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# Transforming Suppression—Process in Our Participatory Action Research Practice

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**Key words**: purpose, emergent power, process, practice, position, oppression, self-determination, interdependency, best practice, reconciliation

**Abstract**: There are many personal and cultural pathways into the worlds of action learning and research. Despite this variety there is a world that we as practitioners share. This world seems to be defined by our resistance to oppression as much as it is defined in our willingness to construct non-oppressive ways of working in this world. Our world is not discipline specific, or owned by any particular social group (as defined by demographics). In our resistance and creativity we can be highly critical in determining validity. How can we, in this environment characterised by tension, develop practices which credibly inform us that what we are doing is indeed credible participatory learning and research?

This paper proposes some ways of distinguishing action research and learning processes in our practices-particularly with regard to experiences of reconciliation at an inter-racial level. Rather than naming a particular process as being generically recognisable as action research or learning, I reflect on how in my practice as a facilitator of participatory action research I recognise and develop process, and how this, rather than being an example of good practice, can easily become an example of very poor practice. To be specific—practice that oppresses even in my resistance to oppression. I explore some of the possibilities that *purpose* and *position* offer as foundations for *negotiation* processes with participants. Using negotiation, *collaborative reflection* and *decision-making* as the fundamental practices of *community building*, we can willingly bring our great diversity into effective congruency. We can also blind and deafen ourselves, crippling our ability to educate the oppressor within and without.

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## 1. Introduction

Let me begin by reminding you of a favourite nursery rhyme:

> There was a crooked "wo-man"
> Who walked a crooked mile
> She found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked style
> She bought a crooked walking stick and met a crooked mouse
> And they all lived together in a little crooked house. [1]

Each of us engaged in action research and learning arrives in this delightfully crooked house from our own unique starting points. We walk our own crooked mile to arrive at our own crooked and highly wrought ideas of what we are doing. It is inevitable, even necessary, that the many crooked styles that we have to climb over are of our own making. They can also be responses to our audacious realisation of unique research and learning strategies in the facilitation of change. [2]

And yet, as Yoland WADSWORTH proposes:

> Despite our differing styles and practices, there is a growing mass of us who have come, overall, to reject a certain mainstream approach to inquiry and truth-formation which belong to `the researcher', and to embrace another where the researcher becomes an active facilitator of—and more or less co-researcher in—collective inquiry processes (1999, yet to be released). [3]

In other words, we recognise suppression and its place in knowledge construction and use. Moreover, we know our theoretical excellence and cultural, academic and political identity by indicators of the extent to which we are committed to addressing this issue in our practice. [4]

In this paper, I want to walk a crooked mile with you, my reader, and think about how we construe process in our practice—given the impossibly eclectic nature of our discipline and, even more so, given that we find our definitions of what we do in collective rejection, as much as collective assertion. My reflections take the form of strongly worded, public, self-critical analysis of how even when we are so deeply engaged in this careful endeavour we can knowingly and unknowingly continue to play our part in the complex ecology of oppression. I am proposing that it is incumbent upon us to resist blinding ourselves with ideologies (be they feminist, emancipatory, systemic or academic) or theories of practice that become ideologies. Our engagement in participatory research must make safe and creative spaces for profound learning about our own part in suppression. We must learn about our own part in suppression if we are to challenge and facilitate change in the dynamics and mechanics of this human tragedy; we must include ourselves in this experience of critical subjectivity if we are to actually generate epistemologies of practice that are effective in this essential collective work. [5]

## 2. Basic Indicators of Process in Practice

The first crooked signpost on this road reads "how do I come to know process in my practice?" I will begin by addressing this question, and in this I want to open up new questions: how do we know that our sense of crookedness is an indication of genuine self-determination in renewable, accountable contexts, and not deeply embedded—even fearfully unconscious—self-deceit and corruption? [6]

My reflections take three familiar forms:

a. Shared self reflective practice
b. A case study that describes how I interpret theories of practice in action processes
c. Contextualisation of my hybrid process in my reconciliation practices. [7]

