of inquiry. I position my research practice within an emergent participatory worldview and within the broad field of action research, and I consider some of the key principles which characterise the field. I go on to explain how I have drawn on various perspectives on action research in developing my own inquiry practice, and I describe some of the ways in which I have sought to develop critical subjectivity. In the latter part of this chapter, I critically reflect on the quality of my action research practice in relation to a number of broad criteria and choice-points identified by Bradbury and Reason (2001). I conclude with a consideration of the kinds of issues and tensions that have been raised for me as I make sense of data.

2.1.1 Shifting worldviews

I set out to develop an inquiry practice from the perspective that current ecological challenges are grounded in the conceptual and philosophical framework of the dominant, empirical-positivist Western worldview. Thus, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'the notion of an organic, living, and spiritual universe was replaced by that of the world as a machine, and the world-machine became the dominant metaphor of the modern era' (Capra, 1983:38). The individual geniuses

of a series of influential mathematicians, including Descartes and Newton, resulted in an ideology of the universe as 'one huge mechanical system, operating according to exact mathematical laws' (Capra, 1983:49). In particular, it has been argued that the Cartesian split between mind and matter and correspondingly between self and other, has resulted in a worldview where 'there was nothing left alive but individual human egos almost completely detached from any intimacy with the world' (Cashman, 1987:29). The mechanistic worldview predominant for the last four hundred years has afforded significant gains, in our knowledge of science, technology and medicine, for example; but at the same time, many would argue that it has proved a highly unsuitable framework from which to approach many aspects of life and of the cosmic experience. In the words of Toulmin (1990), the search for an absolute, objective truth triggered a historical shift from a practical philosophy based on experience and particular practical cases to a theoretical philosophy concerned with the general, timeless and universal. Inspiringly, Toulmin and many other observers suggest that there are emerging worldviews and methods of inquiry which aim to reverse this trend, such that:

> Since 1945, the problems that have challenged reflective thinkers on a deep philosophical level… are matters of *practice*: including matters of life and death… The 'modern' focus on the written, the universal, the general, the timeless - which monopolised the work of most philosophers after 1630 – is being broadened to include once again the oral, the particular, the local and the timely. (Toulmin, 1990:186)

It could be argued that, in present times, we are experiencing a paradigm shift from a modern to a postmodern worldview (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Orr, 1992; Reason, 2002a; Skolimowski, 1994; Tarnas, 1991). Such a shift in current patterns of thought and action can be usefully considered in the light of Thomas Kuhn's work on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970). Kuhn showed that taken-for-granted assumptions and prior constructs provide us with implicit frameworks, or paradigms, which we then use to shape our thinking. When our paradigms remain unnamed or unchallenged, our thoughts and actions as human beings tend to align themselves with our given mental contexts, until such a time when '…problems—queries and data which do not fit the paradigm—accrue to dramatise the inadequacy of the paradigm's assumptions. In periods of radical change, dissonance arises between previous assumptions and present experience;

the paradigm is brought into question—and into consciousness' (Macy, 1991a:8). Many would argue that the empirical-positivist worldview which has dominated Western civilisation for a number of centuries is outdated, and is necessarily being replaced by an emergent worldview which 'has been described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining feature is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author' (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:6).

An emergent worldview is necessarily pluralistic and inter-disciplinary, borrowing from a number of intellectual traditions, including the relatively contemporary fields of systems thinking, deep ecology and feminism, as well as the ancient Eastern philosophy of Buddhism. Furthermore, in so far as an emergent worldview is contentious and evades a definitive metaphysic, it invites and demands problematisation.

This is the frame from which I approach my inquiry, and in this chapter I attempt to critically consider some of the underlying premises of an emergent, participatory worldview, focusing in particular on how these may translate into appropriate and effective inquiry/research practices. In Chapter Six, I introduce a number of different theoretical and philosophical frameworks, all of which may be understood to be grounded in, and to contribute to, participatory worldviews. These include the fields of deep ecology, ecopsychology and panpsychism. In the remainder of the thesis, I draw on these perspectives to develop an understanding of how we might appropriately engage with ecological challenges.

2.2 Action Research

This thesis is clearly framed within the traditions of action research, as developed by Reason and Bradbury (2001), Greenwood and Levin (1998), Freire (1970, 1982), Marshall (1981, 1999, 2001), Fals Borda (1991, 2001), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) and Torbert (1991, 2001, 2004) amongst others. The field of action research is made up of a diversity of voices and methodologies, and indeed, has been identified by Reason and Bradbury (2001) as drawing on a comprehensive range of theoretical foundations, including the pedagogical work of Freire (1970) in the South, as well as pragmatic philosophy (Greenwood and Levin, 1998), the

practice of democracy (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996), critical thinking (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), liberationist thought (Fals Borda, 1991; Selener, 1997), humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Reason and Rowan, 1981; Rowan, 2001; Heron and Reason, 1997), constructionist theory (Ludema, Cooperider and Barrett, 2001) and systems thinking (Flood, 2001).

At the same time, those practices which form the field of action research also share important core values and characteristics which paradigmatically distinguish it from other kinds of social research. In the Introduction to the *Handbook of Action Research*, editors Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury put forth the following working definition of action research, which is further built upon throughout the volume:

> …Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:1)

The above definition integrates five interdependent characteristics which arguably draw together the different schools of practice in this field, and it is these characteristics which I find useful in framing my research practice. In particular, these defining characteristics say something different about the underlying purposes of engaging in action research. For example, a primary purpose of action research is the generation of *practical knowing* that is useful to people in making sense of their situations, and which assists them in developing and enacting more effective *knowledge-in-action* in their everyday lives, where the elements of action and reflection, theory and practice, build on one another and provide a more comprehensive, thoughtful and purposeful guide to being-in-the-world. Moreover, a broader, more encompassing purpose of action research is that of *human and ecological flourishing*; thus the different arenas in which action research is practised are linked by a common purpose, all focusing on things that matter to those involved in the research. Greenwood and Levin, for example, suggest that

action research is one way through which to reconstruct relationships between universities and societies:

> Community members, small-scale organisations, minorities, and other powerless or poor people who want assistance with broad social change issues are looking for solutions to everyday problems in particular contexts: poverty, addiction, racism, environmental degradation, and so on. It does not matter to them whether one university has more government grants than another or ranks above another in the annual *Business Week* university rating; their concern is whether they can get help in producing research that will assist in solving their problems. (Greenwood and Levin, 2000:89-90)

Action research is therefore *participative and democratic*, and acknowledges that human persons are acting, thinking-feeling agents, who have both the capacity, and the right, to participate in processes of knowledge creation relevant to their own situations and life experiences. Again in the words of Greenwood and Levin (2000:97), 'by linking inquiry to action in a given context, action research emphasises the role of human inquirers as acting subjects in a holistic situation'. Thus, action research is only possible *with*, *for* and *by* persons and communities, and the research design and execution are therefore participative and democratic processes, ideally involving all stakeholders (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Moreover, action research takes an *emergent, developmental form*:

> Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice. Action research is emancipatory, it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge. In action research knowledge is a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:2)

In the next section, I expand on some of the characteristics of action research which differentiate it from other social research, including positivist (mostly quantitative) research *on* people and post-positivist (mostly qualitative) research *about* people (Heron, 1996). Furthermore, I outline the congruence between action research and ecological thinking and action so as to demonstrate why the methodology is fitting to my area of inquiry.

