

## Appendix D

This piece relates my thinking on power to the practice of facilitation and the research process.

### The politics of the research process

The idea of value-free research is a denial and an obscuring of the power relationships involved. The research or inquiry process is itself *situated* in our society with its inequalities, and particularly with its divisive approach of the dominant (group, discourse, sex) and the 'other'. It is therefore essential to be mindful of how the research process can either play-into the status quo or can choose to try to redress the balance through enabling the 'other' (politically, socially or economically vulnerable groups) to have a voice.

I have written elsewhere about the importance to me of a feminist approach to research ('how action research learns from feminism, a feminist action research' in *My Approaches to Inquiry*) which, through a critical, dialectical approach can make the space for multiple perspectives and interpretations which question the dominant order of the status quo.

Maria Mies conceived of methodological criteria for feminist research which she described as 'conscious partiality'.

The postulate of *value free research*, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by *conscious partiality*, which is conceived through partial identification with the research objects<sup>326</sup> (Mies, 1983:122).

Conscious partiality is different from subjectivism<sup>327</sup> or simple empathy; *critical consciousness* and *exchange* are key elements of this approach. Joke Schrijvers describes this approach as one in which

The researcher takes the side of a certain group, partly identifies, and in a conscious process creates space for critical dialogues and reflection on both sides. This enables both research 'subjects' and 'objects' to become more aware of the power differences and dynamics involved, and of distortions of perceptions to be corrected on both sides. Paradoxically, precisely through this process of *partial identification* a critical and *dialectical distance* is created between

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<sup>326</sup> Mies, M. 'Towards a methodology for feminist research' in G. Bowles and R. Duelli Klein (eds) *Theories of Women's Studies*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1983

<sup>327</sup> A theory stating that people can only have knowledge of what they experience directly, and/or that the only valid moral standard is the one imposed by somebody's own conscience, and therefore that society's moral codes are invalid.

the researcher and the researched. (Mies 1983:123. cited in Schrijvers, 1997. Emphasis in the original.)

Schrijvers then goes on to suggest that

'conscious partiality' may open the way for a socially situated, contextualised knowledge which is more explicitly inter-subjective and dynamic; the result of unique, time-and place-specific dialogues<sup>328</sup> which continuously raise new questions and images of reality in a *dialectical way*. This entails complex ambivalences as feminist researchers continuously struggle with the alternate positions of constructed and experienced 'other' (Schrijvers, 1997:22).

All parties in feminist informed action research are co-researchers (although it is most likely that the paid or commissioned researcher acts as facilitator, at least initially), and the decision to take the side of a certain group (conscious partiality) does not mean that the researcher simply accepts the interpretations of the other co-researchers (researchees), but that all co-researchers together commit to making space to be explicit about their points of view in order to exchange and discuss interpretations – including the power dynamics enacted within the group of co-researchers, the ways these may be 'mirroring' the wider system, and the relationship of their research topic/question to the power dynamics in the wider system (Freire – conscientisation).

One important aspect of a feminist approach is that it is trying to expose power used unobtrusively, and both action research and feminist research have a core commitment to challenging social injustice. As a facilitator I am aware of the need to be watchful and sensitive to the ways that power gets played out in the relationships with my clients, and within the groups I'm working with: who is influencing and how, whose is the dominant discourse, how much awareness is there in the room of the 'consents' given for this, what 'disciplines' are in action. As well as the factor of my own power from moment to moment, and how this is affected by the way I work i.e. design of process, who is involved in the design, how it is negotiated, style of facilitation etc. I have to be alert, almost suspicious, like a deer<sup>329</sup> always looking out for these patterns (re)appearing in the groups and situations I am working in, and in my own practice. For unsettling power relations is my business, and hopefully I am learning to do it in a supportive and care-full way.

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<sup>328</sup> Schrijvers has identified five characteristics of dialogical communication: dynamic focus on change, exchange, the ideal of egalitarian relations, shared objectives, shared power to define. She explains these in some detail in her chapter 'Participation and Power: a transformative feminist research perspective' in N Nelson and S Wright (eds) *Power and Participatory Development*.

