

## **Living life as inquiry**

by

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper I explain what I mean by *living life as inquiry*, showing how I apply notions of inquiry as method to many areas of my professional and personal activities and how research ideas are generated and tested throughout my life space. The paper has twin tracks which reflect the interwoven processes I am describing and advocating. One is more practice based; in it I outline some of my inquiry practices and dilemmas, and give two examples from my work situation. The second track is more focused on theory, highlighting ideas about systemic analysis, influencing change, relational work and gender. Writing the paper became an example of my topic. I therefore note features of the text which illustrate processes and practices of inquiry.

**Key words:** action inquiry, gender, organizational change, systemic analysis

# Living life as inquiry

## Introduction

In this paper I shall explore issues to do with *living life as inquiry*. I shall first explain what I mean by this, showing how I apply notions of inquiry as method to many areas of my professional and personal activities (in addition to more formally designated ‘research’) and also how research ideas are generated and tested throughout my life space. I shall outline practices I use to achieve this interwoven living of inquiry, and then give two examples of how I have recently conducted my life in this way in my professional setting. I shall mainly draw on my own experiences, but many discussions with other people looking for effective ways to live/be have informed this writing. (Some of these have been with course participants on the postgraduate action research programme at Bath.) One major purpose of this paper is, then, to articulate and reflect on some of the everyday inquiry practices I have been adopting during recent years, to share some of the delights and dilemmas of living in these ways, and so to invite discussion with people who share such interests.

A second theme of the paper is to articulate the theoretical strands of development which accompany my experiments with practice; these become more prominent in later sections. They are an essential, parallel, cross-referencing path of inquiry; they both inform and are informed by my experience. In this paper I have selected theoretical themes to introduce because, variously, of their associations with my practice, the valuable questions they pose, and their potential for further development. The notion of using systemic analytic frames to inform my behaviour pervades the paper. I am also curious about how much influence an individual can have on organizational and other systems, and many of the questions I pursue below relate to this. An allied strand is ideas on ‘relational practice’ (see below), which provide some reference points for understanding and critiquing my practice, and raise questions about how gender influences behaviour, its interpretation and its effectiveness.

Writing this paper has become a mini cycle of inquiry in itself, and this has shaped its form, the tones of its different sections, and the coherence (or not) of its storyline. It is therefore an example of *living life as inquiry* (its topic), and I have not neatened out some text features which illustrate the nature of this venture. Two main overlapping trends shape the paper. One is a time progression. Early and middle sections largely focus on reporting the past, later sections look at current concerns and possible future directions. Secondly, the paper brings together the parallel tracks of development noted above, one more centred in practice but informed by and continually informing theory, the other more centred in ideas which are continually cross-referred to experience. It is a key theme of this paper that these life tracks complement and interweave with each other; at times they will be strongly associated and at others more weakly attuned. Reporting and reflecting on practice is the stronger voice in this paper. The practice has taken more of my attention recently, it has had an immediacy as I needed to adapt my behaviour, and I have used this material as a base for public talks. Whilst the ideas stream has been sufficient to inform practice so far it is less developed and somewhat piecemeal, and this is apparent in the paper. Influenced by both these trends, the text becomes more loosely connected as it proceeds. I have not tried to disguise this. Instead I have wanted to allow this to be a piece with kaleidoscopic qualities, with elements relating to each other more or less strongly and with a sense of identifying next steps as I close, because that is congruent with, and thus illustrates, my process of *living life as inquiry*.

## Living life as inquiry

By *living life as inquiry* I mean a range of beliefs, strategies and ways of behaving which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question. This involves, for example, attempting to open to continual question what I know, feel, do and want, and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages. It involves seeking to monitor how what I do relates to what I espouse, and to review this explicitly, possibly in collaboration with others, if there seems to be a mismatch. It involves seeking to maintain curiosity, through inner and outer arcs of attention, about what is happening and what part I am playing in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action. (Drawing on systemic analysis I might then, for example, explore what is motivating how I keep things the same or how to expand my behavioural and goal flexibility.) It also involves seeking to pay attention to the 'stories' I tell about myself and the world and recognising that these are all constructions, influenced by my purposes and perspectives and by social discourses which shape meanings and values.

