

Using Co-operative Inquiry with Black Women Managers: Exploring Possibilities for Moving from Surviving to Thriving

Carlis Douglas¹

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This paper recounts and explores the early stages of a Black women managers' Co-operative Inquiry group exploring strategies for moving from surviving to thriving. The term "Black" describes any person perceived not to be White. It considers why Action Research methodology was perceived to be appropriate for this work, outlines key considerations attended to in setting up the inquiry, and then, briefly, explores some of the dilemmas encountered and insights gained in the process of undertaking the inquiry. To ensure confidentiality all names used are fictional ones chosen by the individuals.

KEY WORDS: Co-operative inquiry; liberation; institutional discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper tells the story of a group of Black women professionals using Co-operative Inquiry to explore the survival strategies used to negotiate the everyday challenges encountered in and out of organizations. It explores early stages of the inquiry identifying some of the challenges encountered that appeared to be not just specific to our group, but that may have resonance with any group of oppressed people using co-operative inquiry to explore the process by which their oppression is constructed—with goals of liberation.

The Co-operative Inquiry Group was one of a variety of different action-research methods used in a larger research project. The main research project was designed to help me better understand how, as change agents, we might more effectively impact on institutional discrimination in ways that would enable people from oppressed groups to experience themselves as having equal opportunities to realize, and use, their potential in organizations. It seemed that

¹Douglas Management and Training Development. E-mail: cdoulassa@aol.com

despite the resources input toward creating greater equality of opportunities in the 1980s, the fundamental processes of institutional discrimination were still at play.

My research concerns grew out of my work and life experiences as a Black woman in Britain working with organizations to implement their various equal opportunity policies. They also emerged from a more fundamental life question “Is it possible for Black women to thrive in Britain?” That question was first triggered during a Maya Angelou poetry reading concert in Lewisham. Although inspired by the woman herself, I was most struck by the idea of “surviving” and “thriving” as distinctly different goals for the Black woman. They became structural frameworks around which newly emerging thoughts clustered and took shape. She said:

The issues that face us all are not just how to survive—obviously we are doing that somehow, but how to thrive—thrive with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style.

I began to understand my research as, not simply an attempt to generate conceptual knowledge about change, institutional discrimination, and equality of opportunities, but as a mechanism for impacting on the status quo. I wanted to experience research *as* change not just *for* change. (Romm, 1997)

2. WHY ACTION RESEARCH?

It was my intention to go down from the “high ground” of Equal Opportunities policies and procedures, into the messiness of the “swampy lowlands” (Schon, 1983) where individuals’ perceptions, meanings, and behaviors are entangled, and where what is being sought is often not clear. In doing that I hoped to gain insight into some of the underpinning structures of the system and, therefore, be better equipped to design more effective change strategies.

I also wanted to shift the traditional power balance by using the research as a vehicle for the voices and thoughts of Black women to be expressed. From my experience, I had observed that perpetrators of racist and sexist practices are often unconscious of their actions, while the recipients of those actions are often very aware of what has taken place (Essed, 1991). I believed that from years of witnessing, observing, and experiencing discrimination, people from oppressed groups develop a sophisticated level of skill at seeing and analyzing human interactions and detecting discrimination in its more subtle forms within interpersonal transactions. We seem to have a well-developed “sixth sense,” which allows us to “know” discrimination, even when we are not able to isolate and verbalize the problem objectively. We seem to gather this knowledge through the experience of being in the presence of, and from engaging in joint actions with, “the other.” We collect this information

through our senses and then hold the knowing within ourselves as feelings. In some instances, we are able to translate these feelings into conceptual knowledge that provides insights into the ways in which our oppression is maintained. But often this translation work is not done. Nevertheless, we walk around potent with this knowledge. Therefore, if suitable spaces are created in which feelings and “sensings” can be tapped for their knowledge, Black women, and others who experience discrimination, have unique contributions to make to the understanding and deconstructing of discriminatory systems and to designing and framing more equal and mutually beneficial ways for people to relate to each other (hooks, 1982; Friere, 1972).

