

Red Thread 2

When Feminist Collaboration Breaks Down

In this second Red Thread I reappraise the ethical and political dilemmas I experienced in my first case study.

The consultancy contract that my client and I negotiated was framed as a political intervention on behalf of the group of refugee women managers that she had convened. Thus the contract between us was based on both political and business interests.

As the consultancy progressed my client and I met regularly to discuss the research and shared personal and professional experience. We established a mutually supportive relationship that addressed the effects on individuals of gender discrimination as well as strategies for challenging male power in working environments. As this relationship of mutual support developed, the business contract receded. Only at the point when it became clear that I was not to be named as author in the publication did I experience conflict of interests. At this point tensions opened up between the business contract, our shared political objectives for this piece of work, and our shared personal stake in the project.

Initially I framed this conflict as an extension of the political intervention that the women refugee managers and my client had initiated. Positioning myself alongside my client, I set out to discuss the issues with her strategically. In response my client made it clear that at this point our interests diverged. Getting organisational support for the project had been difficult and exposing for her. She had previously made representations on behalf of consultants who had asked to be named as authors on publications and been refused; this was organisational policy and not negotiable.

The conflict that then arose related to putting my own voice back into the text in an independent publication. At this point the collaborative relationship we had established broke down; we entered into a legal conflict in which my voice became that of my individual business and professional interests, and my client's voice that of her

organisation. Feminist collaboration had been replaced by a conflict in which I was positioned as pursuing my individual business interests, and she acted as a representative of the male authority that we had jointly challenged from a feminist perspective.

Why did I feel such necessity to put my own voice back into the text, and to publish in my own name elsewhere? I had fulfilled my contract, resolving methodological challenges and forgoing my legal right to be named as author of the publication. What was at stake for me that could not be contained either within the consultancy relationship or by calling on my individual resources?

My client and I were both acting from political passion to challenge the consistent undervaluing of women's contributions to organisations. This shaped the nature of our collaboration, and in my case shaped my approach to the research data.

In chapter 2 I introduced the notion of 'passionate' or 'connected' knowing (Belenky et al 1986; Clinchy 1996). In this form of knowing, the knowing subject uses herself as an instrument of understanding, engaging deeply with other persons while maintaining a sense of her self as distinct. In contrast 'separated knowing' is based on positivist epistemological conventions, in which the knower retains her separateness and relates to the known as subject to object (Clinchy 1996). My account of how I approached the research data describes how I used myself as an instrument to interpret the experiences of my research subjects. In using the skills associated with 'connected knowing' I felt I had put something of myself into the report which I wanted to be acknowledged, and which was identified with the experience of my research subjects. However acknowledgement of the presence of my voice in the text would have breached the conventions of separated knowing within which it was to be validated. Acknowledgement as author would have provided symbolic representation of the part I had played. However when this was also withheld, I experienced pain similar to that described by my research subjects, and lost my ability to maintain a separate sense of myself.

At the point where my client made it clear that she could not agree to my research paper going forward, I felt that the shared political and personal stakes on which our collaboration was based had in some way been betrayed.

However this collaboration was bounded by constraints set by the organisation in which the consultancy contract was situated. In this environment feminist political collaboration

could be sustained only up to a point, and when I pushed beyond it was replaced by a conflict constructed by her organisation in terms of opposing professional and business interests.

In chapter 6 I introduced the term 'tempered radical' to refer to conflicting loyalties which must be held in tension by individuals who are both committed to their organisation and who carry beliefs which are at odds with those enacted in them. Meyerson and Scully (1995) who developed the term describe these conflicts thus:

As 'insiders' they play a vital role in organisation transformation. These individuals must develop strategies for resisting pressures to forfeit one side of themselves or another. They must carry ambivalence in their affiliations, while maintaining clarity about their attachments and identity (1995: 586)

If I had framed the collaboration between my client and I as one between tempered radicals from the outset of this project, I might have been better equipped to maintain clarity about the multiple layers of our working alliance, and the constraints set by the business contract. I would have invited her to consider together how to enact our shared political and personal stakes in the project, and tried to separate the inner work necessary to separate my use of my self as instrument for connected knowing from my individual desire for affirmation. However it was through the inquiry journey I subsequently made that I developed the practices which would have better equipped me to carry this through.

Within my inquiry the conflict played a useful purpose in putting me in touch with long accumulated anger at being undervalued for my professional expertise, and for the undervaluing of women's equality work. In the following two case studies I explore how this emerged as a theme from clients, and how I developed inquiry practices which enabled me to hold in balance my need for affirmation in my consultancy projects with an assessment of appropriateness in relation to context.