If all this sounds like arduous or self-punishing work, that is not my intention or generally my experience. It can be joyless, but that is usually because the inquiry processes have become degenerative in some way - and that, of course, needs 'remedial' attention. But mostly this inquiring is a compelling aspect of being inquisitive, curious and open to testing self and others. Quite often living like this is fun, and has the capacity to turn what might otherwise be daunting, mundane or duty-full activities into ones which are engaging, interesting, playful and opportunities for learning. However, I do need to know when not to adopt a thoroughly inquiring approach and to leave life 'unprocessed', but deciding when and how to do this is also part of living inquiringly.

One implication of this approach to living is that I adopt the self-reflective and action-oriented 'research' approaches I employ in my 'work' in any area of my life which seems appropriate. (Surely all researchers have such carry-over? But it is something we seldom discuss.) In doing so I am testing out the methods and learning about them in different arenas.

Some of this approach derives from my belief that much research is partly personal process (Marshall, 1984; Reason and Marshall, 1987; Marshall, 1992), for example that we draw on our lives and their themes in the topics we choose to study, and my interest in working with this explicitly; I see doing so as good practice. Also, having worked on gender issues for many years, I pay attention to how themes in my research relate to my own life and how my own experiences test and relate to theorising. For example, as I attend a committee meeting I may well wonder if gendered values and dynamics such as those research participants report (Marshall, 1995) are in play, and whether I am placed differently as a woman (rather than man) in that setting. Rather than speculate, I might then try to find ways to test out the factors of interest, including my own behavioural flexibility. In this integrated life, in which research is not separate or bounded, I must hold an attitude of continuing inquiry, as I seek to live with integrity, believing in multiple perspectives rather than one truth, holding visions of a more equal world and hoping to contribute to that practically, not separating off academic knowing from the rest of my activity.

Research is also 'political process' in many ways. Who researches and how; whose experience is researched and how that is named or categorised; what discourses gain currency and hold power; what forms of inquiry and writing are favoured by 'mainstream' power-holders; and

much more are political issues. 'Creating knowledge' is political business. Living practice is thus politicised.

My research and values, on gender and other issues, lead me to hope for transformative changes of various sorts (towards more equality, humanity, sustainability, for example) in organizations and society, and I feel I should be making some contribution to these rather than leading the comfortable life afforded by various forms of privilege. This impetus too fuels my need to be inquiring. I have a sense, for example, that collusion with dominant structures and viewpoints is an ever-present challenge for someone working, as I do, from an appreciation of what they consider marginalised experiences. In my case this has often been researching women managers lives and seeking to speak from and for them. I must take care in my representation of these, partly to avoid making my research participants vulnerable (see Marshall, 1995, for a discussion), and partly to help these voices into debate. Many contexts seem to encourage researchers to say less than they believe in order not to breach prevailing 'etiquette', shock, disrupt or invoke resistance. Thus I should be especially wary if I feel comfortable. But also I do not believe in over-clear truths, attacking for the sake of it, devaluing the good intents of others, and much more that I might be led into if I saw myself as righteous rebel. Having these concerns is a strong impetus for inquiring - into self and situation. So living in inquiry means continually asking questions such as 'am I colluding?' 'what behaviour is productive here?' and 'can I contribute to potential change?'. And in doing so, it is fundamental to question any sense of self-importance I might hold.

[I note that much of what I have written assumes some notion of people, myself included, as aspiring change agents. I both find this a useful designation and yet have fundamental questions about its grandiosity and appropriateness. I have decided, however, not to address these questions here, they may be apparent occasionally in qualifying comments.]

Questions about contributing to change are shared by many people I meet. From a variety of roles, these people, have been seeking to influence organizations or social settings. Many have now moderated previous hopes of being able to 'change the world'. People are discussing how difficult this is, are increasingly using systemic analyses to appreciate how interaction patterns are held in place by multiple factors, are more wary of thinking that one person can (or has the right to) make a difference, are more aware of the personal costs (and the inappropriate modelling) of acting largely alone (and under stress) as a change agent in an unwelcoming system, and much more.

Sharing these concerns, I especially welcomed a recent paper by Meyerson and Scully (1995) which addresses related issues. They identify the role of 'tempered radicals' - 'people who work within mainstream organizations and professions and want also to transform them'. They have chosen the designation 'tempered' for its multiple meanings. These people seek moderation, they have 'become tougher by being alternately heated up and cooled down', and they are angered by incongruities in values and perceived lack of social justice (p.586). Meyerson and Scully suggest that a wide range of types of people can experience the ambivalence of these roles, of being simultaneously outsider and insider. They look at the characteristics of tempered radicals, especially the advantages and challenges of their ambivalent status, and then outline a range of potential change strategies. Their paper has proved exceedingly popular amongst people I know who identify themselves as change agents in some way. It captures some of the complexities and conundrums of their lives in ways which mainstream change writing does not.