Therefore, an important challenge was to find a research paradigm that validated that contribution and empowered participants to offer their knowledge, and their sense-making skills, which are often different to those valued in traditional research. Action Research, with its long established links with liberation struggles, was a prime choice. Its explicit values of researching *with*, rather than *on*, people provided a framework in which there were possibilities for participants, as co-subjects and coinquirers, to give meaning to their own experiences from their own perspectives on, and standpoints in, the world. Its acknowledgment that cognition resides in all parts of our system offered me a process for valuing our subjective experiential knowing as an additional source of information (Reason, 1988, 1994; Heron, 1988, 1992). Since domination, exclusion, and disadvantage are more often acted out, rather than explicitly spoken, the stated assumption (Schon, 1995) that some knowledge can be only accessed through observing our actions and reflecting on our experiences, created possibilities for us to come to know how we collude in our oppression. As we observed ourselves relating to each other, we were able to move beyond what we *think and say* we do, to *seeing* what we *actually* do. In those moments we discovered worthwhile questions that previously we did not know existed.

Our Inquiry generated great insights into the challenges for us as Black women wanting to not only survive but to thrive. It connected our subjective and objective “knowings” about the many ways in which we unintentionally collude in the complex process by which many of the groups with which we most closely identify are kept excluded from the benefits of the system and disadvantaged. In addition to this, it was instrumental in progressing our development. In this paper, I recount the early stages of our inquiry group and reflect on the ways in which our survival strategies, the very topic of the research, continuously tripped us into habitual ways of being and relating. Unfortunately, in this paper I can only indirectly communicate the insights gained about the ways in which our collusion in the system is effected. My main focus is on describing the method in practice and the lessons learned about engaging people from oppressed groups in inquiry endeavors with goals of liberation.

3. THE CO-OPERATIVE INQUIRY IN PRACTICE

3.1. Overview

Toward the end of 1991, having gathered, and made sense of quite a lot of data about the experiences of Black women managers and professionals in organizations, I was now ready to move into the second phase of the work. I decided that six would be the ideal group size. Between October and December 1991, from my extensive network of Black women, I made a long list of managers and professionals with the type of experience I wanted to tap and outlined some criteria for achieving a successful group process. This became the basis on which I invited women to join the group. I was quickly able to identify potential women for the group and, over a period of 6 to 8 weeks, had long face-to-face, or telephone, conversations outlining my proposal, and requesting their involvement in the research. The first five that I approached accepted. This was, in many ways, not surprising, as during the period of doing this work I have found that whenever I talked to other Black women about the project they were extremely interested.

Our first meeting took place in February 1992 and we met on six subsequent occasions. The group was never formally terminated and I was left with a contract to continue the work,—“at any time, and in any way that would be helpful to the project.”

Rereading my personal journals of this period reminds me of the amount of thought and attention that went in to planning for this cycle of research. In other cycles of the research, as I uncovered ways in which my survival strategies colluded in maintaining my oppression rather than in negotiating my liberation, I had experienced feelings of vulnerability and of being deskilled. Therefore, I was extremely conscious of the degree of disturbance that this work might create in participants. As initiator of the inquiry, I felt a great responsibility to do my best to create a safe and secure context for participants and for myself. I became aware that if we were to be effective in identifying our habitual taken-for-granted responses, we would need heightened awareness of ourselves in action. Toward this end, I invested in transforming three friendships so that they became learning contexts in which we developed our skills at giving and receiving support, as well as feedback that challenged our habitual ways of seeing and being, and used journaling, and therapy to create spaces for retrospective reflection and sense-making.

It seemed that another important determinant of a successful group process was the selection of the “right” people. Time was short and I wanted a group that would form and perform quickly, so I generated the following criteria for guiding my choice. I looked for women who:

- Were experienced and effective at working in groups.
- Had an in-depth knowledge of the process of institutional discrimination and an understanding of the concept of internalized oppression.