When I reflect on how I weave process into my facilitation practice, it is my sense of *purpose* that holds the threads together. Let me refer to Peter REASON's discussion about purpose. He says: "Purpose or intention cannot be unitary: rather—different purposes will nest with each other ... Holding sense of purpose is quite different from establishing an objective or setting a target, both of which I associate with alienated consciousness and unconscious participation ..." (1994, p.51). [8]

Purpose is a way of discovering processes in participatory research practice that is very different from reflecting on goal, objective or target. In my experience, and as REASON states—these managerial concepts of purpose alienate my practice from me, even if I have been colluded by a client into determining the goal. I see that goals, objectives and targets drive practice backwards into pre-existent outcomes. The process that emerges risks being one of alienation and servitude ensuring that research never generates new knowledge. [9]

Purpose on the other hand enables the objectives of *existing* power (I understand power as the recognised "right to act") to be included in a research initiative without colonising and disempowering the intentions of *emergent* power. [10]

I have come to understand that my purpose is realised in liberating knowledge. As a facilitator of action learning and research, I create interactions that set knowledge free from dead theory; theory that props up deadly power and that conjunction with this power attempts to turn life into a kind of post mortem of eternal loss, continually trying to keep things as they were, not as they can be. I see my purpose as creating time and place for knowledge to flower into living, unpredictable and uncontrollable energies. I have only recently discovered that my process for liberating knowledge is initiating and resourcing participatory communities of congruent, rather than shared, intent. I want to share with you that I have been doing this work for over ten years—but it is only in writing this paper that the eloquence of purpose became clear to me. [11]

To understand what I mean by "community" I refer to Liz KELLEY's illuminating definitions (1996) where she proposes community as being *located potential for social activism*. In reference to community-based responses to family violence for example, she sees social activism located in many forms—communities of place, interest, identity, experience and circumstance [EDLESON 1996, p.71]. Marjorie DeVAULT names communities of resistance in her reflections [1996, p.44]. [12]

I realise my purpose through my practice of facilitating participatory research actions. In this sense I distinguish process from practice by seeing *process* as decision-making that transforms tangible and intangible resources into realising congruent intentions. The transformation is guided by *practices*, which I see as a person's embodied interpretation of a particular discipline or—more likely—a mix of disciplines. [13]

Purpose however remains generic until the contingency of *position* is dealt with. Position is critical to how purpose is realised. Position does not just happen, is not static or without character. DeVAULT (ibid.) reflects at length on the epistemology of position—and its significance as a starting point for thought. She considers how positions are "relative, cross cut by other differences, often situational and contingent" (p.39). She agrees that anyone's position, no matter what the experience, social construction or privilege is a good starting point for inquiry (SMITH 1990). It is this wonderful truth about our own authority to inquire that explains why it is that we each come from such different places to co-habit this crooked house. We all realised that our position was as good as anyone else's for beginning and investing our lives in human inquiry. I hardly need to state that this view about position and the human right to inquiry is not widely shared outside of participatory research environments. The non-participatory world controls the right to inquiry by locating it in positions that are beyond the reach of anyone who is not prepared to live their lives with some experiences of alienated servitude to secure the benefits of privilege.[1] [14]

But making our positions more than a starting point for inquiry—making them a legitimate space where research practices and realisations can be used in daily life, is an activist's position. It is a position that requires courage and strategy to negotiate with those intentions that would actively inhibit knowledge from being anything other than deadly theory sustaining privileged position and mass oppression through the use of generalised truth. In other words our epistemology of participatory research practice *is* social activism, and we see it as valid, legitimate research in so being. In our framework, such research is considered illegitimate that simply serves to maintain the status quo of suppression or to maintain the denial, the self-interest, the fear and the exhaustion of ecologies that generate and sustain oppression. [15]

Susan WEIL beautifully expresses her experience of such oppressive positions when she says that she speaks

1 This may seem a little harsh, but is based on the knowledge of how currently academic intellectual property in Australia is owned by the academic employer, including knowledge that is created in spare time, voluntary time and leave time.