## **Practices of self-reflection and reflection-in/on-action**

In this section I shall illustrate some of the processes of inquiry I use, some dilemmas I encounter, and the resources I draw on, to show the nature of what I do in general terms.

As a researcher, one of my specialisms has been paying attention to processes of self-reflective sense-making, and explicating these in my writing. For example, in Marshall (1995) I articulated how I had constructed women's career stories, illustrating the forms of analysis I used, the issues which arose in doing so, and the negotiations with research participants to achieve a publishable version. Within my own life conduct I am very respectful of my arising ideas and seek to allow their loose connections. I work with these ideas, treating them both lightly and seriously. A key aspect of my inquiry style is to be doing this self-reflective work.

Another element is devising experiments in action (or in relation to qualities of being) which allow issues to be tested. I seek to turn puzzles, problems and curiosities into cycles of inquiry - meaning evolving processes incorporating appropriate, and repeated, movements between action and reflection - which will allow me to take them further and explore them in practice. Otherwise they may become stagnant or, worse still, turn into repeated mantras of worry. At their best these experiments reap both practical and conceptual rewards. For example, by testing out alternative behaviours I may develop ways to operate with interest and apparently increased effectiveness in an environment which previously daunted or diminished me. I may also have learnt conceptually about system dynamics and how individuals influence them.

*Living life as inquiry* means that I hold open the boundary between research and my life generally. Often, therefore, I am aware that a theme I am pursuing in research is also relevant to some other area of my life, and I will seek to work with, rather than suppress, that realisation. This can be highly enriching for both my personal and professional lives, and it can be demanding. I must, for example, accept that life processes have their own sense of timing and necessary resources, and that these may not fit with 'academic' timescales. Sometimes I must allow the latter to be put 'on hold' for a while, until the former have run their course.

There are therefore boundary issues about how 'personal' to be as I articulate my perspective and paths of sense-making, taking these as significant aspects to be accounted in constructivist science (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). These boundaries are not clear-cut; finding and articulating them is itself an aspect of inquiry (and perhaps any bounded notion of 'the personal' is a figment of academic imagination these days). I do not, however, want to tell 'confessional tales' to no purpose (but they may sometimes be to valuable purposes) or to make myself or others vulnerable. This is an edge which needs awareness, and when we write from inquiry it requires appropriate signalling.

Images, phrases, concepts and questions around which I organise my sense of inquiring can arise from a variety of sources, but when they 'appear' they can have an intensity which makes me recognise them as powerful, or invest them with such power. They have an evocative quality for me, repeatedly catch my attention, and/or are rich phrases (often with ambiguous or multiple meanings) which echo in different areas of my life. They serve as organizing frames for my self-reflection and for taking issues further conceptually and in practice. Typically they have been repeated in more than one setting. Sometimes I will be encouraged because they have resonance for other people as well as me, but sometimes this is unimportant. One I use below - knowing when to persist and when to desist - encapsulated themes which came from various sources independently, including my research, my life experience, other authors, and conversations with friends and colleagues

Typically, when I engage in the kinds of inquiry I am discussing, I notice that my focus of interest and questioning moves on as I sufficiently resolve specific issues. There may be an iterative process in which I cycle through similar themes again, but inquiries which I have lived fully tend to become emptied of energy (which makes detailed note-taking at the time vital for 'data' tracking, finer details may not be remembered later). Noticing how particular issues fill and empty of energy is one of the ways that I know I am on the scent of 'meaningful' inquiry.

In the practices I am referring to I draw on an eclectic array of resources, some self-generated and some from others' work. Action inquiry as advocated by Torbert, for example, offers some helpful attentional disciplines (Torbert, 1991; Fisher and Torbert, 1995). This model has encouraged me to push more than I had previously done to obtain some response from the outside world, although not always explicitly, and to question my own purposes. A central tenet that whatever happens can be treated as valid information rather than as 'error' is sometimes uncomfortable but allows a flexible learning agenda and playfulness.

