

Chapter 11

Case Study 3

Doing Feminist Consultancy in Mainstream Organisations

An Inquiry Based Change Intervention

Section 1

Introduction, Method and Case Study Overview

Introduction

This case study is concerned with dilemmas that arose during my consultancy within a three year European project which aimed to develop methods for sustaining women in leadership roles in organisations. To respect confidentiality I have used fictitious names to refer to this project and its participants.

In the case study, I show how I used inquiry to sustain myself as a partner in the transnational project and as external consultant to my client organisation. In both of these arenas transnational partners, clients and myself made assumptions concerning women's leadership, feminist collaboration, and trust. In my inquiry I explore these assumptions, identify similarities and differences between my own expectations and those of my clients and partners, and reflect on their implications for feminist collaboration and consultancy practice.

Method

As in my second case study, this is a selective account of a multi-layered inquiry. My inquiry took place over the three years of the consultancy project and continued through successive drafts of my case study. In its first phase it was practice based, intertwined with and adding richness to my consultancy activities. It took the form of reflective practices undertaken on my own, and drew from discussions with colleagues, clients, partners, and practitioners outside the project. In its second phase, after the consultancy was completed, my inquiry practices focussed on analysis through reflection. At the end of the consultancy project, I sought and was given permission to tape record research discussions with members of my client organisation and with transnational partners for use within this inquiry. I reference this material within this case study, and show how these discussions opened up dialogue on a different level with clients and partners.

During the consultancy project I kept journals tracking how I made sense of the dynamics of power and leadership on both the transnational and the local project. I recorded my reflections before and after working sessions, discussions with transnational partners and within the client organisation. I have drawn from these records selectively in order to illustrate the process of reflection that informed my analysis and practice throughout the consultancy project.

During my consultancy, and during my drafting of this case study, intensive inner work was necessary to process difficult and challenging emotion. In the case study I show how this inner work enabled me to shift from a conceptual and ontological position which led to 'blame' to engagement with multiple frames for 'doing gender' within the transnational project.

I discussed several drafts of this chapter with my inquiry group and supervisor, and made substantive changes which addressed their feedback. I clarified my description of complex project roles and structures and identified themes that cut across my wider inquiry. I set out to write a case study that would 'tell the story' of a completed consultancy intervention. In the process of writing, I found myself confronted with further questions, a Pandora's Box of uncomfortable feelings, and a strong desire to 'close the file'. I resisted this desire, fired by the conviction that many of the questions that confronted me were at the core of my feminist consultancy practice, and embarked upon a further cycle of

inquiry. This 'writing inquiry' began several months after the consultancy project had ended.

In writing this case study I became more interested in how use of inquiry had informed my consultancy practice. In it I critically appraise my sense-making as it had unfolded during the consultancy, and how it shaped my consultancy interventions. What had I learned about how my colleagues and clients understood gendered power, and how I had understood it in relation to them? What had I learned about the challenges of building an equal partnership, a 'coalition' between feminists in mainstream organisations? How did we negotiate issues of power, leadership and trust between ourselves? How would I now adjust my approach and methods?

Case study overview

This case study is written in six sections. This introduction is followed by section 2, an overview of the Persephone project. It describes the context in which the project was developed and the project aims, structure, methodology, and results; introduces the transnational partners and describes the consultancy roles I adopted at different stages of the project.

Section 3 is concerned with leadership within the transnational project. It explores how expectations of leadership were enacted between transnational partners and illustrates how I worked with these dynamics. In it I critically appraise my sense-making frames, drawing from research on expectations of women leaders, and referring back to the conclusions of previous cycles of inquiry (chapters 6, 7).

Section 4 is concerned with collaboration between women in my client organisation. In it I explore how leadership, power and trust were enacted. I draw parallels between patterns enacted within the client organisation and between transnational partners.

In Sections 5 and 6, I consider the tensions between organisation development and feminist approaches in my consultancy. I explore the meanings of silence and my role as a breaker of silence within the client organisation and in the transnational project. I relate these dynamics to conflicts concerning the positioning of the project, and draw conclusions concerning the challenges of gendering organisational practice.

Section 2

The Persephone project

Persephone Project overview

This section begins with an introduction to the Project and its transnational partners, and follows with a description of my project roles and stake in the Project. I map the tensions that I experienced on the project and signpost those that I address in this chapter.

I offer this overview from my own standpoint, knowing that each player would have a different story to tell. In it I aim to situate my account of the expectations I held of the project and how I worked with these as the project unfolded.

The Project Persephone partnership

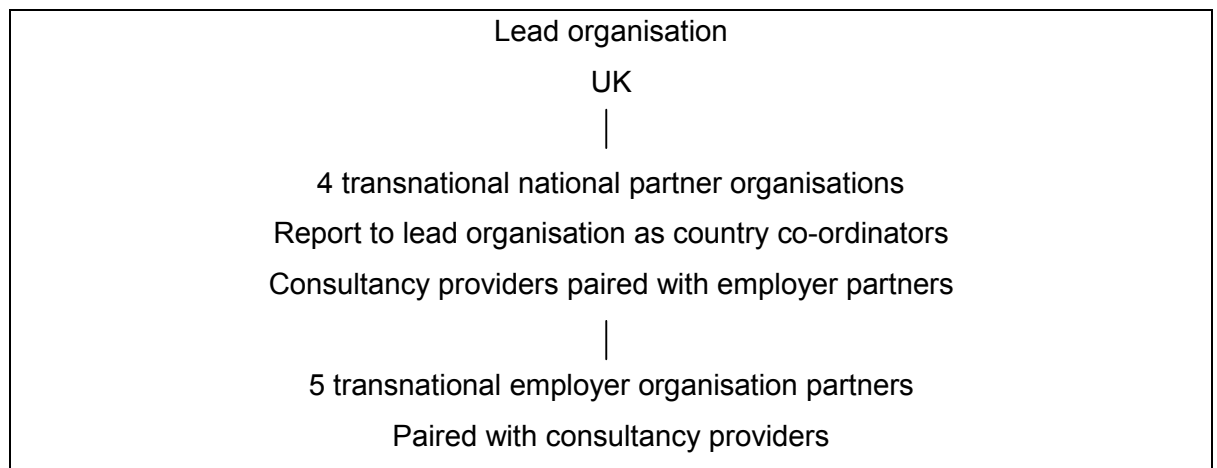
The Persephone Project was a transnational multi-sectoral partnership of organisations in five countries. The project ran for three years and was part-funded by the European Commission. Its purpose was to develop a portfolio of change interventions, designed to attract and retain women in leadership.