> ... as a passionate participant in this drama, not a distant observer... The legitimisation of alternative and exploratory spaces for systemic learning must be established... and our opportunities to learn from such spaces must be enhanced by new forms of policy making and systemic inquiry. (WEIL 1999) [16]

As a "nomadic" research facilitator—having no fixed research abode—position is central to my ability to determine my ecological niche on the map of each new contract. My position is known by my recognised negotiated rights and by my responsibilities to practice participatory research (GOFF 1999). [17]

In looking back upon the road that we have just walked together, I discover that I come to know the processes of activist participatory research in my facilitation practice by reflecting on my *purpose* and how I use *position* to *realise congruent intentions*. To help me out I reflect on my research and learning experiences and those of many others, including the agency and lay participants whom I have the great pleasure of working with. I also share the reflections of recognised authors who face similar struggles to my own. I make decisions about these reflections and act on them in legitimate, accountable research contexts and by so doing come to an understanding of what I mean by the terms "process and practice", how they pertain to my research and learning actions—and how they unfold in the dynamic of resisting oppression. [18]

This way of approaching process in practice was or has been derived from a continual dilemma in my work which I describe in the following question: To what extent do facilitators have a right to shape what they see as their environment and to what extent do facilitators have a responsibility to be shaped by the environment that they see—especially under conditions of inequity, self-interest, exhaustion and denial? [19]

I find that I am self-facilitating process in my practice by continually working through this dilemma in planning, delivering and evaluating my research facilitation practice. The binary principles of "self-determination and inter-dependency" help me to "work through" the dilemma, which I will explore in more detail in the following section. [20]

## 3. Case Study

We are now arrived at a second bend in our crooked pathway. Here the signpost reads "case study that describes how I interpret theories of practice in action processes". This suits me because at this point I want to illustrate what my thinking up to now actually means in practice. I am purposefully choosing a relatively un-dramatic scenario because I want to illustrate how suppression and entrenched oppression operate even in relatively comfortable and politically insignificant contexts. (I am proposing that suppression is the negation of rights that are being expressed whereas oppression is having forces in place that stop these rights from ever being expressed at all.) [21]

I want to tell you a story, which, I am sure, many of you will recognise. The story focuses on the action process of working through my strategic question about the facilitator's rights and responsibilities with the aid of the above binary principles of "self-determination and inter-dependency". [22]

As well as being engaged in professional work, I am also the secretary of my local progress association. In Australia a progress association is a group of residents from a geographically determined community who meet regularly to discuss local issues. If anyone is interested in really honing process in practice skills I could not recommend a better training ground. [23]

We are an island community and for years various groups have tried to secure funding for a small-scale marina to solve our mooring problems. But the efforts have failed because of liability and maintenance issues. The problem persists, however, so the progress association organised a meeting to pick the issue up again. [24]

About ten people came to the evening, which was quite a good number for this small community. We sat down around the table in the local hall and began to talk. Within five minutes I observed that the conversation had taken the form of competing solutions, old neighbourhood disputes and male participation muting female voices. In my position as secretary I claimed the right of intervention and said: "how would we like to go about this discussion?" [25]

There was no response. In effect, I noticed what was happening because I was sensitive to the binary principles of self-determination and interdependency being realised. In so doing, and ironically, I momentarily severed my inter-dependency with my community through practicing self-determination. The participants responded by simply ignoring me and re-engaging in their contest. I let things go for a few more minutes and intervened a second time. By doing so I requested that the participants recognised or re-engaged in the inter-connectedness of community according to my terms. I said: "There are many people not talking and we seem to be jumping to solutions very quickly, how would we like to go about this discussion?" [26]