I also draw on a range of ideas I call systemic (from the works of Bateson, 1973; Watzlawick et al, 1974; Meadows, 1991; Senge, 1994 and others) in a shifting blend of analytic frames and approaches to practice which seems highly idiosyncratic. I assume, for example, that systems are highly resilient, that often the more things change the more they stay the same, and that my behaviour is potentially system-reinforcing even if I intend it as potentially system-divergent or system-changing. (I also treat myself as a system level with these properties.)

I have been somewhat hesitant about making the inquiry approaches described in these last two sections public. I assume everyone has some sort of 'awareness practices' and ways they seek to become continually more effective at what they do and who they hope to be. It seems presumptuous to give mine any sense of status through writing. And yet a key theme for me in *living life as inquiry* is that my learning is enhanced by articulating it to myself, and by opening it to comment by others.

## **Examples of inquiries**

In this next section of the paper I will give two examples from the inquiries that I have especially paid attention to in my paid work during the last few years. I do so to show some of the processes of action and reflection I engage in rather than to claim anything momentous about their impacts.

### ***Speaking at Senate***

When I was promoted to Professor a few years ago I became eligible for election to the University's Senate (a major academic decision-making body) as a professorial candidate. I was elected at the next ballot. There were very few women on Senate and the setting was quite formal, with the vice-chancellor and a few other senior people sitting behind a long table on a raised platform and the remaining members of Senate - approximately thirty to forty people - arranged in rows in front of them. The vice-chancellor chaired the proceedings. I soon became interested in how to speak effectively at Senate, and wondered if my ability to do so would be affected by being a woman in a male-dominated environment. A significant organizational restructuring was being discussed at that time, and so I soon wanted to make contributions. I thus adopted *speaking at Senate* as an inquiry which I made explicit to myself and pursued in

conversation with selected colleagues and friends at times. It was fun to do this, as well as significant for me. I also paid attention to connected fields of activity: how I related to other people in the University who were members of Senate or interested in its activities, and how I conducted myself in departmental meetings when Senate-related business was processed.

By making this an explicit inquiry I could play with my own behaviour and awareness, and had a frame for treating what happened to myself and others with curiosity. For example, I watched other people's and my own ways of speaking and saw how some are elusive, disguised, easily ignored or dismissed if potentially contentious. To illustrate, I noticed two comment formats which seemed especially unlikely to lead into further discussion. In one the speaker would make various points showing that they were concerned about or opposed to a suggested course of action and then abruptly stop speaking; they usually did not state the purposes of their comments or suggest how to proceed with them. Typically the discussion simply moved to the next speaker. Or a question would be posed which had the skeleton form (with more words included) of 'surely the vice-chancellor thinks that xx is a bad idea?' The vice-chancellor only had to say 'no', should he choose to, for any debate to be deflected. In both cases, the issues might be raised again by later speakers, but their initial impetus was usually compromised. I developed and copied alternative forms for making statements of opinion, often saying in what way I intended the comment, and often explicitly inviting a response from the vice-chancellor or fellow senators. Also, I generally avoided making more than two points in one statement as I found I could not hold a clear 'message' whilst doing so.

I processed this inquiry through my own reflection and self-observation - through anticipating behaviour, noting it in the moment, reflecting on it afterwards - and through discussions with other people. These processes held much energy at the time, and during some of them I wrote notes which appeared to arrive at insights, to help me ask myself productive questions, to suggest new strategies and ways of behaving, and to give legitimacy to interventions which had sometimes felt awkward or out of place in the setting of the meeting.

As I found I could speak at Senate in ways which maintained my sense of integrity and which also elicited some meaningful engagements, and I became more aware of some (only) of the many other dynamics happening around me, I became more comfortable there and so the early excitement of the inquiry abated (although I will always see this as a sensitive, politicised, environment to be approached somewhat warily, not to be treated as routine). Also I arrived at more settled formulations of my role in related arenas. One key objective I developed was simply to distribute information to places in the system which it might not otherwise reach (Meadows, 1991). But this is not a straight-forward practice. I felt I could sometimes seem, and be, unhelpful to colleagues who were considering how to resolve an issue locally, if I waded in with an account of related Senate discussions. This could deflect their attention, seem to place initiative taking at a higher organizational level, and might look like a power/attention seeking device on my part.

