

JUSTIFY the APPROPRIATENESS of the METHODOLOGY

(a bit more)

Having tried to explain the nature of my enquiry, let me now go back to try to justify my methodology. I feel that I have already provided some justification with my references to the work of Plato, Lomax, Trapedo-Dworsky and Cole, and Eames, but here's some more - I'm always willing to please.

You said in your letter of 5 September 1996 that I could get further support from Marshall and McNiff, so let me begin with Marshall. Firstly Marshall (1995) points out that her book "*enters contentious territory, but seeks to do so with an attitude of curiosity rather than combat,*" (p.3) and goes on to say that the stories, from sixteen women's lives, are "*offered as glimpses of issues which are in process and provisional "truths" which are continually in flux.*" (p.3)

Marshall refers to questions put to her which indicate that others doubted the importance of her embarking on a study of women managers leaving organisations, but she argues that the stories are important because they speak from an important realm of women's experience and "*precisely because they are contentious in terms of meaning.*" (p.13) Marshall says in her book,

"I invite you to join in as you read - to notice your reactions, reflect on why you like and dislike what you do, catch your assumptions in action, trace their sources, and explore alternative possibilities. I hope that you can enjoy questioning yourself in these ways, and that you may also sometimes feel sufficiently unsettled that new impressions will arise for you." (p.18)

I guess that is where you're suggesting that I write in a similar way to Marshall, with an invitation to the audience to take part with a sense of fun and enjoyment at the interpretations that might be forthcoming.

Marshall too had decisions to make in finding a form for her book which would tell each story in some fullness. Also, like me, Marshall wanted her research to fit in with her life, and says,

"The project has happened in phases. I wanted to do it in a way which did not erode my life too much, so there were some times of intense activity and then lulls as other work and life areas needed attention." (p.23)

She describes her style as "constructivist" (Belenky et al, 1986) and links such research to the researchers life process,

"I believe in research which is experiential, action-related and collaborative in intent. Any ideas generated are constructed through the process of research, and historically situated." (Marshall, 1995 p.24)

Another point of interest to me was that she let the inquiry process inform her about the topic, explaining that this is rather different from the many forms of traditional social science research, in which the topic area has to be defined in advance. I see this as having some similarity to my situation in that our correspondence has revealed a topic, the

university criteria, that has repeatedly come to the fore and which could not be ignored, as opposed to my knowing the topic from the outset.

As I read on Jack, I continue to find similarities with my own position, especially concerning my wish to stop worrying about whether I'm getting things "right" or whether my account would gain me a degree, for example, Marshall observes:

" I realized that I was trying to ensure that my ideas were "right" so that I could be sure when voicing them, and not expose myself to either undue praise or criticism. I despaired of achieving this, ... Happily I woke one morning with a revelatory insight - that I would never get it right, that seeking to do so was a futile waste of energy, that I should proceed with this "truth" in mind and allow myself to be more playful in my explorations. With this "permission" I could appreciate theory and action in gender-related areas as ever-evolving. They need clear, forceful expressions at their appropriate times, not in order to stand as enduring truths but to become available to be explored and used as bases to move on. This book is offered with this intent." (p.28)

I've included large chunks of Marshall's words because I feel they are so fundamentally important to my arguments for the inclusion of a personal perspective in my enquiry. She continues,

"This phase of the research went more slowly than I had hoped. This was partly because I had other busy demands on my time from work and home. Writing the stories required concentrated and sustained time, energy and attention which I could not always find. I did later discover that I could work on them at home, enjoying the odd break to talk to people or go for a bike ride, as long as I could keep my unconscious attention with the writing. But sometimes I had to leave a story partly finished and move on to other activities, such as teaching. Doing this was frustrating and painful. And it meant that I started nearly afresh the next time I worked with that story, as I had to repeat the groundwork of engagement before I felt confident to write." (p.33)

I can feel her frustration and see myself stopping to go for a bike ride. She goes on to describe how she sometimes wanted to leave, haven't I described that feeling to you so many times in my letters and haven't I also told you that I wanted to stay, in a similar way to that explained by Marshall:

"As the research progressed and gathered its own energy it became a substantial reason for staying. But then working on it challenged my lifestyle. I wondered why I work so hard for so many hours a week and for so many weeks a year. I regretted all the other life activities I do not find time for. I questioned how much choice I have in these matters, and what motivates me. These last few years have been busy and tiring on all life fronts. (They have included the building works which predictably occur in the middle of any major academic project - but we are delighted with our new kitchen and functioning central heating.) Some of my lifestyle questions await attention when I finish writing this book." (p.34)

By describing her difficulties, joys, emotions etc. in writing the stories of the women managers she gives a glimpse into her own life.

"At this point the risks and vulnerabilities of the project struck me again. I was shocked at how revealing many stories seemed. I wondered whether I dare or should publish all the detail. I realized that concern could make me tone the book down. I resisted the impulse,

hoping that the stories could be read with an appreciation that people can be both vulnerable and strong simultaneously, and that sense making is multi-faceted and elusive." (p.35)

Marshall compares her sense-making to freeing the ends of a tangled piece of wool and comments,

"I am not impatient to disentangle this tangle. Working with it is mostly enjoyable, exciting, lustrous. I do not think there is a final goal or realisation to be achieved. I can leave the task, and return if I choose. My preoccupation is with not pulling each strand of wool too tightly, lest it lose its texture." (p.37)

Marshall acknowledges her tiredness in the later stages of writing,

"I was beavering away inside the project, but became concerned that I had lost my sense of perspective. I had set aside all the life activities I could, to give the writing priority. But my life became flat and dull, and this affected my writing. There were times when I seemed to have a very limited vocabulary; words with texture did not come readily. I noticed all this and allowed myself a little more activity, leisure and reading fiction." (p.38)

I believe that Marshall's account of the way she made sense of her research, and the experiences she felt through the process, mirrors my own to a certain extent. The main difference between our accounts is that her focus seems to be the research participants whereas I concentrate on my need to explain my methodology and to have my form of presentation accepted by the academy.

I worry that I'll be criticised for reproducing passages from Marshall's book instead of "critically reviewing them" but I imagine that Marshall herself would say *"Stop worrying, you will never get it right and seeking to do so is a futile waste of energy."* Looking back I find it interesting to see her priorities, somewhat similar to mine, whereas the first time I read her book, I didn't notice these things.

Moving on to McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead (1996), this book takes a very different form to Marshall's, and to some extent I don't find it as interesting. I think the problem is that it's too organised and doesn't *show* me the process by which the book was put together. It causes me to read it in a way that makes me ask myself "Have I done this, that, or whatever?" and if I can answer "Yes" then I have "done" action research. Strange because I also felt that wasn't the intention of the book.

When I look at the main features of the action research process as summarised by McNiff et al (1996 p.16), I can rest assured that I can satisfy them:

- 1 *A commitment to educational improvement*
- 2 *A special kind of research question (of the kind How can I improve ...my personal practice, ...my understanding of this, ...the wider educational situation?)*
- 3 *Putting the "I" at the centre of the research*
- 4 *A special kind of action that is informed, committed and intentional*
- 5 *Systematic monitoring to generate valid data*
- 6 *Authentic descriptions of the action*
- 7 *Explanations of the action*

- 8 *New ways of representing research*
- 9 *Validating claims made as a result of the research*
- 10 *Making the action research public.*

The one of special relevance to me with regard to this letter and justifying my methodology comes under the heading of representing the action research. McNiff et. al. point out that they have presented some of their action research writing in conversational form and say "*These dialogues are a new way in which action researchers try to represent the living aspect of their theories about practice. Jack Whitehead (1993:69) argues that this approach celebrates a "living form" of educational theory, that is open-ended and contains an intention to create something better.*" (p.21)

So Jack, have I finally managed to *justify the appropriateness of the methodology to the nature of the enquiry* to your satisfaction? Can we now move on to the question of whether I've shown evidence of a critical review of appropriate literature.