When I create interventions of this nature in a professional context, it feels awkward enough, but in my position as research facilitator I have a recognised right to do just this (to shape the context) and am held responsible for the consequences for not doing it. In the setting of my own neighbourhood community however, my position is very different. Progress associations tend to see secretaries as women who type up the letters that the Presidents (usually male) dictate to them with no powers to change anything. They also tend to hold the view that process is irrelevant: people should be able to do what they want—laissez faire: actioned outcomes are all that matters. [27]

At this point in the meeting, one of the women said: "what do you mean Susan?" Gratefully I said: "Well, rather than spending a lot of time going round in circles over old ground, we could consider the history of the issue so we can understand

why we are here—or do something else." I was changing my position from one of "silent servitude" to one of realising a creative space for negotiation through intervention. [28]

After a confused and very thick silence, the conversation resumed—as if I had never spoken. Then interestingly, the same woman who had asked me what I meant interrupted the conversation herself and said: "Actually, I think we should look at the history of the issue before we go any further. We have heard all this before." In doing so, she deftly joined me in the space for negotiation that I had created. [29]

By making this simple statement she also decided to break from her interdependent relationships with her neighbours in order to self-determine a breech of tacitly accepted protocol. She had made the same distinction as myself —which made that distinction more real in the eyes of the others. She looked over at me, so I responded to her cue and checked how other people felt about it. Some nodded, others remained silent. We went ahead and mapped the history of the issue and in so doing rebuilt our connectedness with each other through active participation. Instead of rushing to conclusions and walking out with one winner, lots of angry losers and thus no inter-dependency to support the outcome, we agreed to a shared process to take us to the next step. [30]

Given that this is the way that I saw it, and that if you asked someone else in the meeting you might get a very different view, I am using this story to illustrate how process in practice can enable radical change. In inequitable, self-interested and exhausted communities of mutual denial—of which many if not all of us are members—oppression is the accepted protocol, and we need to introduce contrived and authentic process in our practice to restore resources and health. The story also illustrates how relatively easy it is to question this tacit reality and how, with collective action, it can be legitimately changed, little by little. [31]

## 4. Re-Contextualisation of Theory

We now come across a bridge in our walk. The bridge seeks to relate this story to other contexts as a precursor to approaching the context of reconciliation around recognition of the sovereign human and environmental rights of Indigenous people in Australia. [32]

Does process in community practices have any equivalent to process in business practice? In their paper on the Learning Organisation Meme, PRICE and SHAW (1996, http://members.aol.com/ifprice/ppatperf.html) identify that in the early 90's there was what they refer to as a "variation and mental mutation that is the soup of business theory and practice". They list the following display of the variety of business processes that they observed developing:

1. Process Review
2. Process Simplification
3. Process Management
4. Process Innovation
5. Process Improvement
6. Process Control
7. Process Transformation, and
8. Process Re-engineering. [33]

Did this variation and mental mutation cross the genetic division between business and other sectors? The authors go on to say that it found many a fertile soil. They list the following ecological niches in business practice where there is an awareness of process (PRICE & SHAW 1996):

1. IT
2. Technology services
3. Property and estates management
4. Architecture
5. Interior design
6. Catering and hotel services
7. Engineering
8. Construction
9. Image processing
10. Consulting [34]

When assessing a situation I find that what is absent holds just as much interest as what is present. In so doing I note that PRICE & SHAW don't list "human rights" and "environmental rehabilitation"—despite the fact that in 1996 these issues were high on the global agenda and business practice was as engaged in these discussions as it was in IT or in image processing for example. Two years after this paper was written, the Australian Quality Council did include social and environmental impact in its generic principles for good business practice. For those who are interested, the principle reads: "Organisations provide value to the community through their actions to ensure a clean, safe and prosperous society" (http://www.aqc.org.au/
abef/principles.html) (Broken link, FQS, May 2003). [35]