<sup>329</sup> As is the nature of the deer in my Pig and Deer learning journey stage.

As a facilitator, I view myself and my facilitation practice as being situated in the same or very similar ways to those I have described as relating to researchers.

## Power and practitioners

For the facilitator or consultant working in development and regeneration arenas<sup>330</sup> I believe there is a responsibility to understand both the theories of power and their direct relevance to our own practice. We are members of the dominant group, with its confidence and prestige – it may not always feel like that but it is so.

In her book *Where we stand: Class Matters* bell hooks writes about her own sort of 'migrant' status which she has acquired as a successful academic, which threatens to distance her from her class, gender and race identities. As a working class woman I can empathise and am clear that what I bring to my practice is not only affected by my community of origin, but I am clear that used skilfully this 'migrant practitioner' status is an asset, and used unskilfully could be detrimental to my practice.

For those of us who originally come from non-elite groups ourselves (race, gender and class-wise) I contend we would be unable to operate as we do if we were not *migrants* and had not stolen into the camp of the dominant group, and made away with some of that power through the acquisition of knowledge and our own conscientisation. This can create an additional burden for us of mourning for lost identity and a community of affiliation that needs to be worked with mindfully by the practitioner/facilitator in order that it does not obscure the 'material' the group being worked with is generating.

These *migrant practitioners* are an increasing group, with potential to let down ladders to those who come after, or to make acquired skills seem so complex and alien that only those with bestowed prestige, the dominant group, can facilitate, consult or research<sup>331</sup>.

It seems to me important for the practitioner, whether labelling their work research, facilitation or consultancy, to develop what Maslow has referred to as 'resistance to enculturation' (Maslow, 1987) in order that we can step outside/see through the accepted frameworks of cultural

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<sup>330</sup> I mean the sort of development and regeneration areas and arenas in which I work, and which are demonstrated in the Practice Accounts.

<sup>331</sup> Migrant practitioners in the academy: Bochner and Ellis (2000) describe a shift from a more traditional research approach of 'participant observation' to that of 'observing participation' as increasing numbers of the previously voiceless and powerless enter the academy. This change is influencing both the where, who and how of research, and leading to the valuing of different ways of knowing (other than the purely propositional), and the growing acceptance of a range of presentational forms.

roles and values. Otherwise we carry into our work our own ideological assumptions, reflective of our class, sex, and position of power within the culture and subcultures (Rowan) without questioning them and understanding their impact on our choices and sense-making. Coming from a feminist-grounded research perspective Patti Lather challenges us to

develop a kind of self reflexivity that will enable us to look closely at our own practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intensions ( Lather, 1991:150).

If we accept that power and knowledge are inseparable (as Foucault contends), and that we are simultaneously undergoing the effects of power and exercising power over others, then we are unable to take a simple, benign view of our own practices. As White and Epston point out, we are not simply able to assume that our practices are primarily determined by our motives, or that we can avoid all participation in the field of power/knowledge<sup>332</sup> through an examination of our personal motives. Instead, if we accept Foucault's ideas about the dynamics of power, we must assume that we are always participating simultaneously in the domains of power and knowledge, and that we need to try to establish conditions that encourage us to critique our own practices to identify aspects of our work that might relate to the techniques of social control. It is the commitment to this critique of my practice 'in the moment' that underpins this thesis.

It is important to have more than a broad analysis of power relations to work in ways which are empowering; there also needs to be change at the group *and* personal levels (Gaventa). For me humanistic and construction theory, all contribute to developing a more 'crafty or artful practice' that actively works with these awarenesses and discloses the practitioner's position, working to balance/reduce the hierarchy. And a practice that recognises that both I and those I work with are situated by our culture, and that given the right conditions we can co-create at least some aspects of the worlds in which we live.

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<sup>332</sup> Foucault (1980) believed power and knowledge to be inseparable, so much so that he preferred to write them as power/knowledge or knowledge/power. Foucault, M *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. Pantheon Books. New York. 1980.