- Were experienced in developing Black women—I hoped to tap a wider source of knowledge than just our personal experience.
- Were actively pursuing their own journeys of personal development.
- Would be willing/able to collaborate as equals taking neither teacher nor mentee roles.
- Were endeavoring to use power constructively. If we were to attain the goals of the research and this collaboration was to further facilitate our liberation, we needed to be aware of the ways in which we respond to and use power. Therefore, there had to be congruence between the content and process of the work.
- Give and receive loving challenge. I perceived a potential for co-operative inquiry groups to become collusive. This seemed particularly likely for a group of women who spent a large part of their lives in isolating contexts. I felt that a quality outcome was dependent on our ability to create an ethos of critical reflectivity, and thought that the survival strategy of detaching the self and heavily protecting it might undermine this possibility.
- Able to give one afternoon every 4 to 6 weeks for a period of about a year.
- Able to identify what they wanted, or could get, from participating in such a group—the attainment of shared ownership was important to me. Therefore, I was explicit about the hopes and expectations I brought to the group and invited others to share theirs so that we could consider the compatibility of our objectives. This formed part of our discussions prior to the first meeting and in the first few meetings of the group.
- Were experienced group facilitators, had counseling skills, and were already engaged in their own development. The psychological safety of the group was a paramount concern. I anticipated the need for people who could work constructively with the reactivation of old pain and reopening of unhealed wounds. I assumed that the pursuit of their personal development would have alerted them to the likelihood of this happening. Nevertheless, in our conversations prior to joining, I checked their preparedness to re-engage in such work. Safety was also about the creation of a space in which there was permission to make mistakes and to get things wrong. I was very conscious that I was engaging in an endeavor in which I had little prior experience. I had a certain amount of conceptual knowledge of the method, but I, too, was a learner. I needed a group in which there was acceptance that we were *all* colearners, co-researchers, and co-subjects.
- Willing to work within the co-operative inquiry approach. Reflecting on my own struggles in letting go of my internalization of the values of traditional research, it seemed critically important that prospective participants should be aware that this research was based on a different research paradigm. Therefore, in my initial conversation with each woman, I described the co-operative inquiry method, and a paper about the methodology and my

research goals was sent prior to our first meeting. I did not anticipate that they would have experience of working in this way, but it was important that they should be willing to entertain the redefinition of valid and effective research.

3.2. Getting Started

Our first meeting started with a sense of quiet expectation. We seemed to be anticipating good, and worthwhile, outcomes. We were all highly pressured women, balancing a number of different roles, so it was a great sacrifice to give up a Saturday afternoon. Therefore, we did not take it for granted that everyone would turn up. When we reflected together at the end of the first meeting, the presence of everyone (except Aisha, whose inability to be there was known) was mentioned, as a sign of each individual's commitment to this inquiry. Faced with the dilemma of deferring the start of the group for some weeks or starting with a member missing, Aisha had suggested that we got going without her.

As the initiator of the inquiry, I took leadership responsibility and provided a structure for the first meeting. At that meeting we discussed ways in which we might share leadership of the project. All participants were supportive of shared leadership, but no one wanted to take any leadership functions, claiming that they did enough of those things in their professional lives, and this inquiry was perceived to be about their personal development. This presented me with a research dilemma. It was agreed that in the first 2 or 3 meetings I would take the facilitator's role and that the issue of sharing facilitation would be addressed later in the life of the group. Anticipating that membership at our meetings would fluctuate and, therefore, perceiving a need to quickly build a robust, yet flexible, group, I gave priority to establishing good working relationships and a climate conducive to exploration, challenge, learning, and change.

I commenced the first meeting by restating the purpose of our gathering and making explicit the process by which this group was brought together. Our agenda featured opportunities for getting to know each other, making public prior links and relationships, identifying hopes and expectations from our joint endeavor, exploration of the co-operative inquiry, method, and time to reflect on how we had managed our meeting and worked together. First, we introduced ourselves, each woman taking some time to talk about herself. Our introductions centered on our families, life goals and purposes, and the reasons that brought us to the group. We connected as Black women and mothers. We did not talk about our jobs, professional responsibilities, and status. Rapport and empathy were very quickly established and, rather surprisingly, we moved into exploring the topic with degrees of self-disclosure that seemed unusual for such a new group. Time went unnoticed.