A significant choice in this inquiry came when my first term of office ended and I had to decide whether to go forward for re-election. Good sense suggested that I should not, to relieve some of the time pressures I was under. But I did, after inquiring consultations with my partner at home and a close colleague. I felt that my curiosity about Senate had not been fully satisfied. Partly I enjoy watching what goes on in this relatively senior decision-making environment (appreciating I am only watching one, more formal, face of such activity). This gives me intrinsic interest and a context for my own activities in the University. As I seek to understand the worlds of women managers in other settings I also benefit from having some engagements

of my own, however minor, to draw on. But also I am pursuing continuing lines of inquiry about change and the potential for change as I puzzle about whether and how individuals can have influence in complex organizational systems. (In my previous three year term on Senate I had both moderated and extended my expectations that individuals can have impacts.) These themes interest me personally and professionally; they relate to many of the substantive areas in which I work, such as corporate responsibility (through our M Sc in Responsibility and Business Practice), and so persist as concerns. I was one of those re-elected to Senate, and valued the apparent feedback that other people had found my contributions of value in some way.

And what became of one of my key opening questions in attending Senate, whether gender is an issue? Whilst women are poorly represented in top posts, gender is not obviously a major factor in the overt dynamics of the meeting. I can see other divisions more prominently, based on persons and positions. Some of the men know each other well, and have long histories together, but differences and tensions appear between them. In my experiments with ways of speaking I was not aware of gender codes as significant. And I realise that gender-associated inequalities may be structured into aspects of our functioning as an organization in ways which are elusive, difficult to pin down.

### *Revising our departmental appraisal process*

My second example is less focused on my own behaviour, but more overtly guided by systemic principles. A few years ago I was asked to help revise the way academic staff appraisal operated in our department. A colleague joined me in this for a while, but then left for other activities. We opted for a review process based initially on wide consultation, and then made strong suggestions for a revised appraisal process (in a memo and follow-up public meeting) using a propose, consult and adjust-if-necessary approach. The new scheme was designed with systemic principles in mind such as generating feedback (individual and collective) through circuits of information processing, and circulating data where it had not previously been. The process of review itself was also system-testing, seeking to assess how much energy there was for appraisal-related activities and not to go beyond this by creating an elaborate edifice to which no-one could be committed. At the same time, we hoped that (because of its systemic design principles) the scheme had the potential to strengthen in the future as meaningful and enjoyable experiences generated further commitment and activity.

One aspect of the revision process to which I paid special attention was keeping people such as the head of department, the University personnel manager and members of our department involved in what was happening. This was a challenge and at times made me feel like a 'runner' between stakeholders with conflicting views and needs. It was especially vital, however, to avoid a potential clash between departmental and central university practices. My activities fortuitously allowed our department to contribute feedback to a significant review of the University's appraisal form which was then being undertaken. The improved form was a very helpful outcome and proved a positive element in our revised scheme, something we could not have expected to achieve at the outset.

Why do I call this inquiry work rather than just doing an administrative job? (Is doing so a little 'grand'?) I do so because my approach was strongly process and people-centred rather than outcome based, and I used practices and skills relevant to my researching to achieve administration in this way. My aim was to devise something that would provide information and opportunities for learning as it went along, rather than a blueprint for perfection. I was not



attached to ‘getting it right’, rather I was curious about what might be achieved and very willing both to make things work for which I was responsible if I could, and to treat what happened with interest and adaptation. Also I was experimenting with my own behaviour. Now, several years on, we are planning to adjust some details of the department’s appraisal process in the light of experience. Again the notions of systemic patterns and appropriate feedback loops are overt in this rethinking.

The above inquiries are not pursuing grand theoretical themes, but are in-the-situation, and sometimes in-the-minute, important practice questions for me as the person concerned. They do also link to more generic and theoretical issues. In my interwoven living of inquiry these theoretical threads are a parallel track of reflection and echo back to inform and be tested in my practice.

### **Developing theoretical connections**

In this section I shall illustrate two of the various paths I adopt when working with ideas. In the first example, I take a theme which arose through both my practice and my more formal research and move between these two arenas to explore it. In the second example, I outline a theoretical framework which has several links to the questions of acting with integrity and effectiveness in organizational settings which have underpinned earlier sections of the paper. The further potential of this framework is noted but not developed. As I pursue ideas in these ways, questions of whether gender, race or some other form of privilege/inequality is at issue are always background considerations, sometimes moving into more focus if circumstances or theoretical frames support this.