Partner organisations were drawn from university based women's studies, public service companies, local authorities, consultancy organisations, and professional support networks for women's businesses. The initial approach to these organisations was through individuals known to me through women's networks; they had expertise and organisational responsibility for an aspect of gender equality or of women's leadership development.

These individuals drew up the programme of activities and budget on which the initial project proposal was based and negotiated approval within their organisations. When the project was approved, they held responsibility for the project on behalf of their organisations. While not all identified as feminist, all were highly committed to women's equality and shared a personal stake in it that they had to balance with the business objectives of their organisations. However, they had different degrees of position power within their organisations and this affected their degree of autonomy and control over participation in the Persephone Project.

Project management rested with the lead partner organisation which was formally accountable to the European Commission. Internal reporting arrangements were designed to enable the lead partner to meet EC requirements and linked performance to tight financial control.

Figure 1
Reporting lines within the Persephone Project



Consultant partners were paired with employing organisations within each participating country; consultant / client pairs (C/C pairs) were responsible for their own programme of activities, within the timeframe set by the transnational project. Activities were in three phases, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Objectives in Phase 1 were for C/C pairs to diagnose barriers to women in leadership in the employer organisation; in the second phase to pilot methods for addressing these barriers; and in the third to evaluate these methods. A transnational meeting took place at the beginning of each phase; consultant partners met separately at the beginning of phases 2 and 3. A publication was written by an editorial board made up of the project leader, the disseminating partner and myself containing summaries of the training and consultancy methods and approaches developed by partners and reflections on the challenges of sustaining women in leadership positions. In order to protect confidentiality it cannot be referenced.

Figure 2

Phases of project activity

Phase 1

- C/C pairs identify barriers to women in leadership and select area of intervention
- First Transnational meeting

Phase 2

- C/C pairs design and pilot consultancy interventions
- Second Transnational meeting; First Consultants' meeting

Phase 3

- C/C pairs evaluate piloted methods
- Editorial Board writes transnational project handbook
- Third Transnational meeting; Second Consultants' meeting

My roles in the Persephone project

The funding proposal for the Persephone project arose from my previous research interests and was developed jointly by the project leader and myself. I describe this process and the way that it shaped my participation in the project in the following subsection.

During the life of the project I took up three different roles:

When the project proposal was approved, I became consultant partner to a local authority. In this capacity I developed an inquiry based change methodology which I explore in this case study.

Mid-way through the project I negotiated an additional role for myself as transnational co-ordinator. In this capacity I used my research role to raise difficult and controversial issues concerning inter-partner relationships. Through reflection on my discussions with partners I surfaced and challenged assumptions I had been carrying concerning the enactment of power and leadership within the project.

In phase 3 I was a member of the editorial board who co-authored the final publication. This was a valuable opportunity to identify and explore tensions between feminist, business and organisation development that informed our conceptual frames and

practices. On the basis of this exploration I was able to reappraise my expectations of the project and arrive at a different analysis of power dynamics between partners and in my client organisation. I used my inquiry to invite partners and women in my client organisation to reflect on the power dynamics of consultancy and project relationships.

My stake in the Persephone project

The Persephone project was initiated by the lead partner and myself and was several years in the making. In the rest of this section, I describe this process.

The vision I brought to Project Persephone was feminist and political. I also saw the project as a business opportunity. Through it I aimed to move into organisation development and out of the more marginal and specialist area of equal opportunities. These two approaches brought tensions that I had not anticipated to my approach to the transnational partnership and to my consultancy with my client organisation.

Reconciling political vision with business objectives held by their organisations was a challenge for each of the partners. Thus, while feminist political vision inspired and sustained my participation, as conflicts developed it also became a source of intense disappointment and loss. Unspoken assumptions were made about how the project should be managed; feminist' organising principles came into conflict with project management based on institutional requirements.

The diary entry below illustrates how I experienced this conflict in my own expectations at the beginning of the project:

I remember the strange sense of unreality that I experienced as project partners gathered for formal dinner at the first transnational meeting. The formality of the dinner and stilted conversation contrasted with my expectation of a more celebratory, riotous gathering of feminists. I felt out of my depth, out of my territory, as if something I had created had turned into a creature that was alien, and a shared language, and history, a form of commonality that I had taken for granted was absent.

I was caught between my expectation of embarking on a feminist project and the shock of realisation that the work of creating this project had yet to begin.

Diary entry, January 1997, first meeting of transnational partners of the Persephone Project

My starting point had been a growing impatience with competence based analyses of women's leadership and with debates about gender difference in women's leadership style. My research interest was in expectations and perceptions of women leaders and how women negotiated them. I wanted to develop my previous research, drawing from organisational and psychodynamic sources.

In the years leading up to my design and implementation of this project I drew from psychodynamic and feminist research to develop a more systemic and approach to my consultancy. I was inspired by feminist claims that gendered power is enacted and reproduced through organisational practices and sustained through organisational cultures (Itzin and Newman 1995; Mills and Tancred 1992; Maddock 1995). From this perspective gender divisions are produced through the workings of management and organisational systems, and cannot be reduced to individual behaviours.

Psychodynamic approaches to organisation consultancy analyse how individuals, groups and organisations interact as systems (Hirschorn 1993; Menzies Leith 1960; Miller 1993; Obholzer and Zagier Roberts 1994). Research studies from which I drew were based on consultancy practice and offered concepts for understanding how individuals enact organisational roles through a complex interplay of conscious and unconscious dynamics. In chapter 2 I described more fully how these and other sources informed my practice.