2.3 Research with others

2.3.1 From research dyad to mutuality in inquiry

The conventional interpretation of research as a dyad, composed of an elite academic researcher studying a passive subject, can be understood as a harmful, dis-empowering and colonising discourse of 'the other'. Indeed, the action research paradigm demands a significant re-examination of the Cartesian observer-observed mutually-exclusive dyad and suggests that ordinary people can develop the self-determining capacity to create knowledge which is useful in transforming and making sense of their everyday lives and practice. As Orlando Fals Borda (2001:30) suggests, it seems counterproductive to regard the researcher and researched as 'two discrete, discordant or antagonistic poles. Rather, we had to consider them both as real "thinking-feeling persons" whose diverse views on the shared life experience should be taken jointly into account'. The significance of seeking to re-evaluate and re-describe the degenerative but pervasive knower/known dichotomy is that it brings forth the possibility of participatory relationships between human beings and between humans and nature, one which Fals Borda describes as a 'subject/subject horizontal relationship':

> A resolution of this tension implied looking for what Agnes Heller (1989) called 'symmetric reciprocity', for mutual respect and appreciation among participants, and also between humans and nature, in order to arrive at a subject/subject horizontal relationship. Moreover, the resolution of this tension was another way of defining authentic 'participation' away from liberal manipulative versions – like the dominant one offered by political scientists…and as a

> manner of combining different kinds of knowledge. (Fals Borda, 2001:30)

The methodological stance that all people are capable of creating knowledge that is valid and legitimate, based on their experience and put into practice through purposeful action, has huge implications when considering how we might approach ecological challenges. More specifically, it begins to say something different about where agency, creativity and responsibility lie in dealing with these complex matters. Rather than rely on academic elites, policy-makers and institutions to deliver solutions for ecological crises, which affect all beings indiscriminately, this methodological stance suggests a courageous departure from such learned helplessness and detachment. Instead, it proposes participation and engagement by ordinary people in shaping more effective ways of approaching such pervasive problems.

Moreover, as Fals Borda suggests, a more horizontal subject/subject relationship begins to combine different kinds of knowledge, and when seeking to explore and respond to local and practical problems, the participation and experience of those most immediately concerned might be particularly relevant. Thus, the methodology of action research takes seriously the notion of an extended epistemology, and is shaped so as to take into account different ways of knowing. Greenwood and Levin identify that:

> The relationship between the professional researcher and the local stakeholders is based on bringing the diverse bases of all participants' knowledge and their distinctive social locations to bear on a problem collaboratively…Action research does not romanticise local knowledge and denigrate professional knowledge. It is a co-generative research process precisely because both types of knowledge are essential to it. (Greenwood and Levin, 2000:96)

Perhaps most significant is the notion that this horizontal subject/subject relationship could also apply to the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. The methodology of action research is congruent with the principles of ecological thinking in that they both provide a critique on the established mind/matter and subject/object dualisms, which have arguably led to the distancing of humans from nature and thereby to the ecological crises of our times. The

implicit and explicit assumption is that within the physical world awareness is an exclusively human attribute:

> The interior human 'mind' or 'subject' is kept apprised to random happenings in the exterior 'objective' world by the sense organs, mechanical structures that register discrete bits of sensory data…Within this account, 'meaning' and 'value' are assumed to be secondary, derivative phenomena resulting from the internal association of external facts that have no meaning in themselves…the external world is tacitly assumed to be a collection of purely objective, random things entirely lacking in value or meaning until organised by the ineffable human mind… (Abram, 1987:8)

A subject/subject participatory relationship would see mind and value in all of matter, and the hierarchical distinctions as false and degenerative. As part of my research, I have considered what it would mean to view our being in the world in this way. From Chapter Six onwards, I expand on this by drawing on the philosophical thought of Spinoza, the panpsychism expounded by Mathews (2003, 2005) and ecopsychological and deep ecological perspectives as put forward by Fisher (2002), Bender (2003), Berry (1990, 1999) and Macy (1991a, 1991b, 1995, 1998), amongst others.

2.3.2 Politics and values as formative research qualities

Action research is embedded in transformed understandings of the creation of knowledge among human beings (Hall, 2001) which highlight the importance of asking searching, thought-provoking questions with regards to the process of knowledge-creation, including questions about privilege and worth (for whom and for what purpose is this knowledge created?) and power and politics (who decides on what constitutes knowledge, and how can it be used and abused?).

The thought and practice of action research recognises that objectivity and value-free neutrality are unattainable constructions of the Cartesian mind/matter dichotomy; instead, it is appreciated that all research agendas are necessarily

located within moral and political contexts. Greenwood and Levin are critical of the relationship between mainstream universities and society and suggest that the research agendas to which the former choose to pay attention (often under the influence of government and big private sector players) marginalise socially relevant research which matter to other (relatively disempowered) social groups. Action research has the potential to begin to shift this dynamic, and as Kemmis and McTaggart (2000:568) point out, in the so-called developed countries, 'many of those who have adopted [participatory research] approaches have been academics committed to integrating university responsibilities with community works'.

Proponents of action research have sought to highlight 'the politics of conventional social research, arguing that orthodox social science, despite its claim to value neutrality, normally serves the ideological function of justifying the position and interests of the wealthy and powerful' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000:568). Greenwood and Levin (1998:53), for example, expose uncomfortable and often unchallenged political and power dimensions, suggesting that 'If action research can be categorised as unscientific or "soft", then power holders both in academia and in society at large feel free to ignore our results, which is convenient when our findings are critical of existing power relations'.

In acknowledging that value judgements are inseparable from research efforts, the realm of axiology, posing the questions of 'why' and 'for what purpose', also becomes an important philosophical consideration. Positivist and post-positivist paradigms would consider propositional knowing about the world as an end in itself; similarly, interpretivists would also value propositional knowing in so far as it is 'instrumentally valuable as a means to social emancipation' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000:172). My own sense of purpose centres on exploring and developing practical knowing, or *knowing how*, around how we might creatively respond to ecological challenges and how we might appropriately act for the flourishing of the wider ecology.

2.3.3 Primacy of the practical

The separation of research from practice is another long-established dichotomy, the usefulness of which is called into question by action research. Praxis-oriented

research developed in collaboration with practitioners in particular contexts has much greater potential to be valuable as a tool for social transformation. Kemmis and McTaggart suggest that:

> Participatory action research (not always by that name) frequently emerges in situations where people want to make changes thoughtfully – that is, after critical reflection. It emerges when people want to think 'realistically' about where they are now, how things came to be that way, and, from these starting points, how, in practice, things might be changed. (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000:573)

Thus, praxis-oriented research brings together the spheres of action and reflection, with the purpose of engendering, through a disciplined and critically-rigorous process, knowing that is more grounded, self-aware and applicable. When we consider action research as a cyclical interconnecting between phases of action and reflection, it becomes evident that it is grounded in a radical extended epistemology which acknowledges the full range of human sensibilities and experience as valid instruments of inquiry (Heron, 1996), thus respecting the value of whole-person being and knowing. This is particularly fitting in exploring the experience of ecological living, which is essentially a holistic, whole-being way of placing ourselves within the world. In relation to my own inquiry practice, this leads me to intentionally approach the research process, and the experience of ecological thinking and acting, with heightened awareness, and to attend to an extended epistemology, paying attention to how the different forms of knowing and territories of experience can inform praxis.

2.3.4 Inquiry in the service of ecological flourishing

I find myself particularly enthused by the congruence that is evident between the fundamental values which underpin the action research methodology and those that underlie a more ecological and systemic way of acting in the world. Action research and ecological thinking are both philosophies of life, based on participatory worldviews, and therefore there is a strong link here between *what* I

am choosing to research and *how* I am going about researching it, indeed, I cannot imagine one without the other.

A participatory worldview necessarily 'places human persons and communities as part of their world – both human and more-than-human – embodied in their world, co-creating their world. A participatory perspective asks us to be both situated and reflexive…' (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:7). Participatory worldviews therefore encourage us not only to be critically aware of our social constructs and abstractions, but further to be aware of our participation in all relational contexts, including, necessarily, the natural world to which we belong. Thus the human ego is not the overriding unit of study; rather, we are asked to attend to the situated self, and the self-in-process and relationship with others, including the natural world. The theoretical perspectives upon which I draw in developing my understanding of repose (including those of deep ecology, ecopsychology and panpsychism, as introduced in Chapter Six) are similarly grounded within participatory worldviews. Therefore, the methodology of action research is most appropriate when approaching my particular research interests, which revolve around how we can think and act as part of a wider ecology.

Throughout this section, I delineated some of the underlying values characterising action research. In the following section, I outline some of the different articulations of action research practice, and explain how I am working with these.

2.4 Living inquiry

There are many articulations around how to engage in action research, and each has its particular focus and framing. In this section, I explain how I have drawn on varied articulations and frameworks of action research practice in order to develop my own inquiry practice.