### ***Curiosity about knowing when to persist and when to desist***

I mentioned above in ‘**Practices**’ how key images or concepts come to organize my thinking and further work. Whether individuals can influence complex systems, and if so how, is a key question which recurs in my work role and personal/professional practice. *Knowing when to persist and when to desist* is a supplementary phrasing which has arisen and become charged with energy and interest for me, and so I shall use it as an organizing image here. It was relevant in both the Senate and appraisal examples above. It has repeatedly been a question in various arenas of my life during recent years prompting much reflection and experimentation. I have used it explicitly as a prompt for self-questioning and debating with others. It is applicable from the grand scale of whether or not to continue certain activities to more minor, fine tuning, of how to behave at a given time. It invites me to pay detailed attention to myself and situations, and to experiment. It is a dilemma which resonates with audiences when I talk publically about women managers and acting for change. It is a key skill area for the tempered radical mentioned above (Meyerson and Scully, 1995). In my exploration of this dilemma, it is framed within a systemic sense of the world, for example involving attention to the dynamics of resilience and potentialities for change, (and what persisting and desisting will mean are also crafted within such imagery).

Questions about when to persist and when to desist became well-focused for me through the research I conducted into the career and life choices of women who had reached middle and

senior level management positions and then left, considered leaving or been forced to leave their jobs (Marshall, 1995). These women's stories are interesting explorations in the fine detail of working with this dilemma. I shall now select briefly from that data to illustrate from a formal research base, moving on to incorporate ideas from my own practice.

One conclusion that I reached from the study of senior managers' decision-making was that some of the women had stayed over-long in environments which were unhealthy for them as they repeatedly adapted their working strategies, seeking to be organizationally effective or to implement significant change programmes. Whether to stay or to leave were debates they had had with themselves and others. These dilemmas showed through especially prominently in several cases in which women were change agents in situations which proved exceedingly difficult. Most of the research participants were involved in facilitating organizational change in one form or another and were successful in doing so. These four people had also been successful in previous roles. Their recent stories, however, showed extreme persistence in the face of unpropitious circumstances, and incorporated five interesting, although not wholly common, characteristics:

The managers and their change initiatives had initially been successful, but then other powerful people mobilised against them and attacked the women managers as figureheads of change.

Senior figures who were advocating change in private did not support the managers in public.

The women became isolated.

They became over-committed to work, losing other sources of perspective in their lives.

They carried on, not willing to be deterred and disregarding their own safety.

The latter characteristic is especially interesting to me here, because it involved not paying attention to important data on their own perceptions and needs which was simultaneously encouraging them to desist. Discounting this data left them without many other reference points to consult, and limited their abilities to act inquiringly. Disregarding their own safety seemed an intentional or semi-intentional choice. One person, a Director of Nursing, for example, was too committed to potential organizational changes to heed her own concerns, to trust her 'gut reaction' which was telling her 'slow down, there's something wrong here'. But she also said that she did not want to be 'smart' enough not to try for what is sometimes unattainable. She had to be committed to her job and, as an organizational leader, to have thoughts about how the organization could be different, to make her working life worthwhile.

'I wanted to believe in what was happening. It wasn't that important to me to keep my job per se, but we were building something, it was important for both patient care and the profession of nursing.....' (p.168)

She thought that women are more likely than men to disregard personal safety and push for goals they believe in. The sense of pursuing a wider vision was important.

'So, with any encouragement at all, we [women] will go forward and continue to pursue those goals. I think men are more political than women. We look at what the value is, and I think men look at whether this is going to fly. They're maybe not so committed.' (p.168)

So one potential answer to this section's question, which I would take from my own practice also, is that it may sometimes be appropriate to engage in whole-hearted self-sacrifice in order

to stand for, and so make possible, changes which require this kind of vision and courage. Alternatively, I would argue that staying in a situation beyond one's capacity for flexibility can be dangerous both for the person concerned and the system. The intending change agent becomes too much part of the system after a time and so loses effectiveness, because innovative moves become difficult to frame. Can we have the awareness and data as we engage in any activity to discriminate and choose between these two strategies? I am interested in developing ways to explore such dilemmas and leave them open to inquiry as I proceed. For example, in memos and meetings about the appraisal scheme I asked whether people wanted the demands of a revised scheme and asked for realistic answers so that I could judge how much energy to devote to the task. People who responded were helpfully frank about what was not working well in the current system. Some people made no contributions to the exercise. But inquiring overtly did not engage as much public process discussion as I had hoped for. So I acted largely on my own judgement and my interpretation of weak signals; my assessment of how much to persist was based on limited data.