Over a period (1994 -7) I sought potential partners with whom to develop a funding proposal. When a participant on an event that I facilitated expressed interest I initiated discussions with her. Her organisation was prestigious and represented a 'mainstream' tradition of organisation development and change work with which I wanted to be associated. We established a mutual interest in developing an EU funding proposal and over the following year met regularly in order to do this. During this time I initiated discussions with individual women I had met through women's professional networks to establish their interest and potential for bringing their organisations into the project. They were consultants, management educators and researchers in public and business sectors. Budgets were tight, and depended on match funding from partners' organisations. Proposals were required to demonstrate how the project activities would meet partner organisations' business objectives. We submitted a proposal from twelve partner organisations to a European funding programme based on a 'business case' for 'attracting and retaining women in leadership'.

A year later, our proposal was approved on a reduced budget. Faced with the difficult choice of going ahead on a budget that would not fund the activities we had planned, or pulling out, the lead organisation decided to go forward. However this meant asking partners to begin with a series of negotiations to reduce their activities and secure approval new work programmes. At this point, five partners withdrew due to changes in organisational priorities and individual employment positions. As I show in the next section, the reduced funding set the scene for difficulties that beset the project throughout its life.

My stake in the project was considerable. In financial terms, I had invested two years of unpaid time into development work with no certain outcome. In terms of professional development I saw this was an opportunity to develop and market my consultancy, both by developing new organisational approaches to women's equality, and to position myself within a tradition of organisation development and change consultancy that carried more status and respect.

While I did succeed in developing new consultancy methodologies and a new sense of my professional competence, the personal cost was high. As partners responded to resource problems by becoming increasingly embattled, and I found myself increasingly drawn into destructive interactions between partners and project leadership. Assumptions I had made concerning the transnational collaboration proved to have been over optimistic.

In sections 3 and 4 below I explore these dynamics and show how I worked with them during the life of the project.

Section 3

A transnational partnership: On the margins or in the mainstream?

In this section I describe resource and political challenges in the project environment and explore their impact on relationships within the project, including my relationship to the project leader. I draw conclusions regarding the methodology I developed for feminist collaboration.

The project environment

Discussions with consultants and employees in the public sector during and prior to this project showed that reduced funding, low priority and status, and precariousness of position have become increasingly typical of gender equality initiatives within this sector. This trend had a direct impact on the project partnership: several of the organisations that had originally signed up to the project withdrew commitment when the funding was approved a year later. Consultant partners who had been 'paired' with these organisations then had to replace them, or also withdraw from the project.

In four out of five of the employing organisations, individuals who had drawn up the project proposal had moved on and no longer had a brief that allowed them to participate in the project. Consultant partners with whom they had drawn up the proposal had to try to identify a different lead individual who would champion the project work within these employing organisations. The project had been approved on a reduced budget and work programmes had to be tailored within these constraints. This was particularly difficult given the marginality of women's equality work in each of these employing organisations, the low status of individuals who had originally been lead contacts, and comparatively high investment of resources demanded by the transnational project.

Several individuals who had been committed to the project in employer organisations lost institutional backing at this point and withdrew from the project. One consultant partner withdrew. Others who remained had to rise to the challenges of devising work programmes within reduced budgets, and negotiating the internal resources and ownership to enable the project to move forward. These work programmes then had to be costed and agreed with the lead organisation who then formally contracted with each partner.

This process proved to be a source of considerable difficulty and anxiety for most consultant partners. Within partner relationships the focus of communication with the project leader soon became contractual obligation rather than the substance of the work that partners were seeking to develop. A great deal of anger was expressed over administrative, funding and management issues. As the project developed these relationships continued to be a flash point for conflicts relating to power and project leadership. During the first year communication between most national project partners and the project leader had become conflictual, and communication between partners was

minimal. Far from a collaborative work group, the relationships between project partners were characterised by hostility and frustrated hopes for support.

Resourcing difficulties and conflicting expectations for project leadership were major contributing factors to these difficulties. In the next section I draw from my own experience as a partner in the transnational project to explore how these practical challenges shaped my own approach to collaboration within the transnational project.

Power and dependency

This project had exceptionally high dependency needs.

Project leader

In this section I show myself in action as an inquirer in the final year of the project. I illustrate how I used my inquiry to make a critical appraisal of scope for transnational collaboration between partners and within my own relationship to the project leader. In the indented text below I present slices of inquiry conducted during the consultancy, interspersed with commentary made at the time of writing this case study.

Using inquiry to test scope for collaboration between transnational partners
At the second transnational project meeting, mid-way through the project, partners gave reports of their own work but showed little interest in each other's. Challenge to the project leader was aggressive, and focussed on mismanagement. I experienced an overwhelming sense of loss, as it became increasingly clear that the collaborative project was not to be.

But how to make sense of the conflict was becoming less clear to me as we reached mid-point in the project. I found myself moving between different conceptual frames, as well as different subject positions, as I talked with partners and with the project leader. Evidence from my conversations with individual partners and from exchanges at the second transnational meeting suggested that as well as challenging the project leader, partners were resisting engagement with each other. I was no longer sure how far my vision of collaborative working was shared, after all.

An opportunity to find out arose shortly after this meeting, when the funder responded to the project interim report requiring more transnational linking. I

negotiated a new role for myself, as transnational co-ordinator. In the final year of the project I visited each partner to try to stimulate more transnational exchange. I also invited them to discuss what in their view were the reasons for lack of collaboration, and tried to test my own views.

All complained about inadequate communication, late payments and bad project administration. However two of the consultant partners took the view that common ground could have been built if a different kind of leadership had been given. One referred to spending more time at the beginning sharing contextual information, familiarising each other with plans and project approaches; the other suggesting that stronger and more directive project management and regular information bulletins would have helped create this. When asked why they did not take the initiative to build links with other partners themselves, or use the transnational meetings to share more, they said that differences between projects were too great to establish closer links.