Through my inquiry, I have sought to create spaces for locally-relevant collaborative inquiries within communities. In doing so, I have chosen not to take a singular methodological approach; rather, I have sought to approach life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999) and to draw on the kinds of thinking and methods which appeared generative and appropriate as the inquiry emerged and unfolded. Thus, I

align myself with Geoff Mead's (2001:iii) notion of 'living inquiry as a form of action research which consciously avoids adopting any single method, preferring Feyerabend's argument that there are no general solutions and that the best chance of advancing knowledge comes from the intuitive use of a pluralistic methodology'.

That understandings and enactments of action research can be developed *in* and *through* practice is further supported by Heron's caveat that his own interpretations of co-operative inquiry be continually developed through dialogue:

> It follows from the model of reality as subjective-objective…that there is no such thing as *the* account of co-operative inquiry, only *an* account…The discussion of validity and validity procedures in this book does not hark back to the outmoded objective stance of positivism…It is an attempt to discover, in dialogue with my peers, how I can engage in co-operative inquiry with integrity. It develops a personal canon which legitimates, for me, my participation in continuing dialogue. That canon will and must change as the dialogue proceeds. (Heron, 1996:6)

In the sub-sections that follow, I present the canon from which I have drawn in giving form to my emerging inquiry practice, and explain how I am contributing to dialogue around these.

2.4.1 First, second and third-person inquiry

A distinction which I find useful in framing my approach to action research is that of first-person, second-person and third-person research/practice (Torbert, 2001). These dimensions of action research practice relate to attempts to bring heightened attention and critical awareness into increasingly more areas of experience and into the midst of our real-time daily practice, so as to 'welcome (rather than resist) timely transformation at the personal, relational and organisational scale' (Torbert, 2001:256), and so as to contribute to 'a present-centred, timeliness-seeking participatory action inquiry' (Torbert, 2001:251).

2.4.1a First-person inquiry

Torbert's articulation of action inquiry as a particular form of action research is one that I have found helpful and inspiring (and in section 2.4.2 of this chapter, I explicitly consider the place of enthusiasm and inspiration in inquiry). Action inquiry, he proposes, is 'about discovering actions in real-time personal and professional settings that alert, attune, and sometimes even align self, immediate others, organizational strategies, and global vision - and that encourage non-violent personal, organizational, and societal transformations' (Torbert, http://www2.bc.edu/~torbert/, Accessed 31 May, 2003). Such a practice, he suggests, is

> …inspired by the primitive sense that all our actions, including those we are most certain about and are most committed to, are in fact also inquiries. Conversely, action inquiry is also inspired by the primitive sense that all our inquiries, including those we most painstakingly construct to detach ourselves as researchers, in so far as possible from biasing interests, are in fact also actions. (Torbert, 2001:250)

This is not dissimilar to Judi Marshall's (1999) notion of *living life as inquiry*, which I have also found stimulating and thought-provoking, and in reference to which I have entitled the present section of this chapter:

> By *living life as inquiry* I mean a range of beliefs, strategies, and ways of behaving which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question. This involves, for example, attempting to open to continual question what I know, feel, do and want, and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages. (Marshall, 2001:156-157)

The ways in which we might actively engage in this questioning, and in which we might process its stages, could be understood as aspects of first-person research/practice. First-person research, therefore, is about developing critical

attention to one's own frames, desires, feelings, and patterns of behaviour, and about attempts to sustain such attention moment-to-moment (see Marshall and Mead, 2005). Torbert (2001:253) describes this as 'listening through oneself both ways (towards origin and outcome)'.

Another way of thinking about first-person research is to say that through engaging in this kind of inquiry we seek to make explicit both our *espoused theories* and our *theories-in-use* (Argyris and Schön, 1974), or to critically consider how 'what we say we do or think we do' relates to 'what we actually do' in practice. Indeed, it is possible to argue that first-person research/practice is a significant and defining dimension of action research generally; for example, Argyris and Schön's (1974) articulation of action science 'addresses the problem of multiple interpretations by requiring both practitioners and researchers to make their own interpretation processes explicit and open to public (intersubjective) testing' (Friedman, 2001:161).

A large part of what I attempt to do in my own research practice is to engage in first-person inquiry, and throughout the thesis, I seek to notice how my capacity to do this well is shifting over time.

2.4.1b Second-person inquiry

Second-person research involves 'encouraging public testing of attributions and assessments in real-time encounters and meetings, along with transformations toward increasingly mutual control of our collective vision, strategies, performance, and assessment' (Torbert, http://www2.bc.edu/~torbert/, Accessed 31 May, 2003). This may be understood as co-generating first person research/practice in interaction with others, or speaking-and-listening-with-others (Heron, 1996). Through my experience of participating in second-person inquiry with others, I have come to understand this type of inquiry practice as being grounded in the shared aspiration to help each other learn and develop together, and to engage in mutual exploration and common learning within an area of activity whilst remaining self-focused and respectful of individual motivations and first-person inquiries.

Co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001) is a specific articulation of how we might engage in first-person and second-person research practice in a community of peers. Essentially, this is 'a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things and to learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better' (Reason and Heron, www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/layguide.htm, Accessed 6 October 2002). Co-operative inquiry is characterised by small groups of people coming together to inquire into common concerns and interests, acting as both as co-subjects and co-researchers through cycles of action and reflection. The defining qualities of co-operative inquiry (which I would argue are also qualities underpinning a variety of perspectives to action research) are as follows, as adapted from Heron and Reason (2001):

1. *Extended epistemology*: Integrating experiential knowing through meeting and encounter, presentational knowing through the use of aesthetic, expressive forms, propositional knowing through concepts and frameworks, and practical knowing in the exercise of interpersonal and political skill, for example. Primacy is given to critically-informed action and practical transformation, in the belief that practical knowing is grounded on and consummates the other three forms of knowing.

2. *Research cycling*: This refers to the intentional movement between phases of reflection and action over a period of time, whereby participants experiment with ideas and perspectives emerging from the inquiry and reflect on the usefulness and/or validity of these in practice, and furthermore draw on the results of such experimentation/reflection in the next iteration of the inquiry cycle.

3. *Balance of action and reflection*: Explicit attention is given to the interplay between reflection/making sense and experience/action, and on how these inform and shape one another.

4. *Developing critical attention*: Including non-attachment and meta-intentionality, and fine-tuned discrimination in perceiving, acting, and in bracketing off and reframing lunching concepts.

5. *Authentic collaboration*: All participants are fully involved as co-researchers in all research decisions regarding both content and method.

6. *Dealing with distress*: Including the development of the emotional competence to manage effectively anxiety stirred up by the inquiry process.

7. *Chaos and order*: This relates to participants' capacity to creatively allow for the interdependence of chaos and order, and for an attitude which tolerates messiness, confusion and tension without premature closure.

The above are qualities of inquiry which I have sought to develop, to varying extents, quite apart from my involvement in formal co-operative inquiry groups. For example, key challenges raised for me in developing an inquiry practice have revolved around the following kinds of questions: What is authentic collaboration? What does this look like in practice, and how do we make it possible (or not possible)? What does it mean for the quality of action research practice when it is missing? What competencies and qualities might I draw on in dealing with distress, and how do I (alongside others) develop these? What do we mean by chaos and order in inquiry, and how do we experience and appropriately tolerate, shape and hold these?

In Chapters Three and Four, I illustrate how I sought to create possibilities for second-person inquiry in various fields of practice, and later in the thesis, I analyse some of the difficulties I experienced in doing so, returning to the kinds of questions I listed above.