Then, we used a loosely structured activity to create a visual depiction of the links and connections existing at that very early stage of our group, and to

provide a process for facilitating Aisha's entry into the group at our second meeting. This did not work well. Although there was consensus about the need to openly disclose prior relationships and friendship bonds and there was stated commitment to the activity, many members of the group experienced problems with the activity which were expressed as a need for further explanations of the methods. As facilitators skilled in handling complex activities, using a simple method, I sensed that the difficulty expressed was masking an issue that we were not yet able to speak in the group. We progressed in a rather unsteady way—sometimes with high energy and engagement and then becoming stuck—trying to work out the mechanics of the exercise. The frustration of our process was balanced by a lot of humor and laughter. The prior relationships between each member of the group and myself assisted the negotiation of this very sticky process. We had not got very far with the activity, but it has been planned to continue it at our second meeting.

Toward the end of the meeting, we shared our hopes for and expectations from the project; and reviewed our management of the inquiry; and the experience of working together. We realized that we had not left enough time for these very important aspects of our process and resolved to give more time to reflection in future meetings. Reviewing our experience of working together Claire said that she wanted to cry, but she was conscious that we were out of time and that she would soon be on her way home, so she was mentally pulling herself together to go home. This comment reminded me of the fact that I had always been aware of the power of such a group to disturb coping mechanisms and to release distress. I was concerned that this had been expressed at the point when there was no space to deal with it. Offers to stay behind and talk were made, but Claire was in a hurry to get away. This incident raised again issues of my responsibility as initiator of inquiry for the emotional safety of coinquirers. I had committed myself to getting Fleur back to the station at a certain time and so I was not available to Claire, even if she had chosen to stay behind. As a new group, we had not yet established the level of trust that might have made it likely for Claire to accept the support of another member in dealing with her distress. I felt a moral, although possibly unrealistic, obligation to ensure that group members did not leave meetings feeling distressed. I left with a sense of not having been able to discharge a responsibility and with a determination to ensure that next time I would be more available.

Our stated hopes and expectations reflected a tension that almost ended the group. That situation was eased somewhat when one member, who represented the far end of one pole, withdrew from the group. This was the stage at which we first began to realize that not everyone wanted to bring their whole self to the research. While some group members assumed that an important outcome of the work would be personal growth, others wanted only intellectual stimulation. At this first meeting, we recognized this as a tension, but did not understand how

problematic it would be to negotiate that difference. We left the meeting pleased with what we had gained and surprised that we had engaged with the task so quickly and with such intimacy and self-disclosure.

While the dominant themes of our first meeting were those of discovering similarity and experiencing connectedness and empathy, those of our second meeting were about difference, challenge, and negotiating power. Aisha's presence completed the group and also brought a difference—we were no longer a group of mothers. We commenced our second meeting by returning to the connections activity, using it as a way of introducing ourselves to Aisha and engaging her with the first meeting. I noticed that while we were now fully engaged in a smooth flow of conversation, rather than the stop-start nature of our previous encounter with the activity, all the rules were being broken or reframed. This seemed to indicate that the problems experienced with the activity in the first meeting were related to its structure. Therefore, I suggested that we stopped trying to make the activity work and made a decision to abandon it. This statement seemed to release something in the group and with laughter the sheet of flipchart that represented our relationship ties was put aside.

One member of the group, Roselyn, stating that she was struggling with feelings of separateness and disconnection in the group, expressed an urge to talk about her connection with a woman who, although not a member of our group, had been on her mind throughout the whole of our first meeting. She mentioned a woman, Clementine, who with Claire, Roselyn and I had set up and run *Network for Black Trainers* in the late 1980s, when there were few Black people in that profession. She had been very present in my mind as well. A year earlier, it would have been inconceivable to imagine establishing this group without inviting her to join. I realized that Roselyn was naming the fact that although physically absent Clementine had been brought to the group by at least half of us. This connection, which could not be represented on our paper map, proved to be very influential on the group's process.

A few months earlier Clementine had a mental breakdown, and with that went her ability to engaged in activities such as this, aimed at changing the system. As we spoke about her, we realized that we thought of her as a casualty of the oppressive system. In the process of this conversation, we discovered that two of the other women also knew Clementine. The event of her breakdown had powerfully impacted on five of the six of us and with it the statistics about the overrepresentation of Black people in mental institutions was being given meaning. This took us into a conversation about our own vulnerability in relation to the very powerful system that seemed constructed in ways designed to bring about our destruction. Fleur, the only member of the group who had no connection with Clementine, abruptly and powerfully interrupted this conversation. She told us that "at the risk of breaking rapport" she found it impossible to go along with the trend of our conversation. She told us that she had constructed a "life story," which was not

about vulnerability, changed the mode of engaging from experiential to conceptual and then introduced an activity.

