

Red Thread 3

Sustaining Feminist Collaboration

In this Red Thread I explore the tensions I experienced on the ELP project in terms of the multiple frames in which my colleagues and I were working. Moving between these frames raised dilemmas within my own sense of identity and self-image and within my relationship to the project leader, colleagues and partners on the ELP project.

In writing my case study, I noted that with successive drafts the tensions I was describing seemed to recede, almost as if I was either disappearing or resolving the less palatable aspects of them through my inquiry. In this commentary, I turn my attention to the politics of the narrative I constructed through my inquiry and ask what I can learn now about the political challenges of feminist inquiry and of feminist consultancy.

In my case study I explored a series of tensions that I had lived out in my consultancy. These were:

- Sexual and gender identity v organisation or project culture
- Processes v product orientation
- Individual v collaborative approaches to consultancy and project leadership

In revisiting the project reports, I noticed that these tensions had permeated discussions during the project and had been lived out by partners as well as consultants. Each of us had to balance individual advancement, or survival, with feminist values in environments that no longer favoured women's equality.

Partners as for consultants' approaches to achieving gender mainstreaming project goals and to disseminating results was informed by needs for self-promotion and survival within the organisational and policy environments on which we were dependent as well by our political commitment to women's equality. However potential conflicts were not expressed as a series of binary oppositions; rather, they were accepted by participants as part of the context in which we were operating and referred to as considerations which had to be held in tension. Dissemination of results, for example, served both to promote partners' work

and to help them in their political and professional development. Partners and consultants became adept at presentations adapted to rational output-related environments, and partners used the political currency carried by European sponsorship of the project to widen their political and professional impact. This was documented by consultants in reports from transnational meetings, project newsletters and in the evaluator's report as well as in the project publication. While the fluid environments in which partners were working made it difficult to assess sustainability of organisation change results, these gains in practical and political knowledge of individual participants were permanent.

This intertwining of individual career with project change goals had its impact on relationships between partners and on relationships between partners and consultants. At transnational level participants encouraged each other in relation to individual needs and project goals. Sometimes boundaries became blurred between self-promotion through the project and promotion of the project in order to achieve project goals. These situations tested trust in relationships between participants at different levels of seniority within country groupings and between partners and consultants. One partner, who was taking part in her unpaid voluntary time, challenged the need for paid consultants and suggested that partners possessed the skills for facilitation and evaluation. Managing these tensions within relationships between participants was an important aspect of project consultancy and project leadership.

But how did ELP consultants balance concern for their business needs with feminist values in their work on the ELP project? This was not a subject that was openly discussed, except in brief asides before and after meetings. Rather, in my experience, consultants acted as if the project provided the means for us to work together to implement shared values. Business and feminist political goals were not distinguished until I made bids for accreditation of my work towards the end of the project.

In Red Thread I drew on the concept of '**tempered radicals**' to explore the tension in my first case study between shared political values and individual business interests. In this Red Thread I will draw from feminist research on **friendship between women in organisations** to analyse these issues further. In doing so I aim to bring into sharper focus the politics of my inquiry into ELP project relationships.

In ELP, collaboration and participation in the project was sustained by shared political passion for the project work. Collaboration was not confined to professional roles, but spilled over into friendships that developed from this shared political passion. In my

interview discussions I explored how contributors enacted boundaries between social and professional roles with women colleagues and clients. In all cases, contributors described a preference for permeable boundaries while identifying both positive and negative consequences, and cultural differences in how these were interpreted.

In the challenging political environment in which the project ran friendship was an important factor in sustaining relationships. Yet, in writing my case study, I left it out, feeling that revealing friendship might invalidate my findings and undermine the professionalism of my consultancy. In doing so I suspected that I was enacting a tacit norm within organisation research: acknowledgement of friendship risks undermining claims of individual professional competence. Further, it might undermine the validity of the project, as friendship between women and real 'work' must surely be incompatible.

Reading feminist research has led me to reconsider the politics of this decision. To illustrate this re-framing I selected two separate research articles in which this implied public/private boundary was challenged by assertions of work-based friendship. In these articles, women's friendship and shared political passion is shown to be an important resource to the individuals concerned and to the organisations of which they are part.

The first of these is an autobiographical account of a work-based friendship between two women who are lecturers in a community education college (Andrew and Montague 1998). Their account has similarities to my friendship with the ELP project leader and to contributors' accounts in my interviews of positive aspects of their work-based relationships with women (chapter 6). The researchers refer to their friendship as a resource offering support, encouragement, fun and stimulation, enabling joint projects to be initiated and carried through. In their analysis (p. 356) they draw from research which argues that a key characteristic of friendship is the extent to which it provides affirmation of oneself as a competent, worthwhile person (Wright 1978, cited in O'Connor 1992). In the gendered workplace, they observe, identity validation is not something to be taken lightly. Friendship can become a tool for challenging patriarchal practices in the workplace, creating and maintaining views about the world (p. 360). This can have negative or positive consequences, providing a haven from which to take refuge and avoid confrontation or a base from which to sustain constructive challenge.

The researchers describe reactions from male colleagues to their public expression of friendship similar to those described by contributor C (see summary of interview in chapter 6). They suggest that male colleagues found it unsettling, threatening and challenging (p.