We know that since the 80s there has been extraordinary "variation and mental mutation" in environmental and social responsibility when it comes to process in our practice. Feminist research, action research and action learning have pollinated this bloom. When I searched the Internet for references, however, I found 35,800 English Language sites for process management and 32,399 for process engineering, but absolutely none for process + practice + human rights, or + reconciliation (other than book keeping practices) and only a very few for +

environmental rehabilitation. So why is there such a lack of recognition of process in the practices of human rights and environmental rehabilitation? [36]

Well, it seems that our bridge only made it half way across the river. We cannot proceed into the domain of reconciliation until we understand this issue. I suggest that we get into a canoe and start rowing. [37]

Over the last two years my company has been engaged by the Australian Federal Government to use PAR to develop a framework for self-facilitating continuous improvement in the community crime prevention sector. [38]

Like many non-corporate environments, community crime prevention is a critically impoverished and under-recognised sector. It has to deal with historically entrenched transgressions of human rights resulting from and feeding into social pain on both the systemic and the personal level. [39]

This situation exists in the community crime prevention sector for many reasons, not the least of which is that there is virtually no agreement at the inter-jurisdictional policy level as to what a crime prevention process is, or what best practice crime prevention means. Ideological differences between state governments perpetuate irreconcilable differences, except for the fact that the fearful law and order stick is trotted out at every election in every state regardless of the ideological platform to try to force the hand of so called democracy—an example of how dead theory is used by deadly power. [40]

What we found in the PAR project was that while the language of process and practice in the form of *best practice* was widely used to secure funding, there were only a few realisations of best practice theory in what the field identified as being crime prevention best practice[2]. Policy makers in funding sources used the rhetoric largely for accounting purposes—to ensure that Project Officers' work stayed within policy and budget guidelines. Ground workers used it to lever funding advantages from their funding sources. The result was that the Project Officers were on a survival course with their clients—they masterfully used the language to sustain their funding sources and spent much of their paid time ticking boxes instead of preventing crime. Their practice was being commandeered away from social science into book keeping. Facilitating a process of transforming ethically based management language to community practice in a consistent, coherent and documented manner was simply beyond their means—until they began to use PAR, that is. This was even more so for Indigenous crime prevention initiatives—which were making exceptional headway with even less resourcing and stability than everyone else. [41]

An explanation then, of why process in reconciliation, human rights and environmental rehabilitation practices is so under-recognised is that funding sources in these domains do not see the political value of adequately resourcing practice either in financial or in research terms. There is, as they see it, more

2 CultureShift: The National Research Project into Best Practice in Community Crime Prevention for the National Anti-Crime Strategy and National Crime Prevention (1999).

political value in keeping such practices on the poverty line. This is a good example of how relatively minor suppression—for example what is considered to be legitimate practice by political stakeholders—rapidly escalates to full scale, systemic oppression which maintains ongoing injustice and inequity on racial, economic, gender and in the case of crime prevention, on ageist grounds. [42]

Let us land our canoe at this point, and take this piece of information into a new field. If what I observed as being under-valued best practice in the domain of human rights and environmental sustainability is a relevant distinction for others, how can we construe process in our practices of participatory action research so as to overcome this invisibility? [43]

DeVAULT (1996, p.71) describes how feminist researchers focus on what is unsaid and unseen to make it a topic that can be spoken. Much of the feminist researcher's task is to generate processes that make oppression itself evident, and once having done so, support the oppressed to be visible and heard. In a PAR environment, feminist research method does more than carrying out an ethnographic process of making unseen issues and unheard voices seen and heard. PAR has much in common with feminist theories of ethnographic practice. Because PAR is focussed on what happens when things are currently happening we also have to look at the consequences of things happening while the consequences are being viewed and made publicly accountable within a research effort. As a result, we must negotiate research theory, direction and consequence with research participants. This negotiation means that we consider the consequences of making the experiences of the participants visible to others including "the oppressor" as identified by them—be it an individual, an organisation, a system and/or a social blueprint. In these discussions, as feminist researchers claiming the right not to be oppressed by any beliefs including feminist ones, we encounter the possibilities that the oppressors are not only out there, but also within the participatory community, indeed within ourselves. That is, as cohabitants of ideological environments that often do not question oppression, we can never be ideologically clean: our behaviour, our strategies and our purpose reflect experiences of oppression as well as being the oppressor. [44]