Sometimes I will decide to persist in the face of apparent indications to the contrary in order to give the potentialities I am working with an opportunity to be realised. But I will try to make this a deliberate choice rather than let a situation slip into such a pattern (this is one of many bold claims in this paper!) and will try to do this with an attitude of inquiry rather than fixed intent. I will then decide to pay the prices involved in persisting wilfully, and may even be able to find ways to reduce these by strategies such as setting a time limit to my activity, or adopting a dual consciousness of pursuing matters whole-heartedly and yet maintaining some inquiring detachment. Also I will want to learn what does then happen through my persistence, as a comparison for other times when I choose to desist. (And this data feeds my general interest in whether individuals can influence complex systems.)

I am enjoying continually questioning when to persist and when to desist, and it is serious work. I think it holds much further challenge and development for me, and part of its value is this succinct formulation of the dilemma which I can use as my own attentional device and in discussions with other people.

### ***Relational work***

I shall now proceed to develop another, more specific, but highly related, theoretical track, starting out by saying how I have chosen this as significant. Having identified such a strand, my approach is then one of puzzling away at different dimensions of it.

Much of what I am reporting as exploration in this paper is work carried on in and through relationships. My solo vision may be an important element, but it is often to no purpose unless it is realised, and modified, in action and reflection that involves others. This is testing and leads me into potentially gender-related territory. I have noticed in two recent 'projects', for example, how much I consult with and involve other people, and how much time and energy this takes.

I have therefore been exploring what might underpin this behaviour, for example by noticing what is triggered for me if I consult less. Consultation fits with my values about participation and with beliefs that involvement enhances the quality of thinking and commitment of those involved and the effectiveness of action. I have wondered, however, if my propensity to consult is over-determined, and whether this is personality-based or related to gender through socialisation or gender/power patterns of expectations and 'permitted' behaviours. As I

question my own motivations and interaction patterns, I am also experimenting (for example more often acting alone, but usually informing others and allowing redirection if appropriate), and tracking consequences for me and for effectiveness of action in the wider situation.

A theoretical strand which informs me in these reflections is what has come to be called 'relational practice' or work. Before I consider a key reference source in this field I want to step back a little and note that seeking to distinguish different sorts of work is an unclear, complex, fraught and highly political activity. Gender issues are often relevant to how work is defined, conducted and evaluated. Here I shall focus on only two commonly identified categories of work - task and relationships - because I am interested in the latter rather than a wider potential array. Task work is often defined tautologically, along the lines of helping to achieve the explicit task objective. It is the valued label in most western, product-oriented, societies, as the preceding sentence shows, so legitimacy is generally claimed for other types of work by 'proving' that they contribute to task accomplishment.

Relational work can be defined from a variety of conceptual systems. In early leadership literature a basic distinction was made between structuring, which entailed a concern for task and its accomplishment (see above), and supporting (or 'consideration') which involved a concern for people, their development, and maintaining good relationships. The latter provides one slant on relational work. Some sources on management emphasise the importance of politics and informal influential activity as ways of operating - strangely, this is not usually depicted as relational but has a harder, more astute, image. Sometimes women are described as failing to recognise the importance of politics, and as concentrating instead on formal task requirements. Politics is thus sometimes depicted as organizational reality, and as more the territory of men than women. (The juxtaposition of this formulation and that of relational practice which follows is worth more consideration in terms of the gender-associated knowledge politics of naming and valuing.)

Recently, Fletcher (1998) has added a significant contribution to this debate from an overtly feminist position. She draws on theorists such as Gilligan (1982) and Miller (1976) who have affirmed relational models of growth and identity as alternatives to the masculine bias in mainstream psychological theorising.

Relational theory suggests that although the prevailing models of adult growth and achievement are based on public sphere characteristics such as separation, individuation, and independence, there exists an alternative model, called growth-in-connection, that is rooted in private sphere characteristics of connection, interdependence, and collectivity. (Fletcher, 1998, p167)

Fletcher uses this base to develop a model of relational practice, which she describes as a feminist reconstruction of work. As part of a larger project in a major high-technology company in the north-eastern United States, she set out to discover whether she could find evidence of relational practice and to chart its natures in more detail. She used various data sources, including interviewing and shadowing six of the company's seven female design engineers. Fletcher found evidence of four categories of activities constituting relational practice (Fletcher, 1998, p169):

Preserving: Activities associated with task, including preserving the life and well-being of the project.

