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Reflexivity: The dilemmas of researching from the inside

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INTRODUCTION

My starting point for doing research was Oliver's recommendation that:

'Disability research should not be seen as a set of technical objective procedures carried out by 'experts' but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their lives' (1992: 102).

The focus of my research was to understand the nature and extent of oppression experienced by disabled Black women given that we are simultaneously subject to disability, 'race' and gender oppressions. Hence, as a disabled Black woman myself doing research on other disabled Black women, I am, both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which I am observing. In other words, my research is as much about my own experiences as it is about others. A similar point has been made by other feminist researchers researching women's experiences (e.g. Oakley, 1981; Ribbens, 1990).

This is an important point to bear in mind since no research is ever completely free from bias as Wheatley points out:

'Ethnographic relations, practices and representations as well as the metaphors we use to make sense of them are contextually contingent -their character is shaped by who we look at, from where we look, and why we are looking in the first place' (1994: 422).

In fact, the closer our subject matter to our own life and experience the more we can expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work, to influence the very questions we pose and the interpretations we generate from our findings.

Moreover, it is argued that there is a thin dividing line between identification with one's research subjects and their exploitation (Reay, 1996). Thus, reflexivity, the examination of the ways in which the researcher's own social identity and values affect the data gathered and the picture of the social world produced, is a critical exercise for those researching the experience of oppression, particularly to insure the avoidance of colluding with the established hegemony. Gramsci (1971) used the concept of hegemony to describe a situation where the values of an elite group stand dominant within a society who, through the construction of an all pervasive ethos, maintain their own interests while subordinating those of others. Thus, reflexivity is as important for those researching from the 'inside' as anyone else for as Barton has rightly observed 'intent is no guarantee of outcome' (1996: 6).

My research was based on two assumptions. First, that there is a political nature to all we do: our work, its process and products are never neutral. Hence, our research efforts always have implications for the redistribution or consolidation of power (Maguire, 1987). Secondly, I agree with Freire (1970) that the fundamental theme of our epoch is domination which must mean that its opposite, the theme of liberation, must be the aim of all research on the oppressed.

This chapter will outline what prompted me to carry out the research on disabled Black women, why I believe research on the experience of oppression is critical, what strategies I employed to carry out my research in the light of the debate on emancipatory disability research and the dilemmas I encountered. I do not intend to discuss my personal experiences here since these have already been adequately discussed elsewhere (Vernon, 1996a). Suffice it to say that my personal experiences of living as a disabled Black woman in a society which defines 'normal' as being 'able-bodied', white and male and those who deviate from this highly valued norm as 'abnormal', coupled with the realisation that I was a 'stranger in many camps' as those who deviate in several ways are also often rejected by those who are themselves rejected by the privileged (Hill-Collins, 1990; Renteria, 1993; Vernon, 1996c, 1997), have formed the core of my experience and the primary reasons for my research in this area. My need to make sense and consolidate my experience with other disabled Black women was intensified by the fact that there was so little existing literature documenting and analysing our experience.

WHY RESEARCH?

Research is very powerful in that it can either be a significant aid in the maintenance and perpetuation of oppression or it can be a critical tool for eradicating oppression depending on how research is carried out, for whose aims, who it is carried out by and on whom. Miller (1976) explained how the state of subordination in society can be reinforced through the research process: a dominant group, inevitably, has the greatest influence in determining a culture's overall outlook - its philosophy, morality, social theory and even its science. The dominant group, thus, legitimises the unequal relationship and incorporates it into society's guiding concepts (Miller, 1976 cited in Oakley, 1981: 39).