In answer to my question about how to make process as practice visible in human rights and environmental sectors, I am saying that we have much to learn from feminist ethnography and that within a PAR context we take an extra step. We adopt a "whole system" approach where the research method, its implementation and the consequences of implementation are included in the process of making the issues and the actors visible. Moreover, we include ourselves, the researchers and research facilitators in the interacting sub-systems of the research method being implemented in living systems of oppression. In PAR environments this self-reflective critical stance is the fundamental capability for action learning which on a collaborative level and under the right conditions can synthesise into self-reflexive strategies for social change. Such strategies become visible because they are publicly funded, they use current theories of research, they are lived by existing communities of

interest and they address issues of public concern regarding human rights and the environment. This is not to say that the funding body does not attempt to hide the report, or that gatekeepers such as academic institutions and corporate partners fail to recognise the rigour and value of these efforts. PAR initiatives use theories of research that also make oppression within academic and corporate sectors visible. However, the work is done, it does live, it does make a difference and it is part of a growing community of understanding that this way of working (self-reflexive participatory and emergent action research) can no longer be dismissed. [45]

There is a new signpost here that reads "schema". If PRICE and SHAW (1996, p.2) talk about "stuckness"—how we are stuck in patterns and traditions, which sustain what they refer to as "improbable complexity"—that is about systems that are designed to anticipate the future by continuing the present. PRICE and SHAW go on to explain our patterns of stuckness in improbable complexity as "self fulfilling prophecies, self replicating patterns, mental models and unwritten rules" (p.3), and how even new ideas like "the learning organisation" can so quickly get stuck in their own pattern of improbably complex "stuckness". Their paper describes how those who step outside this improbable complexity are first marked as stranger, to become secondly unseen, unheard and rejected. [46]

I find this a very familiar place. When I use my position of facilitator as a space for negotiation and then a place for realising shared intent, I sometimes do this by asking questions about treasured or feared stuckness patterns. For example, in a recent project, a group of ten co-researchers worked for a day to design action plans. They agreed to give them to me at the end of the day so I could write them up and redistribute them to each other, but at the last moment they hesitated. They wanted to attend to the details of the plans before I did so. They promised me that they would fax the plans the next day. Three weeks later I am still waiting. I have rung them individually, sent e-mails, asked questions about issues, technology or phone messages not getting through. One person said to me: "Susan, you have to realise that this is just the way it is here. If you want us to put a piece of paper in a fax machine you have to give us two weeks notice ahead of the two week deadline." I am still waiting—six months later. [47]

My probing is not about meeting deadlines, it is about making the principles of self-determination and inter-dependency visible to the participants in their own actions—or the lack of them. In making these principles evident I not only uncovered stuckness patterns of oppression—fear of what their peers or upper management would say—I also exposed stuckness patterns of compliance and powerlessness to resist this oppression. [48]

In his paper entitled "Learning and Disasters: Normal Academic reactions to non-normal conditions" Keijo RÄSÄNEN states: "If a human being is in a situation where she or he is totally powerless, has no possibilities for resistance and there is no escape, then she or he can only change the state of consciousness." (1998, p.8) [49]

RÄSÄNEN refers to many texts on survival situations. One of them is Ervin GOFFMAN's (1961) book "Asylums" which is an analysis of total institutions (e.g. concentration camp, mental hospital, prison, monastery/convent and army). GOFFMAN identifies typical responses to totalitarianism as:

- Adaptation
- Withdrawal
- Resistance
- Colonisation
- Conversion [50]