The experience of gathering this material prompted me to interrogate my own position within the project. I had set off expecting to find a shared vision of cross-fertilisation, learning and exchange, and a chance to enact this in the final months of the project. What I found was ambivalence rather than curiosity, and self-preoccupation. I came away with the words of one of the project partners: 'Common ground has to be built, it does not come ready-made'.

While it was too late to increase collaboration between project partners, I was able to use my inquiry to establish a more equal collaboration of my own with the project leader. In the following accounts I describe two 'moments' to illustrate this. In the rest of this section I describe the practices and process through which I established a more equal position in relation to her.

Moment 1

At the beginning of the third project year I began work on the publication with the project leader and disseminator partner. Initial meetings were tense; a conceptual framework had to be devised which could accommodate the business-led and political frameworks that we individually brought to the project, and which would adequately market each of our contributions to the project.

During one of the first meetings, disagreement developed between the project leader and myself. She overrode my view on the basis of professional expertise. At that moment it seemed that my personal vision and professional identity were at stake; the consultancy I had developed through the project and had hoped to market through it might not after all be adequately represented in the project publication. I felt overwhelmed with loss and started to cry, feeling flooded with anger and distress.

She looked at her watch, remarked that we had almost reached the time we had agreed to finish, said she had an important call to make, and ended the meeting. Gave me a farewell hug and left without any other acknowledgement of my distress. In accepting her hug I felt disbelief and confusion as if I was colluding in denial of the reality of my distress - or was I?

It seemed to me in retrospect that at that moment of conflict, there had been room for only one of us to be right.

Moment 2

A year later I was on my way to the final transnational project meeting. This time I was determined that I was going to sustain my independent voice in relation to the project leader and partners, and, by speaking from my experience as initiator and partner, claim my stake in leadership of the project. I prepared carefully, using my inquiry to set clear objectives for conveying my perceptions of partner / leadership issues to the project leader and inviting her to respond; working out how to contribute to discussion without getting drawn into confrontation or allowing myself to be silenced. I used my research stake in the project to construct an independent subject position as inquirer in relation to partners and project leader. In this role as inquirer I succeeded in sustaining this subject position, using the tape recorder as a visible reminder to others and myself.

In the first moment, assertion of an opposing view as 'right' effectively erased my knowledge as 'wrong' and made me feel I had literally 'disappeared'. At that moment an epistemological erasure felt equivalent to an ontological erasure; my very existence, identity and not just my opinions were at stake. On a political level, I experienced a sense of trust in collaboration and dialogue betrayed.

In the second moment, I was no longer expecting to find pre-given common ground. In my preparation I constructed a position from which to assert my views and to invite dialogue while setting clear boundaries to compromise. To achieve this I had made an ontological shift from looking for connection on my ground, towards inviting an exchange through which common ground might be built (chapter 7). This shift had to be actively and consciously worked for, using a variety of strategies over a period of time.

In the second and third years I developed project roles that enabled me to work within the limitations of the project while holding onto my political vision and business objectives. This process posed tremendous challenges. The project title and objective, to develop methods for sustaining women in leadership, was charged with personal meaning for participants, each of whom brought their experience and desires for being sustained as women managing under resourced equalities initiatives in their own organisations or sectors.

In her research into women and leadership, Sinclair suggests female leaders re-activate the conflict between our need to be nurtured and our drive to be independent (Sinclair 1998). She states mothers may be admired for their strength, but we forgive them less than the first male leaders in our lives, and that powerful women are magnets for the largely unconscious ambivalence about mothers and the feminine that both men and women feel; Sinclair 1998:176). The intensity of frustration that partners experienced in relation to the project leadership was often explosive. Sinclair's description of powerful conscious and unconscious dynamics at play captures the quality of intense feeling and of confusion that I experienced in relation to the project leader. In the rest of this section I describe how I attempted to contain and work with the destructive elements of these dynamics, in order to arrive at deeper understanding of the dynamics we were enacting.

As co-initiator of the project I had to take up a leadership role of my own; to do this I had to work with my own frustrations concerning the project limitations and hold onto my desire for support in my consultancy role. I developed inquiry practices to work with my inner world, and to engage in dialogue with colleagues. Throughout the life of the project I recorded my feeling and thinking responses and drew from attachment and psychodynamic theory to make sense of them. I tested my sense-making with partners and with colleagues external to the project. Through these reflective practices and discussions I developed a meta-commentary on my sense-making of the subjective quality of my experience in relation to the project leader, partners and clients. Informed by

this process I made practical interventions, taking on different formal project roles in order to promote more collaborative working relationships.

I asked myself what had been the enabling factors which contributed to my moving from the felt position of powerlessness in relation to the project leader, with which I began the project, to a sense of being a contributor in my own right? A movement from an 'either / or' to a 'both /and' position in relation to my leadership of the project?

Changes in our each of working environments had an impact on my sense of dependency and of power within our relationship.

At the beginning of the project I was financially dependent on the project and relied on payments arriving on agreed dates. Administrative shortcomings and delayed payments from the funder increased my vulnerability as a sole trader and sense of relative powerlessness in relation to the project leader. The experience of exposing my financial need through a series of requests to progress delayed payments felt intensely humiliating. Mid-way through the project my consultancy fortunes had improved. I could then respond to the delays as administrative shortcomings, rather than the callous disregard attack on my well being which I had previously experienced.

Mid-way through the project, the project leader faced professional challenges and asked for my support. This offered me an opportunity to negotiate changes in project management and to reinstate the joint leadership role that I had expected to have within the project. I was able to confront some of my difficulties with project management and extend my role to transnational co-ordinator. This gave me responsibility and additional consultancy time to address the lack of transnational co-operation directly with transnational partners.

At the moment of preparing for this negotiation I experienced powerful feelings of fear, anger and vulnerability. I was determined to grasp this opportunity to challenge her approach to project management practice and assert the leadership I believed was needed to introduce more collaboration within the project. In working through these feelings I was able to recognise the extent to which I had made her into an object of my own powerful projections, and to begin the work of disentangling these from our formal project responsibilities, and different approaches to the project requirements.