Hitherto, feminists felt the inadequacy of much of earlier research to capture their experience which was instead 'added on' to masculine viewpoints (Oakley, 1981). This pointed to a necessity for women to engage in research to explain from the 'inside' of what it is like to be a woman in a male-dominated world. Subsequently, Black women felt the inadequacy of much of feminist research which primarily focused on women's experience of sexism and, therefore, excluded or added on the simultaneity of gender, 'race' and class in their lives (Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986; Carby, 1982; King, 1988). Whilst there is now more awareness among feminist researchers and theorists of the need to include Black women's issues (Ramazanoglu, 1989), to date, disabled women continue to be excluded in feminist literature (Morris, 1992).

Moreover, disabled women's concerns are marginal in research on disabled people which, it is argued, is 'mainly about white disabled men' (Morris, 1992). This is because for disabled women the desire for social integration goes far beyond the economic sphere emphasised by disabled men (Lonsdale, 1990). The existence of gender stereotypes which define the role of women as wives and mothers interact with prevailing disability stereotypes of dependency and helplessness (Barnes, 1992b) to exacerbate their experience of oppression (Lloyd, 1992). At the same time, disabled men are also subject to the prevailing masculine image of 'strong' and 'virile' men which is again undermined by disability stereotypes. A recent development in this debate has been the assertion that given the number of feminist writers discussing issues of sexuality, imagery, gender identity and relationships in relation to disabled women (for example, Campling, 1979, 1981; Deegan and Brooks, 1985; Fine and Asch, 1988; Keith, 1994; Lonsdale, 1990; Morris, 1989; Saxton and Howe, 1988), compared with only one article on disabled masculinity (Gerschick and Miller, 1995) that it is disabled men's experience which is

underrepresented rather than disabled women's (Shakespeare et al., 1996). This, it is argued, is a consequence of the fact that disability studies has 'downplayed the personal and focused on the structural' reproducing 'the wider split between the public and the private' (p.7).

However, such an assertion overlooks the fact that we live in a patriarchal society in which men rarely, if ever, experience institutional or individual discrimination on the grounds of their sex. Women, on the other hand, are frequently the targets of sexual discrimination both institutionally (for example, in education and in the labour market) and individually (for example, through sexual harassment at work, violence in the home and rape on the streets). Consequently, although disabled women are considered to be less 'feminine' and 'desirable', just as disabled men may also be considered to be less 'masculine' and 'virile' (Lloyd, 1992), like non-disabled women, disabled women are also often targets of male sexual curiosity and sexual harassment in a way that disabled men are rarely likely to be (Vernon, 1996b). As in other areas of academia and key positions of power, the academic highground of disability analysis is dominated by men who have focused on the structural aspects of disability such as employment, income, housing, etc. While these issues affect all disabled people equally in determining the quality of their lives, the difference between men and women is centred on the question of priorities. For disabled men the economic consideration of employment and income is the number one priority for being a 'breadwinner' is the expected role of men in society. A man who has a job has proved to society that he has the means to be a successful husband and father. In contrast, women's priorities are said to lie in the domestic arena as wives and mothers. Disabled women are not considered to be adequate to fulfil this role even if they wish to do so. Moreover, disabled women who aspire to be economically independent are likely to face a bigger hurdle than disabled men in consequence of their additional penalty of gender stereotypes. For example, Lonsdale (1990) demonstrated that the number of disabled women in unskilled jobs was proportionately higher than disabled men or non-disabled women. Furthermore, whilst disabled men were found to earn on average almost a quarter less per week than their non-disabled male counterparts (Prescott Clarke, 1990), disabled women were found to earn on average a third less than disabled men (Martin, White and Meltzer, 1988). Mainstream disability academics have so far omitted to analyse how gender and disability oppressions combine and interact in the experience of disabled women and their potential impact on disabled women's lives.