The experience of challenge among a group of Black women proved deeply disturbing. In the previous meeting we had discovered the experience of empathy and connection and now suddenly we were again in more familiar territory of feeling misunderstood and unconnected. This experience, in a group of people with whom we felt most closely identified, was highly anxiety raising. It was interesting to observe from the tapes that Fleur prefaced every statement of difference with “at the risk of breaking rapport.” It seemed that she was aware, although maybe only at an intuitive and experiential level, that the expression of difference was an extremely risky thing to do in a group of historically oppressed people with a high degree of self-referencing.

This second meeting was the point at which the group almost disintegrated, which only became apparent some time after the session. During the meeting it was difficult to identify that we were experiencing a group crisis. No voices were raised and a high level of facilitation skills was demonstrated as we enquired into others’ meanings, seemingly listening rationally to each other’s perspectives. In retrospect, I see this as a good example of us utilizing the facility to “mask,” which emerged from the research as one of our survival strategies. At the meeting I had been unaware of my feelings and the insights they gave to what was happening. In my review of the session, I talked rationally about my performance as facilitator and group member. It was many hours later, through paying attention to bodily sensations of severe discomfort, that I realized that the meeting had profoundly disturbed me.

4. REFLECTIONS: KEY ISSUES AND THEMES EMERGING

At the start of this work, we perceived co-operative inquiry to be a method suitable for inquiring into the potential of our survival strategies for helping us to thrive. However, an unintended outcome was the discovery that these strategies inhibit us from bringing the whole self to the inquiry and, therefore, reduce our capacity for participation. In this paper, I share my reflections on three of these issues.

4.1. Initiator of the Research as Leader/Participant

I entered this endeavor with awareness of the seductive nature of power and of its potential for destruction if not used properly. On one hand, my political awareness of institutionalized discrimination alerted me to the consequences of abuse of power. On the other, recent painful memories of being in three groups in which the leaders had, for very different reasons, abdicated their power, were producing shifts in my perception of power. I was beginning to see it as a necessary

resource to be used actively and positively for the good of the group. Therefore, I consciously paid attention to the challenge of holding in creative tension the paradox of control and structure with relaxed flexibility. How could I as a leader provide the group with direction, form, and focus for the task and attend to the needs of the individuals and the group for nurturing, care, and safety while also giving space to others to take and share those roles? I found this difficult.

Claire's statement about feeling distressed at the end of the meeting raised questions for me about the initiator of the research project. Were my responsibilities different to and greater than those of the other participants. From the incident with Claire I began to perceive that in those early stages of the group's process there were needs that I was best placed to deal with. Yet I observed my ambivalence about fully embracing the leader's role and realized that I was much more comfortable with being coinquirer. I, too, was in danger of abdicating the role before ensuring that there was capacity in the group to perform the necessary leadership functions. I noticed a matching ambivalence toward the leadership role in the group. Despite the unanimous agreement that I should take that role for the early sessions, my subjective experience was that control and structures were resisted persistently, sometimes strongly, but more often lightly, with a lot of humor. It took many forms during the "life" of the group. Initially I thought that the problem had occurred due to something I had done badly, or had omitted to do. I invited feedback on my performance and used my journal to reflect carefully on my actions, considering how they were contributing to the outcome. Through this process, I began to realize that contradictory messages were being received from the group—there was dissonance between words and actions.

I found this situation double-binding and became conscious that it was also triggering my survival strategy of withdrawal—from the role, if not the group. I suspect that I was helped to remain connected due to my high commitment to this work, plus my memory of the pain experienced in those other situations when there had been an absence of leadership and, in addition, the group's explicit request for leadership. In a state of not being clear about what to do I presented to the group the contradictory messages I was receiving and my own ambivalence about the role. This triggered a mindfulness about our response to structure. It was much later on in the group, through cycles of reflection on our responses to Fleur's sudden seizure of the leaders' role, in our second meeting, and her imposition of a scripted activity, that were able to catch sight of our fear of and resistance to power. Until then, understanding of our responses to power remained at an intellectual level and subjective knowing remained outside of our conscious awareness.