I had expected the collaboration we established while developing the project proposal to continue once the project had begun; and hoped that this would be a resource to support me in developing new consultancy practice. However in this collaboration I experienced myself as an unequal partner, with more to learn than to contribute. Paradoxically, the absence of collaboration as a developmental resource hardened my resolve to succeed in my consultancy within my client organisation. This was my first opportunity to attempt an organisation change intervention which used inquiry based methods. If I had to do it without support from the project leader or partners, I determined that would. As I did, my confidence in my own competence in relation to the project leader grew. As my self-confidence grew, my projected dependency receded, and hostility diminished. Her interest and approval was important validation to me, and this she had given within the time boundaries of transnational meetings. I was aware that she represented in my mind the power of her organisation and that my desire to succeed in the eyes of this institution was an element of the power I had projected into her and of my sense of relative powerlessness.

As members of the editorial group in the third phase of the project, we discussed expectations commonly directed at women in organisations. Among the disabling factors we identified was the projection of a range of emotional needs onto women leaders and the expectation that they meet them, regardless of whether this was appropriate to their role in the organisation. Women leaders who resisted these expectations were objects of hostility from men and women alike. This coincided with the experiences described by refugee women managers in my first case study and with the desires and expectations shared in the second case study.

In my reflections on discussions in the editorial group, I re-appraised my interpretation of the dynamics enacted between project partners and project leader. My rage at the project leader for not providing a secure base for project partners to work from might be interpreted as a gendered expectation enacted in relation to a woman leader. As project partners, we wanted her to 'do gender' in a way which met our needs to be sustained. As project leader, she might choose to respond to this expectation in a variety of different ways. From this perspective, the interplay between partners' expectations and her way of leading the project could be interpreted as 'how partners and project leader did gender in relation to each other'.

Through this process of reflection I was able both to review my conceptual framing of the issues and move to a new subject position in relation to my own expectations and

responses. I saw that her responses to partners and myself might have been a strategy to resist expectations that she viewed as gendered and inappropriate. This helped me to let go of expectations that my needs be met and in the process to feel less needy. I moved from a sense of dependency to a sense of greater felt equality. From this position I was better able to find my own voice and sustain a more independent position in relation to her on the editorial board.

As my sense of vulnerability to her responses receded, a stronger sense of having adequate skills and knowledge of my own moved into the foreground of my awareness. From this position I wrote a substantial section of the project publication, drawing from my discussions with transnational partners to engage with the political principles which had guided the consultancy interventions each had developed and making the case for multiple approaches to achieving gender culture change.

In the language of attachment, I had got back in touch with my capacity to sustain myself as an independent subject in relation to others. The process was similar to the process described in chapter 7, of moving myself from a position of 'seeking' belonging through attachment to others to an active sense of 'making' a place of my own. In the following section I conceptualise this process further.

It was not possible until the end of the Persephone project to discuss experiences of inter-subjective dynamics explicitly with colleagues or clients. I was nevertheless able to engage with the issues myself, using reflexive skills, drawing on research sources to test and expand my sense making and to develop and sustain an independent critical stance.

In completing this section I am left with a sense of self-indulgence and weariness. Was it only me who felt so intensely committed to collaboration and so intensely the pain of not achieving it? Were the emotional forces that buffeted me mine alone, or was I carrying them for the whole system? What conclusions from my inquiry can I draw concerning feminist collaboration?

To complete this cycle of my inquiry, I turn my attention the dynamics enacted between project partners and project leader.

Leadership between Women: gendered attachment

'They don't let me lead...'

link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/m_page.html

Project leader, referring to project partners

'I've never experienced such a badly managed transnational project!'

Project partner, referring to project leader

During a general discussion about project findings at the final transnational meeting, the project leader remarked that women leaders are under constant pressure to lead 'in a certain way', for example to be 'not like men'.

I reflected that she might have experienced my expectations that she lead in a more collaborative way as refusal to allow her to lead at all. In my reflections I asked myself what leadership meant on a project with a politically inspired vision, which had to demonstrate results in the business environments of the funding and partner organisations. How could feminist collaboration work within such a partnership? How might it be reconciled with accountability to the funder and the practical constraints of the project?

While anecdotal stories abound of difficulties between women in mixed and women only organisations, research studies on these issues is practically non-existent. Most research on women's leadership is concerned in some way with gender difference, draws from data from mixed gender settings, and does not focus on the enactment of power and authority between women.

Feminist research studies of leadership in women's organisations are few and tend to focus on positive aspects of collaborative non-hierarchical working relationships (Brown 1992; Iannello 1992). However, collaborative leadership is not always generative and preference for non-hierarchical relationships may sometimes be a mask for an inability to accept the authority of a woman in a leadership role (Grant 2001; Riordan 1999). Recent research on governance in UK women's organisations describes frequent reports from women executives of being subverted by members of management committees and boards who appointed them (Grant 1999, 2001).

On the basis of her research with women and men who are managers and executives, Sinclair notes that our expectations of leadership are deeply embedded in cultural mythology, economic structures and social expectations. She maintains that powerful unconscious forces as well as material interests are at work in maintaining women and men in traditional gender roles (1998: p. 180). During the period I was involved in the Persephone project I used psychodynamic approaches to organisation consultancy to

explore ways of conceptualising my experience of project leadership. During the life of the project I took part in several experiential events that used psychodynamic approaches to explore leadership and authority in organisations. My experiences as a participant in these events had been a powerful reminder of the strength of resistance from men and women to women who broke with gender stereotypes in order to take up leadership roles. This had also been the experience of the women refugee managers who were the subjects of the research described in my first case study, chapter 9.

Some group relations research suggests that staff managed by women managers experienced increased dependency needs, and made demands for nurturing, care and protection which they did not make of male managers (Graves Dumas 1985). As a result women managers were placed in a double bind: if they responded to these needs they risked being undermined in their effectiveness in the wider organisation; if they resisted they met hostility and were undermined by their staff. As I have already noted, dependency needs in the transnational project were high and often focussed on frustrated expectations for support from the project leader.