The impact of racism on disabled people's lives is also overlooked in disability studies (Hill, 1994; Vernon, 1997). Moreover, disabled Black women's experiences have been, and continue to be, neglected by academic researchers and theorists on disability, 'race' and gender. It is as though the assumption has been made by all concerned that what we experience is the same as all other women, Black people and/or disabled people, or worse, that we do not exist. Therefore, my need to research disabled Black women's experience in order to make sense of the complexity of our situation and to challenge our total exclusion is similar to the need felt by earlier feminists to engage in research to challenge the distortion and exclusion of their experience. Research is involved in the production of knowledge and, thus, it is a critical field of struggle through which oppression can be perpetuated or resisted. Emancipatory research (that is research which seeks to alleviate oppression) is critical in exposing the mechanisms for producing, maintaining and legitimising social inequities and domination. Having thus far described how I came to choose the particular research topic in question and why it is important to carry out research, in the remainder of this chapter I will turn my attention to discussing the particular strategies I employed in my research on disabled Black women.

RESEARCH STRATEGIES

The planning phase of the study and the literature review on research methods indicated the need to incorporate the principles of the emancipatory research paradigm. These include: involving participants from the outset in a research project which focuses on their experiences. This I did in the initial phase by carrying out in-depth semi-structured interviews with four of the women involved in the study to decide what aspects of their experience the research should focus on. From this it emerged that education and paid employment were the areas in which they had major concern which warranted further investigation. This is not surprising since education and employment are the main arenas through which power, wealth and influence are distributed and, hence, they are also the main arenas through which inequality and oppression are perpetuated.

Other principles of emancipatory research include socialising rather than individualising. For example, locating the causes of their 'problems' in the structures of an oppressive society rather than blaming the individual (Oliver, 1992). This was done in a variety of ways: by a careful phrasing of the questions asked in the interview, by sharing my own experiences

(where relevant) so that they felt they were not alone in what they had experienced. And, finally, in collectivising their experiences through an in-depth analysis of the data and disseminating this information both to the women in the study and to the wider community through written publications (e.g. Vernon, 1996a).

Initially, 25 women were asked if they would like to take part in the study. Two women declined (one due to lack of time and one disagreed with the social model of disability) and one dropped out after an interview for fear of being identified. Identification was a particular concern in my research because relating examples of discriminatory practice in the workplace can, if identified, have adverse consequences on their employment prospects. With this in mind, all the women were informed at the outset about the use of pseudonyms which they had the opportunity to choose for themselves as well as the fact that they will have a chance to read through the interview transcript and change or take out anything they are unsure about.

SELECTING THE SAMPLE

In the absence of a suitable sampling frame for the random selection of disabled Black women in Britain, a combination of organisational contacts, publicity in the disability press and word of mouth through networking were used to obtain access to and select women for interviewing. The criteria for inclusion was fairly straightforward. Namely, all disabled Black women who have worked, are working, or seeking work, within the age range of 16-60. Initially, several notices were placed in the disability press with requests for disabled Black women to get in touch for an informal chat on some possible research on their experiences. Only two women responded as a result of the press coverage. It is difficult to say precisely why the press adverts attracted so little response. It may be that after years of being targeted for disability research with little positive effect on their lives, disabled people are no longer prepared to be pawns in a project which is of little or no benefit to them. It may also be an indication of the lack of political awareness around disability, in particular the lack of willingness among some people with impairments to identify themselves as disabled because of the negative connotations attached to disability. Certainly the two women who responded to the publicity were very politicised on all three issues. It is also possible that there are only a small number of disabled Black women who read the disability press on a regular basis or even know of its existence which is particularly likely if they are not politicised around

disability. Attempts to place adverts in the ethnic minority press were unsuccessful as they did not even get printed which may be another indication of their lack of awareness around disability issues.

Secondly, organisations of disabled people were contacted with requests for a circulation of a flyer to members who are disabled Black women. The most fruitful of which proved to be a London based organisation which provided six contacts. Four other women agreed to take part after my meeting with them at various disability events. My major source of contacts came from some of the women in the study who provided me names and addresses (after they had first checked with them) of the women they knew who may be interested in taking part (these were not necessarily friends of the women but rather those they knew either through working in the same field or being involved with disability organisations).