2.4.1c Third-person inquiry

Third-person research involves 'publicly testing propositions with persons not present through measures and publications, as well as through creating learning organisations that interweave first-, second- and third-person research' (Torbert, http://www2.bc.edu/~torbert/, Accessed 31 May, 2003). I understand third-person research/practice to relate to larger-scale impact across wider systems, and it is significant that recent papers by Greenwood (2002) and Gustavsen (2003) have focused on the challenges of moving from the first-person and second-person to the

third-person level. In particular, Greenwood and Gustavsen both suggest that one of the widely-accepted strengths of action research, that of the general focus on local (relatively small-scale) cases, may not readily speak or provide answers to other actors than those directly involved, and who may pose their questions and concerns in more or less general terms, such as 'what to do about poverty; participation in work; the process of globalisation' etc. The challenge identified by Greenwood and Gustavsen is therefore along the following lines: 'Are there ways in which action research can *transcend* the single case without losing the action element along the road?' (Gustavsen, 2003:95). In his paper, Greenwood (2002) credits Gustavsen with the development of broad programmes, rather than single cases, and in his response, Gustavsen develops this claim:

> … First and foremost: the idea is not to replace the single case with a number of cases but to create or support *social movements*. A social movement is a series of events that are linked to each other and where the meaning and construction of each event is part of a broader stream of events and not a self-sufficient element in an aggregate. There is little point in replacing the single case with a number of disconnected cases. What is here called a social movement can emanate from many sources and pertain to a wide range of themes…
>
> …The point in this context is, however, that we cannot face the larger questions of society by digging continuously deeper into an endless series of disconnected groups, however interesting the relationship between the action researcher and each group may be. (Gustavsen, 2003:95-98)

Gustavsen (2003) acknowledges that there remain considerable challenges in learning to research and report adequately on movement level rather than case level. He suggests that 'what is needed is a new generation of efforts to catch initiation, development and result on movement level' (2003:97) and that we can begin to do this by more actively using what is done by such Latin American contributors as Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, suggesting that 'with them focus has all the time been on movements, not on cases' (2003:97). Gustavsen also refers to Greenwood and others' work with the Mondragon co-operative (see

Greenwood and Levin, 1998) as being much more about a social movement than an individual organisation.

Greenwood's (2002) and Gustavsen's (2003) arguments raise some important questions for me, for if it is valuable for the research efforts to be of some kind of size, then what does this say about the do-ability of these kinds of programmes, particularly by early-career researchers such as myself? As I have argued previously, in a book review of Greenwood and Levin's *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change* (1998), the novice researcher may find it difficult to follow in the footsteps of such large-scale projects as that of the Mondragon study:

> …It is important to question the worth of these cases from the perspective of a novice action researcher. Both examples given relate to large-scale community and organisation-wide action research, carried out either with the backing of accepted authoritative bodies or under the initiative of respected professional researchers. Both cases would have demanded considerable funding, time and effort, and not least, access; access which may not have been so readily granted had the outside researchers not been of high repute in their own fields. Therefore, whilst these cases are helpful in portraying the potential scope and scale of AR projects, they might also be considered misleading milestones for first-time action researchers hoping to initiate their own AR projects, many of which will inevitably, and perhaps necessarily, begin on a more modest, localised scale. (Gayá and Reason, 2002:114)

Taking into account the current levels of debate around issues of third-person action research practice, and the apparent belief by many within the field that this is a challenge which action research needs to face if it is to affirm its legitimacy as a practice capable of influencing policy and social movements on a wider scale, it seems important for me to consider how my own first-person and second-person research strands fit into broader patterns. Thus, I seek to do what both Greenwood and Gustavsen argue should be done:

> …to link micro and macro, to place each event in a broader context. In doing this, however, each event has to move into the background

> and be part of a larger scene rather than stand out as something to investigate in detail. (Gustavsen, 2003:97-98)

Through my research practice, I have sought to bring qualities of inquiry to the various spaces in which I have engaged, and to develop my first-person research practice in relation to these. My sense is that, through my engagement in various fields of practice, I am potentially able to contribute not only to my own practice and to local practice within those spaces, but also to broader social movements that seek to move us towards ecological and social justice. Within these movements, the more general questions to which I believe this thesis contributes are those around how we might develop the personal and organisational capacities necessary to engage with complex ecological challenges in current times, and to make sense of the difficulties, anxiety and uncertainty which may be experienced in doing so.

In the following sub-section, I expand on my first-person research/practice.

2.4.2 Critical subjectivity

A key quality I have sought to develop as part of my first-person research practice is that of critical subjectivity (Reason and Rowan, 1981), the ability to reflect critically on what I bring to this inquiry as researcher. Critical subjectivity may be understood as a mode of inquiry that is 'both deeply engaged and rigorously self-critical' (Reason, 1994a:11), or as the 'conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself' (Lincoln and Guba, 2000:183). One of my primary intentions in carrying out research is to reflect on my own life choices and behaviour, and thus I identify with Reason and Marshall's argument that good research is not only *for them*, and *for us*, but also *for me*, contributing to personal development and transformation. Good research is '*for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world, and so elicits the response "That's exciting!" – taking exciting back to its root meaning, to set in action' (1987:112-113).

Following careful reflection on the first eighteen months of my PhD studies, I identified that my energy lay in thinking about how we could shift feelings of

alienation, fragmentation and apathy, arguably the maladies of current times, to feelings of connectedness and participation in relation to wider earth systems. For me, part of making this shift has revolved around approaching this inquiry as a whole person, and not as an objective, detached outsider. As Mitroff and Kilmann state:

> The main reason why the social sciences have given a fragmentary and incomplete account of the nature of man is that the social sciences have themselves been conceived of and practiced in a largely fragmentary and incomplete manner. (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978:3)

My efforts to develop personal awareness and tracking disciplines are related to my aspirations to hold the notion of living life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999) moment to moment, in disciplined and rigorous ways. The need to develop these competencies also arises from my commitment to bring forth responsible, legitimate and powerful accounts of how I seek to influence what goes on around me and with what intentions. This includes asking myself questions such as 'where do I position myself within these different spaces/fields of practice?' and 'what kinds of interventions do I choose to make, and how do I seek to engage others in possibilities for inquiry and change?'. It is also about trying to capture how I can find the courage, sensitivity and robustness to make these interventions.

In this section, I outline the kinds of practices with which I have engaged so as to develop the quality of my attention 'in the midst of daily practice', and I touch upon some of the themes that have become apparent to me as I reflect on my first-person work. Of course, the emergent quality of my research practice is something on which I focus throughout the thesis, especially in later chapters; nevertheless, I wish to make the point here that I understand my capacity to engage in first-person inquiry to be evolving over time.

At this point, I wish to make quite clear how terribly difficult I have found it to sustain a systematic first-person practice. As Torbert suggests, in trying to enact first-person inquiry in our daily lives, and in the midst of our real-time actions,

> …we immediately discover a fundamental difficulty. *We rarely remember to do so.* Moreover, we don't really know what to do

> when we do remember. We rarely experience ourselves as present in a wondering, inquiring, 'mindful' way to our own action. (Torbert, 2001:250)

This is an apt description of my own experience of first-person research/practice. I find that the heightened attention which is necessary in developing such mindful presence is difficult to cultivate and remains fairly tenuous. Nevertheless, developing such critical subjectivity is core to what I am trying to do through engaging in action research (that is, work towards human and ecological flourishing) and therefore I have attempted to make this an active part of my research process, and to track how the quality of my critical attention has shifted as I have progressed through the PhD. The following are the kinds of practices, and areas of my life, with which I have consciously engaged in developing my capacity for critical subjectivity. These made space for—and gave form to—my first-person inquiry practice in various ways and at various stages throughout my research. I list these briefly below to contribute to the present account of how I sought to develop an inquiry practice; I return to these as appropriate throughout the thesis:

1. Journaling as a way of developing detailed attention to my being-in-the-world and to what happens around me and also through me, or what Judi Marshall (2001) calls *inner and outer arcs of attention*. I find journaling particularly useful as a method for capturing these in the moment (or soon afterwards), and that my capacity to engage in first-person inquiry develops as I return to these, and choose poignant moments on which to reflect off-line. Attending to the questions and challenges with which I am playing at particular moments helps me to draw out some of the broader themes arising as part of my inquiry. I include examples of reflective personal writing from my journal where appropriate in the thesis.

2. My educative practice as a Research Teaching Associate at the School of Management from 2001-2005, as one of the organisational roles which, following Torbert (2001), I have framed as action inquiry opportunities. I return to aspects of this organisational role where appropriate throughout the thesis, and I attempt to show how developing critical subjectivity over time has allowed me to begin to transform worn cycles of attributions, emotions and actions in this arena (Torbert, 2001).

3. To allow myself the space to attend to questions that mattered to me, in 2002 I joined a co-operative inquiry group focusing on embodiment and place. The group met for a period of nine months, and over that time, the kinds of questions we attended to revolved around inhabiting space more fully and with heightened awareness; both the space that is our bodies and our place in nature, thus developing a sensitivity of our fullness of being. I came to pay attention to such questions as: Where and how do I meet 'the other' that is more-than-human nature? In time, I realised that questions around my sense of place and my experience of self-in-context were core to my inquiry. I return to these later in the thesis, when I speak about the qualities and practice of repose, or restfulness, which I argue may be key to our capacity to engage with ecological challenges in life-affirming and joyful ways.