4.2. Learning about Emergent Structure

Part of the learning that occurred for the group, and myself, was that structure could be emergent and that it did not always have to be preplanned or held too

tightly. A challenge that produced much learning about this occurred in the first meeting when I discovered that the paper about the method had not been read. Believing that capacity for learning would be enhanced by intellectual as well as experiential engagement with the method, I became anxious when my plan to engage my colleagues in an exploration of what it might mean for us to apply co-operative inquiry principles, in practice, could not be realized. In the other cycles of the research and particularly through therapy, I had been coming to accept that I did not have unilateral control and that no matter how detailed and tight my plan the unexpected may happen. I had been learning about the need to let go, surrender, and be responsive. Nevertheless this was intensely challenging for me. Through the various cycles of the research, I was helped to identify this urge to be overcontrolling as not only a personal response, but as a group strategy (see also Scott, 1991).

Learning about the need to balance planning and control with responsiveness enabled me to acknowledge my disappointment and avoid trying to force the realization of my plan. Instead, I shared the objectives hoped for when requested that the paper was read prior to the meeting, and my disappointment that we had not been able to discuss the method together. We agreed that I would make a short impromptu presentation of the method and questions and concerns would be brought to the next meeting. This did not happen and it was only in retrospect I was able to see that, nevertheless, the group fully engaged with exploration of the method. Reviewing tapes of our third, fourth, and fifth meetings I realized that, in the context of doing, we had been working quite intensely at making sense of what it meant to research in this mode. There were many other occasions in which plans made outside of the experience could not be realized. From the leadership position, I had to learn to let go of them, sometimes sharing my hopes/objectives with my colleagues and always trusting that if it was important it would reemerge in other ways.

My colleagues also struggled with the emergent aspect of the research process. Claire, from a scientific background, often joked about her struggle to get us to set clear and achievable aims, determine success criteria and set targets for our attainment. Like Claire, some members of the group found the open and flexible structure of our inquiry very difficult. The uncovering of many issues and resolution of only few challenged them. Both as individuals, and as a group, we searched for, and found, many ways of "keeping hold" of the emerging issues. In our third meeting, Claire observed that our way of working was not as chaotic as it seemed "We are creating new forms as we go along, so it is only in retrospect we are able to say how we worked to uncover whatever we find." By the sixth meeting, having experienced our ability to return to process and content issues left unfinished at earlier meetings, she said that she was reassured to see that we were working systematically at issues, although our methods were not always evident.

Nevertheless, recognizing that this way of working, in which threads were left hanging rather than prematurely neatened, was anxiety-raising and, therefore,

challenging for some members of the group and we regularly checked with each other to see how we were coping with it emotionally. Working consciously, as we were with defense mechanisms, it was challenging to know when not staying with and deepening understanding around a theme was avoidance colluded with the maintenance of our “unknowing” (Field and Milner, 1990; Maslow, 1968), and when it was because we had genuinely taken it as far as we could at that time. Claire’s question, often asked at the end of a meeting, “Have we been honest?” kept us constantly aware of this dilemma.

4.3. Research Process as Rich Source of Information

We entered the research alert to the fact that the survival strategies that were the subject of our inquiry were likely to be reflected in our working relationships. We saw this as a challenge to which we had to pay close attention. Observing our process, *how* we did what we did in *and* between meetings, proved to be not irrelevant incidental occurrences but invaluable research material.

It was as we paid attention to the subjective experience of being in this group, to our ways of responding to each other, and to the feelings and bodily sensations experienced as we attempted collaboration that we understood deeply, in ways that connected head and gut, that liberation engages the individual in a process of continuous struggle. Exploring the resistance to the activity in the first meeting, and our responses to Fleur’s powerful interruption of the group’s process in the second meeting, we began to understand that, despite strongly held values of inclusion, equity, and co-operation, our habitual ways of surviving had taught us to resist being controlled and either to avoid or abuse power. This learning, while very painful, was critically important to our understanding of the part we play in maintaining and perpetuating the destructive, oppressive system that we so passionately want to change.