During the project this dependency was masked by abundant practical reasons for dissatisfaction and anger. It seemed reductive to frame as 'high dependency needs' the very real resource and management issues about which partners were complaining. However at a meeting mid-way through the project the project leader referred to partners not responding to her communications and not putting in claims for expenses to which they were entitled. From her perspective they appeared to be creating difficulties for which they were blaming her and the lead organisation. This challenged my sense of reality. I explored the issues further with other partners but results were inconclusive and left me puzzled and uncertain.

Attachment research offered me an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the powerful dynamics enacted between project partners and the project leader (chapter 7). Within this framework the role of the project leader would have been to create a 'secure enough base', an environment in which participants experienced conditions conducive to creative work. Anger and withdrawal expressed by partners would have been read as evidence of anxious attachment, rather than over dependency. Productive leadership interventions within this frame might have focussed on providing practical assistance for setting up consultancy projects, aiming to reduce anxiety and to encourage self-reliance.

In the second year of the project I drew from psychodynamic and attachment research to make the following analysis of the events that set the tone of dynamics between project leader and partners at the beginning of the project:

After the difficult start to the project, partners dealt with their insecurities by withdrawing into their own projects; transnational communication between meetings became virtually non-existent and meetings continued to be conflictual. All the signs of a dysfunctional work group described in psychodynamic research rapidly developed: fight/ flight and dependency were mobilised as defenses against anxiety, and also blocked effective working (Bion 1961). Individually held anxiety led to dysfunctional dependency, and in some cases envy of partners who appeared to be better resourced; this blocked collaboration, when inter-dependency based on shared ownership of anxiety might have promoted it.

Journal entry, project year 2

Using an attachment frame to make sense of these dynamics did validate my negative feelings in relation to the project leader. However they also locked me into self-righteous anger, when what I needed in order to take up a more pro-active role in the transnational project was to make a shift from dependence towards autonomy. In the previous part of this section I described how I make this shift and described the inner work which made this possible. This cycle of inquiry led me to a new question:

Do women - and men - have a right to expect their attachment needs to be met by women - or men - in positions of authority?

If so, women leaders who wish to resist expectations based on gender stereotypes are faced with a paradox: how to provide a secure enough base for creative work when the meaning of 'secure enough' will be experienced by participants as nothing short of providing a nurturing, caring presence?

If not, my inquiry suggests that women leaders and 'followers' may be stuck with powerful projections that have the potential to destroy collaboration between women.

Journal entry, project year 3

The under-resourced and under-valued nature of women's equality work seems likely to stimulate dependency needs which will lead to heightened expectations in relation to

women in leadership roles. I have shown that I was able to contain destructive elements of my individual experience of these dynamics sufficiently to improve the quality of my relationship to the project leader and to try to increase scope for collaboration. This bore fruit in terms of self-care and self-development and had some effect in relationship to others. However this could not compensate for the cut made by the funder when the project was approved, which reduced funds for transnational development work that had been allowed in the original proposal.

In contrast the ELP transnational partnership was staffed by no less than three consultants. They held responsibility for facilitation and design of transnational exchange, partner communication between transnational meetings, and evaluation. In this project collaboration generated its own challenges but consultants did provide partners with support to build sufficient common ground to develop high levels of transnational collaboration. Cashflow was guaranteed by the lead partner organisation which was sufficiently well resourced to protect partners from delayed payments from the funder.

It would be tempting but missing the point to say that more efficient project management, collaborative leadership, and sufficient resourcing, would have enabled partners to sustain generative project relationships. Equality projects by their nature are about political change from a minority position, and are therefore often likely to take place in adverse conditions. Moreover equalities initiatives in employing organisations must balance business objectives and considerations with political vision. These challenges place stresses on relationships between women that provide the context for the projection of need and expectations for being sustained by women leaders. In this context women leaders and followers both need resources, skills, and commitment to work with the inevitable emotional and inter-subjective challenges that they will experience within their relationships.

In the following section, I explore these issues from the perspective of being the consultant leading a feminist change initiative within my client organisation. I uncover interesting parallels between the dynamics I experienced within the organisation and the dynamics I have described between the project leader and myself. I will return to these parallels in my conclusions to the chapter.

Section 4

An inquiry based feminist change intervention: the consultant's story

Part 1

Introduction

In this section I turn to the consultancy I carried out for ABC, my client organisation in the Persephone project.

In my overview of the transnational project I explained that the substance of the work of the project, to create methods and tools for sustaining women in leadership, was carried out in client/consultant 'pairs' of partners. In this section I explore the dynamics of power within the ABC client / consultancy relationship and within the 'coalition' of women with whom I worked in ABC. The complexity of the account reflects the shifting sands of equalities work, as different players sought to keep their agendas alive in an environment in which political priorities and their own positions were constantly changing.

This part of my inquiry was multi-layered. The first of these layers was the organisation consultancy that I conducted within ABC; this is described in the first two parts of this section. In the second of these layers I interviewed key players who had taken part in the project and invited them to reflect with me on their experience of the project. In the third part of this section I describe this process. Through this process, and in writing numerous drafts of this chapter, I developed my analysis and drew conclusions for my consultancy practice.

I begin with an overview of the ABC project. This overview consists of an introduction to the project and its key players, a summary of my consultancy activities, and an introduction to key dilemmas concerning how the project was positioned within the organisation.

In the second part of this section, *Using Inquiry to Confront Gendered Power*, I describe how I explored ways in which different players in the organisation enacted gendered power, and how this was expressed within the consultancy relationship.

In the third part of the section: *Power Authority and Trust between Feminist Change Agents*, I draw from interviews with key players in the consultancy project to explore and conceptualise divisions and solidarity between these women. I relate these to my use of 'coalition' as a method for sustaining women working towards gender culture change, and suggest that elements of my experience of client relationships seemed to mirror some of the dynamics between partners and the project leader in the transnational Persephone project.

A summary of the consultancy methodology I developed through this project is appended (appendix 1B). In the conclusions I draw together themes from the two inquiry tracks within this chapter.