4. In 2003, I took part in a meditation retreat, which I saw as an opportunity to develop my skills in engaging in foundational practices. Through engaging in an unfolding meditative practice (which, to be clear, is not based solely around formal practices of meditation as expounded by Buddhist traditions) I have sought to develop the capacity for openness and silent attention to my being-in-the-moment, shifting the focus of my attention away from the abstract 'out there' worries which regularly occupy me when not in meditation.

5. From time to time throughout the last five years, I have taken part in deep ecology exercises, otherwise known as 'the work that reconnects' (Macy and Brown, 1998), which have also contributed to my capacity to engage with first-person inquiry in sustained and life-affirming ways. For example, the *Council of All Beings* rituals developed by Seed et al. (1988) and Macy and Brown (1998) encourage us to share our sadness and despair at the state of the world, and then invite us to transcend our bounded, human selves and to connect with another life-form, experiencing the Earth and the problems it is facing from this being's perspective. To enter into conversation with another being requires us to think and to act from an extended epistemology, and although I experience some difficulty in representing the experiential knowing that is embedded in those experiences, I can begin to name this as a sense of deep compassion, and liberating creativity, which arises through speaking from another being's perspective. Furthermore, I have become (at least temporarily) aware of a sense of interconnectedness, and of a shift from an

anthropocentric to an eco-centric experiencing of the world. In helping to facilitate these exercises, I have become deeply conscious of to the importance of holding these as solemn, sacred spaces, and of why this needs to be understood as a serious part of the despair work which Macy, Seed and many others argue we need to open ourselves to if we are to shift current planetary patterns.

In Chapters Three and Four, I describe in some detail the various spaces in which I sought to develop both my practice as an action researcher and my thinking around what it might mean to contribute to change towards ecological sustainability. I describe how I sought to develop my first-person inquiry practice and create possibilities for second-person inquiry in each of these. Throughout the thesis, I reflect on the quality of my action research/inquiry practice and on how this is developing over time.

2.5 Quality and choice-points in Action Research

In the conclusion to the *Handbook of Action Research*, Bradbury and Reason (2001) reflect on the issues and choice-points which action researchers may attend to in improving the quality of their action research practice. Bradbury and Reason (2001:454) are clear that no action research project can address all issues equally and that 'making explicit the questions of what is important to attend to is itself often part of good action research'. They suggest that PhD students using action research include a review of the strengths and weaknesses of the work in relation to these five inter-related issues and ensuing eight choice-points. In this section, I seek to do just this. My aim in doing so is to critically reflect on the degree to which my action research practice has appropriately engaged with and responded to these choice-points. I do this at this stage so that the reader may approach the remainder of the thesis with some awareness of the questions and tensions which emerged for me as I attempted to develop the quality of my action research practice.

Below, I list the questions put forward by Bradbury and Reason (2001) and I respond to each of these in turn.

Is the action research:

- **Explicit in developing a praxis of relational-participation?**

As I have made clear, a defining quality of action research is that it is participative and democratic, and acknowledges that human persons are acting, thinking-feeling agents, who have both the capacity and the right to participate in processes of knowledge creation relevant to their own situations and life experiences. Thus, Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest that action research is only possible *with*, *for* and *by* persons and communities, and the research design and execution are therefore participative and democratic processes, ideally involving all stakeholders.

I am not able to claim that I have succeeded in making space for participation and democratic involvement of all stakeholders in my research practice—that is, in making *my* research *our* research. My intention in this thesis is to evidence how my own capacities for first-person research/practice have shifted, and part of what I sought to do within my first-person inquiry was to create spaces for inquiry with others. I believe that I was able to do this to varying extents, as I show in later chapters. That I was not able to do this as well as I might have liked is, I believe, in part due to my relative lack of experience as an action researcher in the early stages of my inquiry, and arguably partly due to the anxieties and tensions which were raised for me (and many others) in considering how we might appropriately position ourselves and respond to ecological challenges, as I explain in Chapter Eight.

I feel that the way that I engaged (or failed to engage) with this choice-point is a relative weakness of my action research practice. Bradbury and Reason (2001:448) advocate that 'we must pay attention to the congruence between qualities of participation which we espouse and the actual work we accomplish, especially as our work involves us in networks of power dynamics which both limit and enable our work'. My sense is that while seeking to make space for second-person inquiry, I at times failed to give sufficient thought and attention to what the qualities of participation and collaboration which I espoused *actually meant in practice*. Similarly, in the moment, I often failed to attend to 'issues of interdependence, politics, power and empowerment' which Bradbury and Reason (2001:448) argue 'must be addressed at both micro- and macro-levels…'. My sense is that my shortcomings in relation to these areas limited the extent to which

I was able to make space for genuine participation and critical second-person inquiry in these arenas. In Chapters Three and Eight, I further reflect on what these shortcomings meant for the quality of my action research practice, and I explain how I am attempting to develop my capabilities in these areas.

- **Guided by reflexive concern for practical outcomes?**

A further characteristic of action research is the importance placed on the practical outcomes of the work. Greenwood and Levin (2000) suggest that social research is valid to the extent to which the ensuing learning can be put into practice in the service of problem-solving in real-life contexts:

> Credibility, validity, and reliability in action research are measured by the willingness of local stakeholders to act on the results of the action research, thereby risking their welfare on the 'validity' of their ideas and the degree to which the outcomes meet their expectations…the core validity claim centres on the workability of the actual social change activity engaged in, and the test is whether or not the actual solution to a problem arrived at solves the problem. (Greenwood and Levin, 2000:96)

This is, I believe, one of the choice-points to which I have given particular attention in attempting to develop the quality of my action research practice. That throughout this thesis I often refer to my research *practice* signals the importance I have placed on generating practical knowing in relation to the core questions I have held throughout my inquiry. These include: How do I translate my values into authentic, effective practice when conducting research? How do I practice action research in such a way that I can contribute to change within established systems? And how can I seek to do this within the context of Western academia, where, as Greenwood and Levin argue (2000), the received view of knowledge-production is rooted in the Cartesian ethos, which has succeeded in separating mind from body, praxis from reflection, science from social action, all dichotomies which seem degenerative?

Apart from seeking to develop the effectiveness of my research and facilitative practice, I have also sought to develop practical knowing regarding how I may

appropriately engage with present ecological challenges. Core questions for me here have included: How do I develop the capacity to engage with such challenges in joyful and life-affirming ways? How do I sustain my engagement with such challenges, despite the distress and despair which I sometimes experience in doing so? How do I make sense of these experiences, and how can I look after myself while doing so? How do I position myself in relation to the ecological crisis, and what would appropriate action entail? And how might I speak to others about this, particularly in my role as an educator?

Thus, much of the focus of my PhD inquiry has been on the development of *practical knowing*, or *knowing how*, in relation to these myriad questions. Indeed, through this thesis, I aim to provide an account of how my *practical knowing* and the *practical outcomes* of my work (or my *practice*) have shifted over time, as a result of having engaged in this inquiry.

- **Inclusive of a plurality of knowing?**

Heron and Reason (1997) suggest that the quality of participatory paradigm research can be ascertained by the extent to which the different kinds of knowing explored and developed, including the experiential, presentational, propositional and practical, are congruent with one another, and consequently lead to action to transform the world in the service of human and ecological flourishing.

In a similar vein, Bradbury and Reason (2001) suggest that action researchers ask themselves the following kinds of questions:

> How well is an inquiry experientially grounded? How is it embodied in sensuous knowing? What is the appropriate form of presentation given the audience? Is it aesthetically elegant? Is it conceptually clear to all involved? Does it promote further knowing by raising new questions allowing us to 'see through' old conceptual frameworks so that these are newly experienced as more limited than enabling? (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:448-449)

I reflect on some of these questions below.

- **Ensuring conceptual-theoretical integrity?**

My belief is that I have worked hard at developing conceptual-theoretical integrity, and that my efforts at theorising have indeed been anchored in my experience and in the experiences of those with whom I have engaged as part of my inquiry. I seek to evidence this in the way that the thesis is structured and held together.