Following our second meeting, I was able to discover how deeply anxious I had become when I experience myself as without control, and vulnerable to someone into whom I cannot see and therefore do not know if I can trust. Using my journal to explore the experience of being awake at 2 AM, although physically very tired; my sense of being uncomfortably full and my surprising bodily reaction to Fleur’s activity the previous afternoon I discovered fear. Through this process, I realized that Fleur’s inability to allow herself to *experience*, rather than intellectually explore, the concept of vulnerability had made the group unsafe. Her inability to experiment with letting go of this to survival strategy—even momentarily—took us by surprise. We all talked the language of openness, disclosure, intimacy and honesty, but it was only as we examined the difficulty of exposing feeling of fear and of being at risk experienced that we could identify that we used these words as a mask.

In this meeting, the tension, spoken in our first meeting, between those who wanted intellectual stimulation and those wanting experimental knowledge, was

painfully encountered. These poles were most represented by Fleur (intellectual) and Roseanne (experimental). At the second meeting, Fleur indicated that she was considering leaving, but it was actually Roseanne who withdrew. She never expressed a clear decision to leave, but she just did not attend any other meetings. In retrospect, I realized that we had not yet attained a level of openness and trust that allowed her to feel safe to engage at the level that she wanted to inquire. As a group of experienced facilitators we entered the inquiry aware of the need for psychological safety, but it some weeks before we understood what we meant by this or even realized that we did not know how to make it safe. In the course of this work, I deepened my understanding of this issue and also uncover some question I previously did not know existed.

Through our various processes of reflecting *on* action and also while *in* action, we were able to give meaning to the idea that cognition resides in the body as well as the brain. It affirmed for me the importance of having spaces and places within the research process in which feelings and bodily sensations could be credited as important research data and of the need to have mechanisms for tapping the insights that reside within. We did this by cycling the same experiences many times and in different ways. In my journals, I used a range of reflective processes (Rainer, 1978) to surface “sensings,” which were often only within my realm of consciousness as a feeling.

4.4. The Experience of Being Black Women Working Together

The research—process and outcomes—were influenced, in so many ways and at so many levels by the fact that we were a group of Black women, and there were some experiences and outcomes that are more likely to occur among people from oppressed groups. We struggled to balance multiple roles. In or out of organizations, whether married or single—with or without children—we were extremely busy, managing multiple roles and with large workloads. The combining of caring responsibilities—whether for adults or children, with a professional role was particularly challenging, and, when young children were involved, it became almost impossible. We often found that when compared to our colleagues, we carried much heavier workloads and, despite the imbalance, it was often the case that any new work was given to us. We were also asked to take on additional tasks, related to helping the organizations learn about racism and in identifying or responding to the needs of the Black community. There were also, often implicit, demands from Black staff and from the Black community that they take on additional roles. From Black staff there was expectations of emotional and practical support in negotiating the challenges of the organization. Many of us were mentors—in and out of the organization. To the Black community, we were bridges for facilitating communication with the powerful institutions. In addition to this, we played active roles in their churches and/or in the community, sometimes involved in more than

one voluntary organization. The notion of needing to make a contribution to our community was strongly felt.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Despite the challenges that this method posed us, our inquiry was extremely productive. Through a research process that allowed for the emergent, perceived emotions and sensations as potent with information and encouraged the development of skills at “mining” for the rich, but not easily seen, insights we were able to gradually uncover our habits of surviving and gain choice. In these ways, we developed ourselves and learned how to create more opportunities in which we are able to thrive. In the course of this work, we came to better understand that paradoxically the very strategies that have keep us surviving inhibit our ability to engage intimately and, therefore, to thrive. The surfacing of the multifarious (and often not visible) ways in which we habitually mask in order to protect the self, and in doing this unintentionally create and maintain separation from the other, is important for effective engagement in co-operative inquiry. It is as we attend to the research process and the dynamics between participants that we are able to catch sight of the subtle ways in which separation and alienation are being constructed in the course of the ordinary research interactions. While these issues were extremely pertinent to us—a group of Black women—they are also relevant to all people—to a lesser or greater extent, we have all experienced oppression and learned the protective habits of alienation.

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