DATA COLLECTION

A three-stage model of research and validation of data was followed. First, informal conversations were held with all the women, usually by phone, although, some were also face-to-face -unfortunately, time, distance and the cost of travel (the research was part-time while working full-time and self- financed) prevented me from doing this with all the women in the study. Issues discussed in the initial contact included establishing rapport by telling them about me, finding out about them, what the research was about, indicating what would be required of them and asking if they were willing to participate in the research.

Some gap was usually left between this and my second contact with them when I did the interview. The time and place of the interview was selected to suit their convenience. For example, they were asked if they would prefer to come to my house in which case I would. pay their travel costs, or would they like me to meet them somewhere that is convenient for them. Three interviews took place in the participants' workplace, three in my home and the rest were at the participant's own home. Of the three women that came to my house, only one accepted my offer of travel expenses and one stayed the weekend with me. She wanted to stay for a weekend because she was going through a difficult patch with her family at the time and she welcomed the opportunity to be able to talk it through with another person of a similar background to herself.

Although, the primary focus of the research was on the experience of education and employment, participants were asked to talk about their personal biographies during the interview in order for them to have some control in what was discussed and to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the women's lived experiences. My sample comprised of a range of impairments including three deaf women and one with a learning difficulty. However, all interviews, except one, were in one-to-one direct communication. One deaf woman was interviewed through a sign language interpreter.

The interviews were taped. During our first contact I asked if they would mind my taping our conversation. None of the women did. The advantages of taping were that I was left free to listen and respond to what they were saying without worrying about taking notes and being accurate. Interview times ranged from half an hour to three and a half hours, the average being two hours. The taped interview was transcribed into print and given back to the participant with the request to add, delete or change anything as they saw fit. This was important in order to avoid manipulation and exploitation of the interview situation for it is often easy for research participants to get carried away in talking about their lives, particularly if a good level of rapport has been established. It is also necessary to check descriptive and interpretative validity as well as a means of giving them the opportunity to reflect on what they said.

A few days after the transcripts were sent, I contacted them by phone to see if they had received it and how they felt about it. Overall, a majority of the women said that it was fine as it was. Although, one was a little anxious about what she had said because 'in case people get the wrong idea about what I am saying' and as a result of this she decided to opt for a pseudonym which she originally did not want. One transcript was returned to me with 52 amendments, the majority of which were grammatical corrections but there was one additional piece of information (an actual example of where she had experienced further discrimination). Another woman sent me back her transcript after reflecting on it at some length and making several changes, mainly clarifying existing points.

When I sent them the interview transcript I had made it clear that they could either phone me their comments through and I will make the specified adjustments to save them time and inconvenience or, if they wished, they could write to me. Consequently, four women dictated me changes over the telephone which I was able to do with the aid of a

mobile phone perched between my shoulder and neck while I typed the changes at the computer. Although, not requested by them, I sent these four women a revised copy of their transcript to reassure them that the changes had been made and for them to keep a copy of it for future reference if they wished.

INVOLVEMENT /EXPLOITATION

Hitherto, researchers have assumed the role of 'experts' over the research subjects and, thus, reinforced the dominant power structure of society (Oliver, 1992). In order to shift the balance of power from the researcher to the researched, there have been calls for greater involvement of research participants at every level of the research process. For example, Barton (1988a: 91) asserts that the research participants should be involved in the choice of topic for investigation as well as the uses to which the findings should be put. Some feminist writers have even argued for involvement at the point of conceptualising and writing up (Lather, 1987). This is an attractive and commendable aspiration. However, there are practical difficulties. I found that the main limitation in realising this aspiration has been one of time constraint, particularly from the viewpoint of the research participants. For example, if they are to have a say on the final content and shape of the study, they would need to receive a full draft of the report for them to read and reflect on before commenting. This would require a great deal of their time and attention which the majority of them were unlikely to be able to give to it. I was concerned that making such a demand of them may give rise to feelings of resentment or exploitation. Therefore, I tried an alternative method of dissemination by attempting to bring all the women together in order to share and discuss the findings. Again, this proved difficult for several reasons. The participants were geographically spread out into different parts of the country and travelling on inaccessible public transport is a major constraint for many disabled people, and for those who could overcome this with difficulty, it was impossible to find a time that was convenient to all concerned. Thus, even this modified aspiration had to be abandoned in favour of disseminating a summary of the findings in order to give them a picture of the collective experience and obtain their comments.