Project overview

In the following I provide brief contextual details of ABC, key players in the ABC Persephone Project (PP), and the phases of consultancy activity. These are followed by an introduction to key themes I will explore in this part of my inquiry.

The ABC Persephone Project

ABC is a local authority located in an area of major industrial decline and high unemployment. The traditional culture of this area is paternalistic. As more women enter public life, this is slowly changing: in recent elections a high percentage of women were elected councillors and the female leader of the Council was re-elected.

Major re-organisations have occurred at ABC in the last few years. These included heavy budget cuts which significantly reduced the resources available for equal opportunities work. New legislation changed the political and organisational process of decision making, bringing both challenges and opportunities for the positioning of the Persephone project (PP) and for progress on its initiatives.

The PP ran three phases of activity. The **first phase** set out to identify and define barriers to women gaining access to and being sustained in leadership roles within ABC and to propose interventions to address these, with specific reference to the experience of black and minority ethnic women. In the **second phase**, action based interventions were developed and piloted; in the **third phase** results were evaluated.

The PP approach aimed to combine bottom up initiative by women employees with top down managerial and political support for change initiatives. In the first phase an inquiry-based approach was designed to stimulate participation from women and men in a range of different roles within the organisation. A Steering Group was formed to develop interventions. In the second phase, Steering Group members were trained as internal consultants; they developed a range of interventions, evaluated at an open staff conference that they organised in the final phase of the project.

The key players

Note: I have used pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

Bella Tang, former equalities training officer, developed the initial project proposal. She was a freelance training consultant who worked alongside me as external consultant to facilitate project events.

Aileen Bergman Head of Training and Equal Opportunities, was my client contact in the initial phase of consultancy. She was responsible for organising the PP Steering Group meetings to plan consultancy and for liaising with senior management. In the first phase of the project these managers were David Smith; in the second phase Jodie Green. Aileen was the link person for the PP transnational project; she was responsible for reports to the Persephone project leader and represented ABC at PP transnational meetings.

David Smith, Senior Executive, 'championed' PP in Phase 1 and continued to authorise and support its initiatives as part of the OD programme. Interested in 'learning organisation' initiatives, he chaired an OD Steering Group and offered tantalising potential for 'mainstreaming' the findings and proposals work of the PP project.

Jodie Green, senior corporate manager, with a background in gender equality work, was the first woman to be appointed at this level of seniority in the authority. Jodie took on the 'championing' role for PP at the beginning of phase 2, resourcing and supporting the activities of the Steering Group and integrating proposals into the organisation

development strategy for the reorganised council. Towards the end of the project her formal position changed as a result of another reorganisation and a politician, Anna Richie, took up the champion role.

The PP Consultants were a cross departmental group of women managers and employees acting as internal consultants to identify barriers to women in leadership, raise awareness of their effects and initiate activities to remove them. The group was formed at the end of the first phase of the project to initiate and evaluate interventions during the second and third phases of the project. The group had a formal brief and reporting line. Following re-organisation that took place at the beginning of phase 2, it was the only forum for women's equality initiatives. Members rely on support from senior management and politicians to authorise and support their activities.

Political support was provided by Marion May, former Chair of the Women's Committee and newly elected Mayor; Paula Strong, Leader of the Council, and Anna Richie, Lead Cabinet Member for Organisational Capacity. At the end of the PP project she was relocated to 'community affairs'.

ABC Consultancy objectives within phased activities

Phase 1

To identify barriers and solutions to sustaining and valuing women in leadership:

- 4 inquiry groups: women politicians; managers (women and men); women employees; disadvantaged employees: black and minority ethnic, lesbian and gay, disabled
- Staff conference
- Steering Group formed

Bella Tang and me plan and co-facilitate; Aileen Bergman (Head of Training and Equal Opportunities) organises; David Smith (Senior Executive, HR) authorises participation and Chairs Steering Group; Paula Strong, Leader of Council and other women politicians participate in staff conference.

Phase 2

To pilot consultancy methods to tackle barriers to women:

- Steering Group pilots sexual harassment awareness networks
- Consultancy skills training for Steering Group members
- Steering Group formally constituted and resourced; Action plan agreed

Bella Tang and me plan and co-facilitate training; Aileen Bergman (Head of Training and Equal Opportunities) organises training and services Steering Group; David Smith (Senior Executive, HR) authorises participation; Jodie Green (senior corporate manager) resources and contributes to Steering Group

Phase 3

To continue to pilot and to evaluate phase 2 methods:

- Steering Group organises rolling programme of 'roadshows' in every council site
- Evaluation conference with keynote Euro MP speaker
- Steering group members make presentation at final transnational meeting and present their findings and recommendations to senior management group

Roadshows are championed and led by Anna Richie (elected member) with Steering Group; the evaluation conference is organised by Steering Group members, resourced by Jodie Green, supported by Paula Strong and David Smith. I give keynote speech.

Mainstream or margins?

The following slice of inquiry illustrates how I used my inquiry at the end of the project to explore issues that had blocked collaboration during the project. It introduces the power dynamics that I explore in the following section:

A frustrating series of silences met my attempts to engage my clients in designing the first phase of the Project. These continued as the Project developed.

During research interviews I conducted after my consultancy role had ended, I explored with my client Aileen some of the conflicts that had been expressed through these silences. In these conversations, the dynamic between us seemed to shift out of the conflicted relationship it had become as we worked together as client and consultant into a more reflective and frank exchange. For me it was a relief to put words to some of the unnamed and painful power issues between us.

In one of these research discussions I had been astonished to hear Aileen describe my efforts to engage her in a collaborative design process at the

beginning of the project as 'not getting value for money'; she believed it had been my job to do the design work. My efforts to negotiate an agreed work programme were interpreted, I discovered in research discussions, as self-interest, an attempt to get more paid days from a cash-strapped client. The opportunity offered by the project to engage in a collaborative approach was blocked by perceived conflict of interest within the client / consultant relationship.