I recognise this schema very well—as an everyday reality—not just as an example of how people respond to so-called totalitarian institutions. I suggest to you that this state of powerlessness not only exists in public institutions as RÄSÄNEN so boldly stated, but also in corporations, small businesses, families and community networks—and even within ourselves. [51]

In my current PAR project, which is researching community development responses to family violence we (survivors, agencies and myself) are identifying that all of our responses—those of myself as facilitator as well as those of agency workers and community network members who seek help in coping with family violence—reflect oppression (self-interested, socially fragmented, depersonalised and disassociated behaviours)—and that the responses can also be empowering behaviours—altruistic, social capital building, compassionate and held in high esteem. It is important to note that they can be *both*. [52]

As RÄSÄNEN's paper claims, high levels of oppression cause those same behaviours of depersonalisation and disassociation and moreover are the precursors to colonisation and conversion to totalitarianism in the absence of empowering counterparts. [53]

Given our current fascination with consciousness raising practices, constructivism and the liberating possibilities of information technology, should we even see these latest emancipatory hopes in the same light as RÄSÄNEN's claim that in situations of no escape—where emancipatory and empowering counterparts to oppression are inhibited or not recognised as being legitimate, all we can do is change our state of consciousness (through the use of consciousness raising and transformative practices) so we become disassociated from a reality that we are unable to be included in? To be really harsh, are our current thoughts of transformation little more than a form of elite alcoholism? In critiquing my process in my practice I am confronting the appalling possibility that my passion for emancipatory processes is not making that, which is invisible, visible. It is very possible that I am using emancipatory practices to make the painfully visible invisible to our new paradigm, technologically sophisticated and transcendent eyes. I am reminded of an urban myth from Russia which states—"*you can take away my food, my freedom and even my life—but you cannot take away my pain*." Perhaps I am making this final transgression. [54]

## 5. Painful Learning from those we Oppress so we May Facilitate the Learning of those who Oppress us

In conclusion, I want to walk with you through this last painful place—the place of reconciliation around the invisible despair of the continuing genocide of Indigenous people in Australia. I say continuing, because an Aboriginal associate of mine tells me that in 1965 at the time that Aboriginal people in Australia received the right to vote in white Australian political life there were about 600,000 of his people left in Australia, and now there are less than 300,000. [55]

I have spent the last two years working in an informal association with the New South Wales Council for Reconciliation to establish a PAR initiative in the reconciliation arena. I have been completely unsuccessful. We approached white and black tertiary education bodies, government workers, religious groups and leaders, consultants, community groups and individuals. We engaged in introductory meetings as well as in sustained sessions over several months. Some sessions were facilitated and some were informal. We wrote, spoke, interacted, listened, dreamed, learned, taught and cried. [56]

Looking back and most particularly in the light of my current conversations with black friends and colleagues what I experienced and can now see was this:

- Purposefulness can be construed by Indigenous counterparts as more examples of continuing colonisation.
- Inquiry can be construed as transgression (not respecting cultural boundaries).
- Meaning (on an individual rather than collective level) can be construed as misinterpretation and a threat to heritage.
- Contextualisation can be construed as dislocation—replacing the country of origin with a new, out of place context (the result of forced separations from families and inherited country on the Australian land mass).
- Difference can be construed as inequity—the condition of Indigenous peoples is felt as a shared state of impoverishment.
- Not knowing can be construed as not caring as there is no reason for non-Indigenous people to not know the truth if they care to find out.
- Vision can be construed as lies—more fix it, false promises to salve western guilt.
- Progress can be construed as failure since no one aspect of a solution can save the whole disastrous situation, and is thus overshadowed by the whole disaster. [57]