Ultimately the researcher is responsible to the sponsoring institution for framing the analysis, contextualising the findings and writing up the final report and, thus, forcing her/him to do it in the way she/he deems most appropriate (Ribbens, 1990). Moreover, for me, the need to involve the

women in the study raised the issue of exploitation particularly as it is the researcher who benefits the most out of completing a research project. For example, Sue Wise (1987) points out the inescapable power that we as researchers have over our research data when she states:

'The research products are produced by the researcher and it is her version of reality that is seen to have cognitive authority ...no matter how we deny it we are still operating, within an environment where the ethic prevails that those who publish research are experts and those who are written about are not' (p.76).

A further dilemma I reflected on was over the question of conflicting interests, which has not yet been addressed in any discussion of emancipatory research. For example, what if there was no consensus among the women in my sample about what aspect of their experience should be researched? This is a particularly important question since not all disabled people perceive their experience as defined by the social model of disability. We may think that rejection of the social model is a form of internal oppression (Rieser and Mason, 1990).

However, if they are not aware of the model, and many disabled people are not, do we take on the role of an educator? And, if we do, are we, then, not imposing our own value judgements and interpretation of the world on their realities? In my own research, there were those who did not recognise what disability, racism or sexism were, even though they gave me examples of where they claimed to have experienced such discrimination. In such situations, it was left to me to interpret the specific meaning of what they had related to me. This left me wondering, at times, if I was not imposing my own political and theoretical way of viewing the world on their reality.

HOW EMANCIPATORY WAS IT?

In summary, emancipatory research is about the 'changing of the social relations of research production' (Oliver, 1992). In other words, shifting the control from the researcher to the researched which requires researchers to learn to put their knowledge and skills at the disposal of the researched for them to use in whatever way they choose (Barnes, 1992a). Although, as stated earlier, my research is as much about making sense of my own experience as those of the women who took part in my

study, the research was for a PhD and the decision to proceed was solely mine as well as how to undertake the interviews and the analysis.

However, because there has been very little research on disabled Black women, once I started to approach other disabled Black women with the idea of doing research on our experience, their enthusiasm was clearly encouraging. Thus, I was in control, although, a small number of participants (four) were initially consulted on what aspect of our experience should be researched.

Following earlier feminist writers Oliver (1992) identified three essential principles of emancipatory research as being reciprocity, gain and empowerment. Below I discuss how I tried to achieve these and the limitations I encountered.

RECIPROCITY

Feminist researchers have defined reciprocity in different ways. First, it is argued that the researcher must be prepared to answer direct questions regarding the mutual exchange of personal information and, thus, secondly, introduce some vulnerability through self-exposure in the same way as we are asking the research participants (Ribbens, 1990). However, as Ribbens (1990) points out, not all research participants want to hear about the researcher and that if we volunteer the information without being asked, it may be seen as 'making demands of them'.

The issues of reciprocity and researcher vulnerability are also complex as each individual differs in how they view the world and its social interactions. In my research, I found that I soon learnt from the messages I was receiving from the women themselves so that I knew when it was okay for me to share my experiences and when it was not. If my experiences were similar to theirs, then I shared them and in return I usually received the response that 'it's nice to know that I am not alone'. In general, however, I waited until they asked me about myself. Although, I let them know at the beginning that I was prepared to answer any questions they may have. Some women wanted to know something about my experience before talking about themselves. Others asked me questions about myself after they had finished telling me about themselves and, yet others, asked me during their accounts to compare and contrast their experiences with mine. I agree with Ribbens (1990: 584) that:

'...we should ...take our cue from the person being interviewed for they may not always wish to know and it may detract them from talking about themselves'.