Mutual empowering: Activities associated with an other person. Including intending 'to enable or empower others to achieve or to contribute to the project'.

Achieving: Activities associated with self. Intended to empower oneself to achieve goals and contribute to the organization's work programme.

Creating team: Activities associated with building a collective. This 'includes activities intended to construct the social reality of team by creating an environment where positive outcomes of relational interactions can be realized.'

Fletcher elaborates more detailed subcategorisations in her paper. She goes on to argue strongly that these relational practices were not valued or considered 'real work' within that organizational environment, which favoured qualities such as autonomy, self-promotion, individual heroics, tangible outcomes and short-term results. There was no organizational language in which relational practice could be positively portrayed, and thus 'no way of describing the output of some relational activity as an achievement in its own right' (p.179). The intention of the engineers' behaviour was, in fact, misattributed as some personal trait or idiosyncrasy (such as naiveté, powerlessness or emotional need) rather than as motivated by work effectiveness. Whilst the factors above might affect anyone engaged in relational practice, a further issue related to the social construction of gender. This way of working 'got conflated with images of femininity and motherhood..... female engineers felt they were expected to act relationally, to be soft, feminine, helpful, and good listeners.' (p.179)

'It was difficult to articulate a relational way of working as an intentional choice when they sensed that they did not have a choice.' (p.179)

This last conclusion raises important, but familiar, questions for women as they reach more potentially influential positions in organizations.

Fletcher's work has become a reference point in this field, but it is also contested. Its potential to re-stereotype women with some of their classic associations is one main line of critique. But her theorising is also welcomed because she seeks to differentiate dimensions within the previously largely devalued, and often diffusely specified, attribution 'relational' and to speak for their positive value. These activities may at times be gender-associated, but they are engaged in by women and men, including 'tempered radicals'. I believe they are both much needed in current organizational functioning and under threat given pressures such as speed, slimmed workforces and increased attention to specifiable outcome measures. These ideas therefore pose valuable theoretical and practice conundrums. In both these realms, a systemic approach seems an important companion perspective, to pose questions about different kinds of effectiveness in relational practice.

### **Further inquiring**

As I warned the reader in my **Introduction**, the theory elements of this paper do not reach conclusions, but are incorporated to illustrate the pursuit of certain types of inquiry. As I draw this exploration to a close, I am again looking to my sense of living in inquiry to reveal where my energy and next steps might be. I am working with and extending the above ideas in various theoretical and practical frames. As I relate them back to my own practice, I experience several conundrums. I believe in the efficacy and ethical value of adopting relational practices, and shall choose to continue to do so. I am also entering a phase of looking afresh at the nature of this work and its consequences. It is highly energy demanding and yet may be seen by others as only indirectly connected with effectiveness. It may be long-

term work, requiring sustained attention and/or follow-through action to ensure contribution. As Fletcher reports, it can become associated with, and potentially reinforce, gender stereotypes. I wonder if I can pay attention to these questions without making relationships somehow instrumental, because outcome tracking (effectiveness-based) frameworks pull in this direction. I shall strongly resist doing so. I glimpse that one valuable path for me will be to continue the linking of relational practice with systemic analysis and action research approaches as I have done in constructing this paper (whilst maintaining an awareness of possible gender ‘interference patterns’). This seems to offer a robust array of complementary and conflicting questions which I plan to incorporate in more formal research and in living inquiringly.

It seems fitting to close with this openness. I find that *living life as inquiry* is a continuing unfolding process. As one theme becomes emptied of energy or develops more of a habitual format of inquiry (as persist/desist has for me), other waves emerge to take its place as fresh edges of questioning. Sometimes engaging with them precedes an appropriate labelling and it takes a while to recognise what is at heart in the inquiry. Sometimes an appropriate phrase acts as an organising schema that then directs attention. In writing this paper, I have noticed that my inquiry energy is reforming around my interactional practice (and the implications this has for space and time for myself). My next steps will be some gentle noticing about these issues, and in time I shall formulate some action experiments or ways of tracking data to push further into inquiry.

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