In the two chapters that follows, I seek to contextualise my inquiry by giving details of the various fields of practice with which I engaged and by presenting some of my initial experiences of inquiring there.

In Chapter Five, I reflect on the experiences of participants in two of my fields of practice, and I present some of the key themes that I see as emerging from these particular experiences. In Chapter Six, I begin to put together a theory of how people seeking to act for sustainability might make sense of and develop their capacity to *stay with* the complexity and distress which seems to be a common experience of aspiring change agents. Thus, my conceptualisation of *repose* and *action-from-repose*, which I develop throughout the thesis, emerges directly from, and seeks to respond to, the experiences of many of the people with whom I engaged as part of my inquiry.

In Chapters Seven through Ten, I continue to develop the propositional-conceptual integrity of these ideas, and one of the ways I do so is by testing their usefulness and appropriateness *in relation to* my experience (and that of other participants) across various other fields of practice. Thus, I believe that the theories I put forward are both anchored and tested in the ground of my own and others' experience.

At the same time, I am conscious that the interpretations and theoretical frameworks which I present are just that—interpretations, frameworks, and 'hypotheses about reality' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451). With this in mind, my intention is to present my notion of *repose* (and the way I am working with the concept) as one way for thinking about influence and agency in current times and in the context of the ecological crisis. I aim to show that it might be understood as *contributing to* how we seek to act within this context, but I also aim to place my ideas within a wider context of what might be understood as effective thought and practice in engaging with complex challenges. Throughout the thesis, I aim to

show how multiple perspectives and practices (alongside those relating to *repose*) might be helpful in making sense of the core questions I explore, and I argue that what is important is finding those that resonate with one's own lived experience and positioning in the world, and which help us to see through old conceptual frameworks, whilst inspiring us to develop a sense of what our own particular (conceptual and practical) offering might be.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I explore how I have understood myself as engaging in data analysis. I believe that this section is further evidence of the attention I have given to developing propositional-conceptual integrity.

- **Embracing ways of knowing beyond the intellect?**

As I argue at various points in this thesis, my belief is that embracing ways of knowing beyond the intellect is central to developing useful, appropriate knowledge and action in relation to the ecological crisis. Nevertheless, as I hinted earlier in this chapter, I have found that there are challenges associated with representing these different ways of knowing, especially when our intention is to put forward accounts which are legitimate, powerful, and capable of speaking to and influencing wider systems. At various points in the thesis, I begin to experiment with alternative representations of different ways of knowing; nevertheless, I acknowledge that this is a choice-point with which I could have engaged in much greater depth.

- **Intentionally choosing appropriate research methods?**

In the chapters that follows I outline the key research methods and inquiry practices which I have drawn upon in my various fields of practice. I reflect on the appropriateness and effectiveness of these research methods at various points in the thesis. I believe it is fair to say that this is another choice-point to which I could have given more attention. In Chapter Eight, I consider the possibility that the anxieties and tensions I experienced in the early stages of my inquiry may have limited my capacity to draw widely, creatively and systematically from the richness and diversity of research methods which I might have understood as being available to me.

- **Worthy of the term significant?**

Bradbury and Reason (2001:452) suggest that one of the qualities action researchers in general might further develop is that of '[paying] *explicit* attention to inquiring into what is worthy of attention, how we [choose] where to put our efforts'. They suggest that in Torbert's (2001) and Marshall's (2001) accounts of their first-person inquiry practices, these authors succeed in '[illustrating] ways in which we can bring ongoing consciousness to the fundamental question of whether or not we ought to be doing what we are doing at all' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:452). Bradbury and Reason go on to say that while

> It is arguable that as inquiry groups cycle between action and reflection over time they move from surface concerns to more fundamental issues…we note the absence of explicit, critical attention to this: we see few direct accounts of this kind of transformation. (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:453)

Although I do not claim that this was a choice-point which I consciously set out to develop, I believe that my inquiry practice has contributed, to a certain extent, to raising questions about the significance and purpose of the work with which I have sought to engage. Questions of significance and worth shifted to the foreground for me (and to a certain extent, for others with whom I collaborated) as we increasingly experienced frustration and dissatisfaction with the processes which we had created and/or in which we had agreed to participate. This meant that our focus eventually shifted from asking more *general* questions such as 'how might we together create a more sustainable community?' to more *particular* questions such as 'what do we mean by sustainability in this context?' and 'what might working together mean and why is this important?', for example. These kinds of experiences encouraged me to be more attentive to the assumptions which underpinned my sense of purpose as I approached this work. For example, I came to critically consider different conceptualisations of change agency, authority, collaboration and so on. My experience is that my own sense of intentionality and my own understanding of engaging in significant work shifted, and that I have managed to maintain a degree of lightness and critical attention in relation to these. I return to this explicitly later in the thesis.

- **Emerging towards a new and enduring infrastructure?**

Bradbury and Reason (2001:449) suggest that 'the developmental quality of our work through its history and into the future' is a further area of concern for action researchers. They continue:

> First-person research/practice is a lifetime's project…Second-person collaborative inquiry is something that has to be grown over time, moving from tentative beginning to full co-operation…Further…we must attend to the question of viability in the longer term (third-person research/practice). We must therefore ask whether the work was seeded in such a way that participation could be sustained in the absence of the initiating researcher? We must create a living interest in the work. (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:449)

I notice that I experience some difficulty in making sense of my work in relation to this choice-point. On the one hand, one of my main objectives as I write this thesis is to represent the emergent, developmental quality of my inquiry practice. As mentioned already, I believe that my capacity to engage in first-person inquiry continues to evolve over time, as I engaged in my various fields of practice and even as I write this thesis. On the other hand, I am aware that through my inquiry, I did not succeed in helping to move second-person inquiry spaces 'from tentative beginning to full co-operation'. The one space which I helped to create turned out *not* to be sustainable in the long-term (a fact which I found distressing and discouraging at the time). Taking into account Bradbury and Reason's (2001:453) point that 'the integration of first-, second- and third-person research/practice correlates well with emergent and enduring consequence', I feel hesitant to claim that I have engaged well with this choice-point.

But there is another point I wish to make here, relating to the difficulties I believe are inherent in making judgements about the emergent and enduring quality of any work. I do not know what consequences might unfold out of the work with which I have begun to engage in this inquiry. I cannot claim, with any degree of certainty, what this inquiry may have given birth to, what seeds it may have sown. I do have a sense that I have engaged in important, developmental personal work, and that this engagement will have emergent and enduring consequences in my own life and in how I approach my engagement with others and my work as an academic.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Torbert's point that:

> Action inquiry is inspired by the primitive sense that all our actions, including those we are most certain about and are most committed to, are in fact also inquiries. (Torbert, 2001:250)

In a footnote to the above point, Torbert explains that the primitive sense or intuition to which he refers

> …is that the ultimate essence of efficient, effective, transformational, inquiring action is its unique, myth-making timeliness, where 'timeliness' is understood to refer not just to an immediate effect or short-term consequence, but to a widening and deepening and transforming effect across ages of history (e.g., Socrates drinking the hemlock, or John Hancock signing the American Declaration of Independence). (Torbert, 2001:258)

I was slightly taken aback when I read Torbert's words about primitive sense, intuition and timeliness. How could we possibly appropriately comment on the myth-making timeliness of our own (or others') inquiring action? Were there any dangers in doing so? Could it be understood as somewhat self-aggrandising and self-indulgent? On the other hand, Torbert's words also resonated with me somehow. This is because I do, occasionally, feel a certain intuition that the kinds of questions I and many others are asking, and the kinds of offerings we are sometimes able to make, may somehow contribute to widening and deepening effects across wider systems. A tension I have identified is that of appreciating that I *may* be able to contribute to such timeliness, and at the same time, acknowledging that

- this is something of which I am often uncertain;
- which I find incredibly difficult to track; and moreover,
- which I am loathe to speak about because of the risk that I may indeed be engaging in self-aggrandisement.

2.6 Thoughts on data analysis

In preparing this thesis, I am conscious of the need to consider questions around data analysis. There exists a range of inductive and ethnographic approaches to data analysis within the field of qualitative, social research. In this section, I look at four such approaches and relate these to my own understanding of the kinds of processes with which I have chosen to engage as I make sense of the data which has emerged through my collaboration with others.

Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) is one example of an iterative and inductive approach to data analysis, as is Lincoln and Guba's (1985) work in naturalistic inquiry and inductive sense-making. I consider some of the underlying principles of each of these hereafter. I also explore Judi Marshall's (1981) notion of making sense as a personal process, as well as Laurel Richardson's (2000) perception of writing as a method of inquiry and ongoing analysis.

2.6.1 Grounded theory

The following are some of the underlying principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which *both* help to inform and develop my thinking around the processes involved in grounded, inductive theorising, *but which also* serve to somehow limit the usefulness of this approach in relation to my own research practice (and I explain why this is so hereafter):

- *The grounded-ness and emergent quality of theory*, linked to John Dewey's (1934:50) notion that 'If the artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind'. As one of the objectives of my action research practice centres around challenging worn frames/worldviews, I consider it essential that understandings are allowed to emerge over time, and are grounded in the data and sense-making of the communities of practice with which I am involved. Thus, I favour analytical processes which are inductive and grounded. At the same time, I am aware of a tension between processes which seek to be fully inductive, and the notion that what we generally and necessarily do, whether

implicitly or explicitly, is build on that which is already there, that which has already been, and which has somehow led to us paying attention to this moment, this experience, this piece of data. I suggest that what may be necessary is to develop a capacity to be reflexive of what has come before, and of the foundations on which ideas and understandings are being built, whilst balancing this with an openness to what may emerge.

- *Theorising as a process* 'of *constructing* from data an explanatory scheme that systematically integrates various concepts through statements of relationship…it enables users to explain…events, thereby providing guides to action' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:25). In particular, I am struck by the notion of *constructivist theorising* as a process, and I explore this further hereafter, in relation to Kathy Charmaz's (2000) work on constructivist grounded theory.

- *Describing, Conceptual Ordering* and *Theorising* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as informing and building on from one another. Specifically, describing involves 'depicting, telling a story, sometimes a very graphic and detailed one…' (1998:25) while conceptual ordering involves 'the organisation of data into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions…using description to elucidate these categories' (1998:19).

- The *practice of coding*, and the notion that:

> To uncover, name and develop concepts, we must open up the text and expose the thoughts, ideas and meaning contained therein…Events, happenings, objects, and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped under more abstract concepts termed 'categories'. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:102)

Broadly speaking, this is the process of identifying '…potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text' (Ryan and Bernard 2000:783). I understand this to be an iterative process of becoming immersed in the data; re-living the moment of data collection; looking at it both in detail and as a whole; grouping, forming understandings and drawing out themes and links between

these; and revisiting the data. It sometimes helps for me to diagrammatically represent this process of conceptual development as a tentative mind-map.

It is possible to argue that the analytical procedures and processes advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998) are somewhat didactic, prescriptive and over-rationalised. My understanding is that different approaches to data analysis diverge with regards to the degree of formality/informality that is tolerated, and the tight-ness/loose-ness with which structures and procedures for analysing data are defined. These differences seem to relate both to method (*how* do we enact data analysis?) and purpose (*why* do we seek to analyse data, what outcomes are we hoping for?), and lead me to ponder on the question: *What do we mean by data analysis in the context of participative research?*

2.6.2 Inductive naturalistic inquiry

My emergent understanding of what is encompassed under the banner of 'data analysis' in a participative context is further informed by the qualities of inductive naturalistic inquiry, as expounded by Lincoln and Guba (1985), specifically:

- The notion that the *tacit, experiential* knowing which is embodied in the research relationship cannot be arbitrarily dismissed in the way that objectivist investigations within conventional inquiry paradigms would have us do. Indeed, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that, as with values, tacit knowledge is embedded within every inquiry, regardless of the inquirer's willingness to recognise and own it. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) draw on Heron's (1981) work which suggests that inquiry and theory-building necessarily involve an extended epistemology, including propositional, practical and experiential forms of knowing. Lincoln and Guba (1985:197) credit Heron (1981) with expressing the notion that 'no empirical research can be carried out except through a "subtle, developing interdependence" between these three knowledge forms', and specifically:

  > The research conclusions, stated as propositions and laying claim to be a part of the corpus of empirical knowledge about persons, necessarily rest on the researchers' experiential knowledge of the

> subjects of the inquiry. This knowledge of persons is most adequate as an empirical base when it involves the fullest sort of presentational constructing: that is, when the researcher and subject are fully present to each other in a relationship of reciprocal and open inquiry, and when each is open to construe how the other manifests as a presence in space and time…So the propositional outcomes of the research depend critically on the practical and experiential components of the process of research. (Heron, 1981:31)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the researcher positioned within the naturalistic paradigm would endeavour to make the use of tacit knowledge both explicit and legitimate, recognising it as the base from which insights and understandings will eventually unfold. This is congruent with my own experience of making sense of data and of the research process, as I illustrate hereafter. Significantly, Lincoln and Guba link a perceived lack of balance between experiential, practical and propositional forms of knowing with the untimely closing down of possibilities:

> Of course, the naturalistic inquirer cannot be content to leave his or her knowledge at the tacit level. That tacit knowledge must be converted to propositional knowledge so that the inquirer can both think about it explicitly and communicate it with others…But requiring shareability at the end is a far cry from requiring it at the *beginning*. The latter mandate reduces the effectiveness of the [human] instrument by such an increment as to foreclose much that might have been of value in the inquiry. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:198)

- The notion of grounded theory as one which is 'local'; where the 'fit' and 'work' are essential criteria for judging their grounded-ness. Lincoln and Guba point out that:

> …By this [Elden's, 1981] formulation local theory is an aggregate of local understandings that without the intervention of the researcher, would remain isolated, and we may presume, tacit (or at least remain

> at the level of folklore and conventional wisdom). (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:205)

Whilst I am largely in agreement with the notion of grounded theory as one which is local, (both in the sense of adequately responding to that which matters to the people involved, and in the sense of being based and built upon local knowing), I am uncomfortable with the suggestion that it is only as a result of direct intervention from an outsider, the social researcher, that a shift can emerge from local, embodied knowing to explicit, practical knowing. Whilst I readily admit that an outside researcher can be a valuable resource to local communities in helping to shape and co-ordinate the research process, I would say that, of prime importance for such a shift to occur, is the implicit and explicit intention to make this happen by those participants involved in the inquiry, and furthermore, the willingness to mutually develop their capacities for reflective thinking and purposeful action.

- The notion that data analysis is an inductive reconstruction of the meanings and insights which were constructed in the initial inquirer-source (or inquirer-inquirer) interaction:

> Data are, so to speak, the constructions offered by or in the sources; data analysis leads to a reconstruction of those constructions…the process of data analysis, then, is essentially a synthetic one, in which the constructions that have emerged (been shaped by) inquirer-source interactions are reconstructed into meaningful wholes. Data analysis is thus not a matter of data *reduction*, as is frequently claimed, but of *induction*. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:333)

This framing of data analysis as a process of construction and reconstruction is useful, because it explicitly takes into account the implications of the language turn, and suggests that in analysing data and reporting on our findings thereafter, we must remain conscious that we are actively engaging in the process of *creating* our realities, so that our research 'findings' are framed not as literal representations of the real, but rather, as invitations to understand and interpret particular situations in certain ways, and to consider the insights and possibilities to which these may give rise. As Kathy Charmaz, a constructivist grounded theorist, suggests:

> We grounded theorists can profit from the current trend toward linguistic and rhetorical analysis by becoming more reflexive about how we frame and write our studies. This trend supports constructivist approaches in grounded theory because it explicitly treats authors' works as constructions instead of objectified products. (Charmaz, 2000:528)

As aforementioned, the processes in which I immerse myself when making sense of data are not as cognitive nor as discrete as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Instead, seeds for subsequent analysis are sown in the moment, through noticing and tracking responses to interactions, communications and experiences (such as 'that's interesting…' or 'what's going on here?'). So, I may note on-line reflections, reactions, emotions or questions raised for me, whilst inquiring or engaging with others. Thus, the analytical process is partly tacit, and the knowing that grounds it experiential, (that is, based on having participated in something which somehow informs or identifies with what is happening now, and suggests that this is something to which attention could be given), and therefore not easily translated into a step-by-step cognitive process. My sense of data analysis is therefore less in accordance with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) more formalised procedures for grounded theory development, and instead closer to that process articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