Oakley (1981) identified a third level of reciprocity in that she developed long-term friendships with some of the women in her research project. Indeed, this happened in my own study in that I too have made several lasting friendships. However, this is not something that is in the general control of the researcher as we must take our cue from the research participants as to how much they wish to enter into our lives and for us to enter into theirs.

I believe that reciprocity is an inevitable result of an 'insider' researching the lived experiences of the group to which she belongs: through the mutual exploration of the research topic which is of common concern to them both. For example, when we were discussing difficulties encountered at job interviews, it became mutually convenient to share strategies for deflecting overt cases of discrimination from potential employers. Moreover, several women in my study were, to my immense embarrassment and discomfort, grateful to me for my having listened to them and for 'caring' about their issues. For example, Jackey phoned me after reading her transcript to comment:

'I wanted to put my real name down because I am proud of who I am, a black woman with a learning disability and I hope that we as disabled black women can help each other. I would like to thank my mother, and the Lord for helping me and thank you for interviewing me because if it wasn't for women like you no-one would care what happens to us at all' .

And, Jo said that she had never been able to talk to anyone about her entire experience and feel understood as now because her non-disabled Black friends only understood issues around racism. Often, they were so pleased to have been listened to about 'the whole' of their experience that they were hugging me when I left with pleas to keep in touch as though I was some long lost friend. Furthermore, for research to be fully reciprocal, the researcher must be prepared to listen and help in matters that may not be directly relevant to the research project in question. As researchers we often seek to hear about specific experiences in isolation of others. It is, of course, necessary to have a rough outline of the areas that research is going to focus on to avoid confusion and lack of clarity. However, experiences are not compartmentalised in the way that researchers seek them out and interpret them. Some of the women in my

study felt free to say during the interview that 'this is highly confidential, I don't mind telling you but I don't want it included in the research' When they said this I usually switched the tape recorder off even though they did not ask me to do so and I switched it on later after asking the women's permission.

WHO GAINED?

Throughout my research, I frequently asked myself: I know what I am getting out of this but what are they getting out of it? Undeniably, I was the main beneficiary in that I obtained the data to complete a PhD and the resulting publications. Although, on the latter, it is worth noting that all participants were asked if they would mind my using their material for written publications. None of them did. In fact, some commented that, at long last, disabled Black women's issues will start being discussed.

I also gained a better understanding of my own personal biography through exploring others' experiences and seeing similarities in my own. This latter point was also shared by several of the women who made it clear to me that they valued having been given a copy of the interview transcript because it led them to reflect on their experience and make sense of it. For example, Lisa commented that:

It is emotionally good to receive this. I didn't realise until now exactly how much I had been through because you usually push it to the back of your mind and get on with your life and try not to think about it'.

This is precisely the kind of passive acceptance that emancipatory research can help to avoid through opportunities to talk about and reflect on one's experiences as well as sharing them with others to identify common threads. Furthermore, knowing all along that I was going to be the main beneficiary of this research, I was particularly concerned by the need to avoid exploitation. Thus, I let all the women know that I would be pleased to hear from them either socially or to help in any way I could. To this end, several of the women have kept in touch with me by phone, and sometimes by letter, either to discuss specific things such as job search and interview skills or simply to ask me how the research was going. For example, one woman asked me to give her some feedback on a job application and another asked to help in arranging a work placement which I was able to do. Two other women asked me to speak about disabled Black people's issues at two separate national events and a

third has offered to translate the study into Sign Language for the British library for deaf people.

HOW EMPOWERING WAS IT?