What I am trying to show you is how my PAR practice with all its binary principles, its so called proven track record, passion and compassion was perceived by individual Aboriginal colleagues as nothing more than continued colonisation and all its consequences. While I came to them with wisdom and care, they could not see it. While I continue to deny on a superficial level that what they saw was not

what I intended or even what would have eventuated, what they did was show me to myself through *their* eyes. I am proposing that it is not until we can see ourselves in this way that we can work with the depth of self-critical analysis necessary to make oppression visible and to manage the consequences (in personal, structural, systemic, paradigmatic and ecological dimensions) of so doing. This is needed even when the current action is not suppressive, but can in fact mask or hide the systemic oppression by *not* being suppressive. This misconstruing happens in non-Indigenous environments too, where attention to process can be construed as being "patronising" rather than strategic. I am proposing that rather than continually heading for emancipatory, elitist consciousness, that the participatory research community needs to stop, review our work from the perspective of how we are seen by those who we say we serve, and take responsibility for our place in maintaining the social order that makes it possible for us to keep referring to "them"—"the ordinary or common people" without referring to "us" as one of "them". [58]

Even though I learned to let go of what I thought I could offer, and to let go of what I thought I could offer once I had let go of it, deep in that empty, emergent space that I was left with I was still unable to do anything else but to make the visible pain of Indigenous Australians *in*visible—not just to me, but to them as well. [59]

Instead of approaching this idea of reconciliation from a position of collective strategic effort, I am finding that my life path is leading into sometimes painful but always rewarding relationships with individual Aborigines. They are noticeable by their race to me, because I have to cross such vast spaces of social fragmentation and alienation to be "with" them—and they have to do the same to be "with" their white friend. [60]

They are teaching me how to keep quiet when we are together (which is very difficult to do when you see yourself as a feminist researcher), to listen to the stories and understand their maps. They are teaching me not to translate their symbols into my context—in the sparse landscape of such dwindling numbers their totems of identity and place are far too precious for such mishandling. They are walking with me through the landscape and teaching me about indigenous ways and meanings of spirit. They are speaking with me about their pain and disclosing the complexities of how Indigenous leadership in a white world unfolds. They are claiming mutual responsibility with me for the current situation. They welcome my efforts to include them in my work, but make choices about the appropriateness of this act—sometimes it is right for them, sometimes it is not, and I have to trust their decisions. Most importantly they are teaching me that we cannot expect to ever see the fruits of our labours. We sow seed that we are unlikely to see bloom in our lifetime. [61]

In response to my strategic question regarding rights and responsibilities to shape and be shaped by environment, in the situation of reconciliation I am learning to let my environment shape me entirely. Interestingly this realisation came out of a Peace workshop that I ran recently at the "Action Learning Action

Research and Process Management World Congress" (Ballarat, Australia 1999). The Indigenous ways of being that Elder Ted told us about the Kulin people in the Ballarat area include self-determination AND *environment* determination—because of the harshness of the Australian landscape *and* its sacredness. I cannot facilitate PAR with others, but I can with myself—I have a right and responsibility to change my internal environment. I can use it to make space for the ignorance and fear that sustains exhaustion, inequity, self-interest and denial in my life and make it visible to myself in the company of Indigenous people whom I know. Perhaps what is new to all of us is that this way of learning can be used not only in emancipatory environments that address participant oppression by "others", but also in those in which we are knowingly and unknowingly the dominant force. This domination can exist through our own personal ignorance and also, simply by the colour of our skin, the accent with which we speak or even the practices that we use with all the best intentions. These indicators can represent domination to others no matter what we say and do. What we must not forget is that in other circumstances, they indicate our position to be dominated, suppressed and oppressed by *others*. With this awareness in place we can transform suppression systemically with those who see themselves and us as active players in this repressive/releasing human drama. [62]

My purpose is to find a way forward that somehow and at the very deepest level, restores respect and love within and between us in the midst of continued, visible and traumatically painful oppression. [63]

I am learning to feel Country under my feet and I long for its pull. I am learning to understand time as heritage and place as responsibility. I am seeing a place being made for me—a place of friendship with those who would trust me and forgive me for my ignorance. I am learning to relish a silence that is neither oppression nor ignorance—but a space of negotiating with myself a different process in the simple practice of willingness to be shaped by those whose expertise is surviving oppression. [64]

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