

Chapter 5

An Inquiry Overview

Introduction

Previous chapters in this section illustrated how my inquiry developed through practices that were grounded in my life process and professional practice. This process was dynamic and emergent; through it I developed life and professional skills, and took up new and more proactive positions in relation to professional and persona dilemmas. This process was sometimes planned, and sometimes evolved in relation to external events.

This chapter closes this introductory section of my thesis. It is intended to assist my readers by providing a route map of my inquiry. In it I provide a brief description of the four pathways which my inquiry took, an overview of the data streams that they generated, and of how they interlinked.

These pathways ran in parallel, the focus of activity moving between them according to events and context. For the purposes of my overview I present them roughly in the order in which they were initiated. I show how they were inter-linked, and reference them to the chapters of my thesis that are based on their findings.

Conceptual and methodological pathways ran throughout the inquiry. I have put them at the end of my overview to reflect the focus on conceptual work in the closing stages of my inquiry.

My inquiry findings and activities associated with each inquiry track are fully described in the chapters to which they relate.

An overview of my inquiry pathways

Pathway 1: Inquiry as life process

Data stream 1: 'Mainstream or 'Margins'

In my first year on the CARPP PhD programme I explored my own experiences of marginality, in professional and social identities. I mapped themes and patterns of interaction in consultancy relationships and with family and friends, identified crosscutting themes, and developed strategies for changing these patterns. Drawing from this material I drew up questions to explore more directly in discussions with women in organisations (chapter 6).

This inquiry track was self-generating. It ran alongside my consultancy activities, informing and cross-fertilising my sense making as I introduced inquiry into my consultancy practice. It enabled me to discover the ontological ground of my inquiry, and to enact more dialogic, less marginal positions in my consultancy and personal life (chapters 3 and 4).

Pathway 1, inquiry as life process

Data stream 2: Sustaining self in professional practice

During the first two years of my inquiry, I developed strategies to sustain myself emotionally and financially as a self-employed and self-financing feminist inquirer.

I tracked collaborations I initiated with feminist and business led consultants, and explored the interface between business, professional and political approaches (chapter 4).

The issues that emerged informed cycles of inquiry within my consultancy practice, and are further explored in my case studies (chapters 9,10,11).

Pathway 2: Inquiry with Women in Organisations

Data stream 1: Mapping the Territory of my Inquiry

I initiated this cycle of inquiry when I was ready to test how widely shared my experience was of working with women in organisations. I carried out a cycle of six interview-based discussions, using a topic guide of questions drawn from patterns identified in pathway 1 (chapter 6).

Through analysing the process of conducting these interviews in relation to content of the discussions, I developed methods for conceptualising dialogue within my interactions. In response to challenge from one of my interviewees I modified my conceptual frame to take more account of the need to specify the political and organisational contexts in which my inquiry was situated.

There was overlap in time between this cycle of activity and the consultancy described in my case studies (chapters 9, 10, and 11). This allowed for cross fertilisation in conceptualising my inquiry findings and methodology. In my analysis I signpost themes, dilemmas and challenges to feminist collaboration that I explore more fully in my case studies.

Pathway 1: Inquiry as Life Process

Data stream 3: Reframing the notion of 'secure base'

As I was preparing to analyse the findings from the interviews described above, the ending of a life partnership 'interrupted' my inquiry. I became too preoccupied with the distress associated with this change to engage with the interview data.

I decided to take this opportunity to explore the politics and practices associated with 'belonging', and to conceptualise my need for to create a secure base. I developed strategies and practices to sustain myself, and a feminist critique of concepts drawn from attachment research that had informed my sense making.

Through these cycles of inquiry I made a conceptual and ontological shift from 'seeking' to 'making' belonging. I developed these strategies and conceptual tools further in my case studies.

Pathway 2: Inquiry with women in organisations:

Data stream 2: Collaboration Breakdown

In these cycles I used inquiry to make sense of a breakdown in collaboration with a client for whom I carried out a research contract. In the thesis I offer it as the first of three case studies illustrating how I used inquiry to sustain feminist consultancy (chapter 9).

I explored and conceptualised ethical and political dilemmas I encountered within the consultancy.

Pathway 2: Inquiry with women in organisations:

Data stream 3: Inquiry as consultancy practice

In these cycles I introduced inquiry explicitly into my consultancy practice within two transnational consultancy projects concerned with gender equality. I illustrate this in two further case studies (chapters 10 and 11).

I show that these case studies are multi layered. Through successive cycles of inquiry each conceptualises the consultancy methods I developed, the interactions between women with whom I am working, and the results of my consultancy and inquiry activities.

In each case study I illustrate my use of inquiry as a tool to transform power relationships between women, challenging 'subject / object' interactions and seeking to sustain the spirit of participation through 'subject / subject' mutual exploration (Benjamin 1995; Clinchy 1996). In my analysis I draw from the findings and methodology I developed in my analysis of interviews (chapter 6), and make links with my first case study.

Through these cycles of inquiry I felt affirmed in my purpose of supporting feminist collaboration through inquiry, and in developing and conceptualising practices necessary to sustain myself.

Pathway 3

Conceptualising feminist consultancy practice

Writing each of my case studies involved cycles of inquiry in order to conceptualise further the activities I had described. I identified cross cutting theses and developed a conceptual model for sustaining feminist consultancy and collaboration (chapter 12).

In earlier cycles of this track I entered into a critical dialogue with selected texts and developed conceptual tools for my analysis and practice (chapter 8). In my case studies I show how this conceptual work informed my consultancy practice (chapters 9 -11).

In the closing stages of writing my thesis, I returned to the politics of my inquiry. In a series of 'Red Threads' which interleaf my analysis of inquiry findings I introduce and comment on the tensions between business led and feminist approaches in the research literature I have drawn upon and in my professional field, and on how these were reflected in my analysis.

Pathway 4

Conceptualising methodology for my feminist inquiry

In this inquiry track I read and critiqued feminist and action research methodology literature. I discussed my methodology with my supervisor, members of my CARPP inquiry group, and with feminist researchers. In chapter 2 I describe this process and reflect on the political and epistemological principles of the framework that I developed.

Draft versions of this chapter were discussed and assessed as I progressed from diploma to MPhil and PhD on the CARPP programme. However as development of my methodology was integral to my inquiry process, the chapter was not completed until the closing stages of my thesis.

A final note to my readers:

This chapter has not presented findings or content, its purpose was to provide a map of the territory covered by my inquiry.

A contributor to one of my interviews distinguished between the need to support individual women practitioners, and the need to sustain and resource the work that we do (contributor D, chapter 6).

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate how my inquiry became a means to sustain and develop myself, as an individual, within my professional practice and life process, as well as a means to sustain the work I carried out within my feminist consultancy; and that both were necessary in order to sustain feminist collaboration.

In reading the following two sections of my inquiry I invite you to hold this overview in mind, and select the pathways you would take.