This was more difficult to assess since empowerment is something that people do for themselves collectively (Oliver, 1992) or, indeed, individually - for example, by joining or even forming a local coalition of disabled people and by learning to become more assertive. It could be argued that because my research was initiated from the 'inside', that the decision to carry out the research and make our experiences known was, in itself, a form of self-empowerment and the fact that several of the women who took part in the study were keen to provide me with other contacts to interview is also evident of the same self-empowerment.

Karl (1995) observes that a sense of empowerment comes from 'being recognised and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make' (p. 14). Of course, if the prior experience of the research participants is that they have not been treated as equals - which is the case with many disabled people living in a disabling society, and particularly for disabled Black women who are 'a multiple Other' (Vernon, 1996c)- then a research relationship which treats them as equals, is likely to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem which is the first step towards empowerment. Thus, the first seeds of empowerment may be sown by allowing the research participants to speak for themselves about their experiences and concerns and, thereby, engendering a feeling of being valued.

Disabled Black women are a minority within a minority. Hence, frequently, one disabled Black woman does not know another. Thus, the opportunity to share experiences can quite literally be 'empowering'. In isolated situations experiences are individualised as 'problems' of the individual frequently by people around them and sometimes by the individuals themselves. This can result in a particularly damaging form of disempowerment as dissatisfaction with the self can result in colluding with one's oppressors.

CONCLUSION

I wish to highlight three main points arising from the discussion in this chapter. First, like many other feminists I chose to do research which was central to my own experience, made all the more necessary by the

continued exclusion of disabled Black women's experiences from all three academic agendas of disability, 'race' and gender. My proximity to my research subjects resulted in a constant sense of insecurity about the need to avoid exploitation and bias in the interpretation of the data. Not surprisingly, I found that there were many similarities as well as differences between my experience and those of the women who took part in my study. Hence, I lay no claim to objectivity. Although, it has been argued that objectivity is the word our oppressors use to impose their way of seeing the world on us while they suppress our way of seeing the world (Oakley, 1981) and that empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification and dehumanisation (Hill-Collins, 1990). The affirmation of finding myself at the core of some women's accounts was enormously empowering. Although, my fear of distorting the often similar experiences of the women whom I interviewed generated a constant sense of insecurity which in turn served to underline my power as interpreter. I often found myself feeling immense anger and hurt at the horrendous tales the women told about rejection and discrimination at school, at work and at home. At times, I wondered if I was conflating their many varied experiences with my own. In the end, I came to the conclusion that there is no neutral ground in researching the experience of oppression. One is either on the side of the oppressed or the oppressors and for me as an 'insider', there was no question as to which side I would rather be on. Therefore, my need to avoid reinforcing oppression in the research process was magnified with an acute sense of treading on egg shells in order to avoid overstepping the thin line between identification and exploitation.

Secondly, although I was committed to working within the emancipatory research paradigm, ultimately, it is true to say that 'the social relations of research production' remained unchanged in that I initiated the research and I was in control and not the participants in my study. However, it could be argued that because I was participating in that which I was observing (in that my research was as much about own experiences as those of other disabled Black women), that the control of the project was not as far removed from the participating group as it would otherwise have been. My hope is that the research will act as a much needed starting point both for bringing disabled Black women's issues out into the open and, more importantly, to begin the consideration of how disability interacts with other oppressions in disabled people's lives on the mainstream agenda of disability research and analysis.

Thirdly, the objectives of emancipatory research can be achieved through uncovering how oppression manifests itself in the day-to-day realities of those oppressed. However, it is important to bear in mind that exposing the workings of the mechanisms of oppression is no guarantee of bringing about change for the better. Changing the attitudes, which are deeply ingrained in an individual's subconscious (as well as institutional policies) is a slow and laborious task. As Maguire (1987) has observed 'transformation is a process, not a one time event' (p. 242) and it is important not to lose heart. Taking part in research will seldom result in immediate collective action. However, it is only through understanding our experience as an oppressive situation and through the realisation that one is not alone that we can identify ourselves with others in the same situation and in so doing begin the journey towards our empowerment.

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