359). They conclude that friendship between women does reinforce the challenge offered by women's presence in any aspect of public life: 'instead of nurturing male colleagues, we nurture each other' (p. 359). From this perspective, friendship between women 'challenges hetero-reality' and gives full integrity to the claim that the personal is political (Raymond 1986, cited in Andrew and Montague p. 361). Raymond uses the term 'gyn-affection' to describe 'woman to woman attraction, influence and movement' (1986 p.7). She claims that women who affect women 'stimulate response and action; bring about a change in living; stir and arouse emotions, ideas, activities that defy dichotomies between the personal and political aspects of affection (1986 p. 8).

From this perspective I wish to reassert the importance of friendship as a key sustaining resource which enabled ELP to develop innovative methods in challenging circumstances. Through these methods we generated and drew upon 'gyn/affection' to power our gender mainstreaming interventions in the gendered organisations in which we worked. This is not to say that friendship was unproblematic; it was a source of negative as well as positive emotion. However, it was an expression of political passion and shared commitment to the work and in this sense could not be separated from the politics of the work to which we had jointly committed.

The second research article from which I will draw is concerned with the place of passion in a feminist network (Beres, Wilson 1997). This article notes that:

The history of organisation theory may be seen in part as a process in which a series of non-rational factors have been conjured up only to be subdued by the rationalising core (Iannello 1992, p. 23, cited Beres, Wilson p.1)

They offer a case study of the importance of emotions in the founding and development of a feminist organisation. They note that additional stresses as well as high levels of motivation are likely to be experienced by individual members of organisations set up to meet needs that are unmet, even unacknowledged, by society (Perlmutter 1994, cited in Beres, Wilson p. 178). In their analysis of challenge and change within the development of the network they argue that emotional commitment to the project and the egalitarian principles through which it was managed enabled the organisation to function and change over time. This commitment was expressed through negative as well as positive emotion.

This account of these additional stresses, arising from the nature of social justice work and of emotion generated by high levels of motivation, bears similarities to my experience of participation on ELP. Their analysis draws from research on emotions in organisations which asserts that:

The different groupings in organisations and their relative hierarchical and status positions must be held in place by feelings - such as belonging, respect, diffidence, fear, awe, love (Fineman 1993, p. 14, cited in Beres, Wilson p. 178).

On the basis of their analysis, they challenge the usefulness of rationalising emotions, claiming that reducing emotion can also reduce commitment and that an understanding of the emotional labour that is needed in any organisation is one way of understanding how to move forward (p. 180). Their analysis of emotional labour is drawn from Hochschild who distinguishes between 'emotional work', managing feelings 'at a personal level', and emotional labour, knowing about and managing other people's as well as one's own emotions' (Hochschild 1993, p. 4, cited in Beres, Wilson p.179).

In my consultancy to ELP I used the concept of relational work to describe both emotional work and emotional labour. While emotional labour was undertaken explicitly by consultants in our facilitation of work by partners, managing our own feelings took place outside the consultancy frame and was discussed informally or not at all. My inquiry created a space to bring this work into the consultancy frame. However in doing so I experienced intense feelings of vulnerability. This vulnerability now takes on a different meaning as an assertion of passion as well as of friendship as a dimension of my analysis, breaking the mould of rationality and of professional roles as sole basis for understanding consultancy-based change interventions.

What images of how women enact *feminist* collaboration in *political* and *business* settings has this Red Thread generated? What values did I and the women with whom I 'did' feminist consultancy enact, as we tried to act on our political values while attending to our respective needs to sustain ourselves within the organisational environments we had set out to change?

Certainly those of committed activists, skilful political actors mindful of personal and political agendas, collaborators able to keep a sense of the specific organisational and political contexts in which each partner was developing their interventions. Consultants' roles were to facilitate this process through acts of translation and of interpretation,

reflecting back to partners the value of their work on the project and encouraging them to transfer their learning from it for use in different contexts. Finally, to enable them to represent results in forms recognisable in the eyes of different constituents: the product-orientated measures of the funding environment, the political environments in which their organisations were operating, and the representatives of the intended beneficiaries of gender mainstreaming measures.

In the following case study, I will describe a set of relationships in which passion based on shared political commitment was absent from the consultancy frame. While friendships based on political passion were established within some of the country groupings they did not develop and were not encouraged within the transnational project. Emotion was often referred to as inhibiting rather than enabling and was seldom acknowledged except in these terms in consultancy discussions. Project leadership was modelled on roles defined according to primary task and project relationships were enacted within these task - defined boundaries. However, far from removing emotion from the frame this sometimes led to hostility associated with conflicts that could not be directly addressed within project relationships.

In Red Thread 2 and in the following case study, I use the term 'tempered radical' to describe the role played by the senior women manager with whom I worked. The term now seems equally relevant as a description of the ELP partnership. ELP participants were all explicitly identified with women's equality policy agendas within their organisations or sector. In this sense they did not share the ambivalence of the tempered radical. However as women in environments resistant to implementation of women's equality they did experience struggle to handle the tension between their personal and professional identities. As tempered radicals their radicalism was expressed by intentional acts and by simply being who they were; it was tempered by anger about social injustice, and by political judgement about how to express this. Through ELP, they became involved in a joint project which developed organisation change interventions and survival strategies for the individual participants. The partnership took the form of an 'insider/outsider alliance' whose 'top down and bottom up' strategies embraced both insider knowledge and external radical change perspectives. Affiliation with people who represent both sides of their identity is one of the strategies proposed by Meyerson and Scully to enable tempered radicals steer a course between assimilation and separatism (p. 597). These affiliations help them to keep in touch with their passion and with their ability to speak as outsiders. The 'country of ELP' provided a 'home' within which both insiders and outsiders were able to recognise the roles they were playing and within which

they sustained each other in both their radical convictions and in the need for strategy 'tempered' by political judgement.