> …the units of data upon which grounded theory is ultimately based may emerge because of the investigator's implicit apprehension of their importance *rather than because a specific theoretical formulation brought them into focus*. Admitting tacit knowledge not only widens the investigator's ability to apprehend and adjust to phenomena-in-context, *it also enables the emergence of theory that could not otherwise have been articulated*. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:208, my emphasis)

2.6.3 Making sense as a personal process

In the early stages of engaging with data, my experience is of holding ideas or questions lightly, in the sense that they may be played with, or may be glimpsed and put aside for future reflection, or may begin to connect with and build on other things I have noticed. Indeed, they may shift as different understandings develop (much as a kaleidoscope!) or simply fade away as others become more discernible and significant. In this sense, my experience of data analysis is nearer to that described by Judi Marshall:

> This sort of work is really a whole-mind activity…It needs a lot of attention, I have to overcome a lot of inertia…But then I get involved and it starts to make sense, and insights start to come from some sort of unconscious level. When analysis is going well, I really have some kind of 'broad band' attention when lots of things seem to be connecting…Lots of things come into my consciousness which perhaps I hadn't been aware of for years, and my mind is able to make connections at all sorts of levels. My attention becomes very active. (Marshall, 1981:397)

During off-line reflection or when purposefully drawing together stories around experiences (for example, whilst writing this thesis) I have found myself returning to different moments/interactions forming part of the wider inquiry, and giving them more focused attention. To me, this iterative process approximates Lincoln and Guba's (1985:209) recommendation that the inquirer engage in continuous data analysis, 'so that every new act of investigation takes into account everything that has been learned so far'. Generally, this does not follow the line-by-line procedure usually proposed by grounded theorists; rather, I seek to behold an experience or representation in its entirety (as far as that can be fathomed), asking questions like 'What meaning is there here, and what is it saying with regards to the inquiry?', 'How, if at all, does this experience/representation relate to/inform others?'. I may then provisionally high-light or name elements of the experience/representation.

Having undertaken my doctorate research on a full-time basis, I appreciate that I have been in the privileged position of being able to provide some degree of thorough, systematic attention to these questions and qualities, and I am aware of the need for me to consider how this has shaped (and continues to shape) my practice and my framing as an action researcher. I realise that much of what I notice, including the stories which I choose to tell, necessarily reflect my own partial sense-making, and I welcome this, whilst also appreciating that it raises interesting questions about my role as a researcher. Judi Marshall (1981) suggests that what she is bringing to the sense-making process is her own vision and interpretation, and that this in itself has its own integrity and validity as part of the contribution that she can make as a researcher. Understanding sense-making in this way, as an intensely personal process, helps me to make sense of my own emergent practice. I too recognise that I am bringing my own interpretation and meaning to the data I have gathered as part of my PhD research; at the same time, I believe that this can (and must) be underpinned by an inquiring attitude and by deep respect for others with whom I have engaged. So, while I clearly appreciate that part of what I offer to each of my fields of practice is my own sense-making around our shared experiences, I seek to do this in ways which respect others' voices and my aspirations to engage in inquiry and dialogue with others.

In each of the spaces with which I have contracted to work, I have sought to attain a degree of mutuality around the sense-making process by experimenting with attending carefully to our shared experience (for example, by listening carefully to tape-recordings of meetings, writing detailed notes and noticing the themes which emerge for me, and then carefully checking these out with others in that particular space). In offering my own personal accounts in order to stimulate dialogue around what is or is not going on here, I have been conscious of the need to balance the *four parts of speech* (Fisher and Torbert, 1995); namely, those of framing, advocating, illustrating and inquiring. I frame these as accounts that I have written (and which are necessarily my own subjective, partial representations), with the purpose of stimulating dialogue, reflection and further sense-making by and with others, and I suggest (or advocate) that these are the kinds of themes that might be emerging. I illustrate these in some detail, by drawing on our joint experiences as a group, and then I explicitly inquire into others' responses to these, and invite feedback as to the extent to which we are comfortable for these to be seen as accounts which adequately represent our shared experience.

I purposefully seek to frame themes or understandings so that they are embedded in our experiences as a group (rather than abstracted from them) and thus what I seek to do approximates what Kathy Charmaz (2000) describes as the processes involved in constructivist rather than objectivist grounded theorising:

> …objectivist grounded theory methods foster externality by invoking procedures that increase complexity at the expense of experience. Axial coding can lead to awkward scientistic terms and clumsy categories. Terms and categories take center stage and distance readers from the experience, rather than concentrate their attention upon it…*Making our categories consistent with studied life helps to keep that life in the foreground. Active codes and subsequent categories preserve images of experience*… (Charmaz, 2000:525-526, my emphasis)

Such a contextual, experientially-grounded process of making sense of data, of intuitively perceiving significant moments or 'chunks of meaning', is similar to that described by Judi Marshall:

> It always amuses me when I read books on how to do content analysis that you have to decide on some sort of level of analysis- looking at a word, a sentence, or a section. But the units are fairly obvious—you get chunks of meaning which come out of the data itself…Also the books say, 'Arrive at the categories you will use.' Well, I don't do that either, but let the categories build up all the time as I put things together that *go* together. I think this is partly about how much anxiety and uncertainty you're willing to tolerate for how long; I think the more you can, the better the analysis works out. (Marshall, 1981:396-397)

2.6.4 Writing as process of inquiry and analysis

In further developing my understanding of data analysis, I have found Laurel Richardson's (2000) work a useful point of departure. Richardson (2000:927) points to the dissolving of the boundaries between 'narrative' and 'analysis', which

she identifies as having arisen as a result of feminist research in the 1970s: 'women talking about their experience, narrativizing their lives, telling individual and collective stories became understood as women *theorising* their lives'. It is interesting for me to consider this blurring of boundaries, particularly in relation to the partly personal, partly collective sense-making process which I described above as having emerged through my various fields of practice, where becoming engaged in dialogue and narrative about 'what is going on here' could be understood as a process of making sense, making meaning and forming understandings.

Richardson further suggests that writing is in itself a method of inquiry and analysis. She proposes that 'although we usually think about writing as a mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing"—a method of discovery and analysis' (2000:923). This understanding is deeply congruent with my own experience. I find that writing is in itself a process of coming to know (even if this is coming to know what I don't know), and that my own processes of sense-making are very much embedded in my writing. Different understandings emerge as I try to surface and build my experiential knowing into something meaningful that can be shared with others, and thus I intuitively identify with Richardson's (2000:936) wonderful notion that 'the researcher's self-knowledge and knowledge of the topic develop through experimentation with point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor, and so on. Another skill, another language—the student's own—is added to the student's repertoire'. Moreover, it makes sense for me to see the *writing process* and the *writing product* as intensely intertwined, much as I understand the research processes and outcomes to shape and inform each other. I see writing as a process of sense-making and method of inquiry precisely because the knowing which is embedded in the final product is one which *unfolds over time*, as I play with and labour over my writing, as I go back and forth between what I have written and what I find myself wanting to say, as I discover that there is depth and meaning to what I have written which has crept in during the act of writing, and of which I may not have been consciously aware before. Again, my experience of writing as an analytical, developmental process is similar to that described by Richardson:

> Who has not had their subsequent writing affected by what they have already written? How does the process of writing passages and reading them back to yourself 'open new questions and issues that

> feed back and emanate from the earlier passages?' (A.P. Bochner, personal communication, May 10, 1998). How is a changed Self evoked through the hands-on/eyes-on feedback process? (Richardson, 2000:932)

2.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I explained how I sought to develop an inquiry practice as part of my doctorate research. I positioned my research practice within the field of action research, and I delineated some of the key principles which characterise the field. I explained that I have drawn on various articulations of action research in developing my own inquiry practice. I described some of the ways in which I have sought to develop critical subjectivity, and I reflected on my own developing action research practice in relation to key quality criteria and choice-points. I also considered the kinds of issues and tensions that have been raised for me as I engage in data analysis.

In the next two chapters, I contextualise my inquiry by providing some detail on the various fields of practice with which I engaged. I seek to make explicit what my initial intentions and assumptions were as I contracted to work with these groups, and to outline how I sought to bring an inquiring perspective to the *process of engagement* with ecological challenges.