This struggle was lived out in our client /consultancy relationship throughout the project. At the core of this struggle lay our different aspirations for the Project.

Mine were to develop methods for surfacing and challenging gendered perceptions of women's leadership in organisations. I saw this as an opportunity to develop an organisation development based change intervention, moving beyond the scope and ideology of equal opportunities intervention that I saw as being based on a deficit model of women's skills.

My co-consultant Bella had drawn up the initial ABC Project design. In discussion we had seen this as an opportunity to get some form of accreditation or career advancement for women members of the black and other 'disadvantaged' focus groups she had initiated as equalities advisor for ABC. These focus groups that had a support and advisory function. Members of 'focus groups' often provided equalities expertise to managers, but were neither allowed additional work time nor rewarded for this.

Her former colleague Aileen agreed with this approach but her perspective was shaped by her position in the equal opportunities training section. Resources had been significantly cut since Bella had left, and Aileen was concerned that we set objectives that were achievable. As she explained, David Smith, senior executive who was championing the project, expected her to demonstrate results and would hold her responsible for failure. While there was no disagreement between us about content, there was disagreement about scope.

I was faced with a dilemma: to keep the project within the equal opportunities sphere, where we would have more control, but remain on the margins of the organisation; or to try to convince Aileen and Bella to secure senior management support to move it to a more mainstream location. In advocating for the latter course I hoped for a wider impact on general management practice.

A solution was offered by a senior woman manager, unfortunately on her way out of the organisation. With all of our agreement she negotiated to reposition the Project, moving its reporting lines from equal opportunities to organisation development, and thereby extending its scope and sphere of influence. We then used inquiry groups (see below) to build participation and ownership during the first phase of the project. Being an externally funded consultant gave me scope and confidence to innovate in a way which would not have felt possible had I been 'bought in' to work on a client defined contract. However to do so I had to 'sell' my vision of inquiry and build up trust and motivation with key players with whom I was to work.

My aim was to construct a working alliance that would allow senior manager Jodie to lead the Project as an organisation change initiative, working with the Steering Group. This would relieve Aileen from pressure to carry a Project that went beyond her sphere of influence, and provide organisational backing to take up the findings within the mainstream political and management structures. However, for it to work key players needed to construct a shared agenda and work plan, and this required that trust be built between them.

The key players in the Project, had all played leading roles in equal opportunities work in the organisation. When the Project started, relationships between them were shaped both by their formal power relations and by their shared history of working on women's' equalities issues. However Jodie's move from equalities into a general management position had undermined trust between them.

In the following two sections I describe my work with these issues on the project.

Part 2

Using Inquiry to confront gendered power

Phase 1

Surfacing women's knowing

The ABC project overview in the previous section refers to three phases of consultancy activity. In this part of my case study, I describe how I used inquiry in the first phase of the

ABC consultancy project, summarise the findings of the inquiry groups, and describe how I worked with this material at the staff conference at the end of phase 1.

I designed the first phase of the Project as an open inquiry process into barriers to women in leadership. In this phase Bella Tang and I planned and co-facilitated three inquiry groups for employees in the organisation and one for women politicians.

Participants were invited to discuss barriers to women in leadership, and organisational strategies for tackling them. These focus group discussions were then summarised by me, agreed with Bella, and discussed with Aileen and David. Prior agreement on confidentiality of material had been negotiated with participants.

I interviewed the leader of the council and briefed her about the key themes that had arisen from the inquiry group discussions. I described women politicians' accounts of how they perceived her leadership and obtained her agreement to address the staff conference, sharing some of her experience of barriers and how she had overcome them as woman leader of the council. Later in this part of the case study I describe how I framed her contribution to the conference. I presented the summaries of employee and manager inquiry group discussions to the staff conference at the end of this first phase of activity. While material from the politicians' inquiry group was not presented in its own right, it did inform my analysis and approach. Conference participants included but were not limited to members of focus groups. At the conference there was a further round of discussion of barriers and strategies.

My approach to the project design was inspired by my reviews of research literature exploring how women and men enacted gender in relation to each other and how gendered perceptions were structured through institutional power relations (chapter 8). In one of these accounts women and men explored their perceptions of gender relations within an organisation development project (van Beinum 1997). It was also informed by concepts of 'situated knowledge' developed by feminist researchers (chapter 2). I aimed to use inquiry groups to create spaces in which women and men could enter into a dialogue from their different positions. By focussing on how knowledge was 'situated' in relation to positions in the organisation and to gender identity, I hoped to reframe embattled positions and create space for dialogue.

I also hoped to surface hidden knowledge about gaps between equal opportunities policy and its implementation and to build up a momentum for gender culture change. I

anticipated that the process would uncover hidden resistance and hoped to explore this with participants in order to arrive at new understanding of how gendered power worked in their organisation. On this basis I hoped to develop strategies which would position barriers to women's leadership in the mainstream of organisation development. I was influenced by Gherardi's account of how men and women 'do gender', and of how meaning is constructed through their enactment of gendered power (Gherardi 1995).

Designing an intervention without clearly defined outputs required a high level of confidence. This approach was counter-cultural within ABC and a required a high level of risk for my clients as well as for me. I was encouraged in my approach by my reading of some practitioners of complexity theory who suggest that opening up a space for dialogue without preconceived agendas could be strategy for change (Griffin, Shaw and Stacey 1998).

The stories that were told in each inquiry group revealed a complex pattern of resistant and adaptive strategies that were enacted in a context of shifting gendered power relations. In a culture which they described as in transition from macho, paternalistic leadership to a 'listening learning organisation', managers and politicians said that they alike experienced conflict between espoused values and what was in practice needed to get things done. In a context where information was accessed and decisions made through informal networks, women and black people were strongly disadvantaged.

In my analysis of data from the inquiry groups I paid attention to the different ways in which participants made meaning of the dilemmas and experiences they were describing. I considered how to present material from the different groups in a form that would encourage dialogue, enable movement out of entrenched positions and open up opportunities for new alliances. Using Friere's notion of 'problematizing' I decided to present material from each of the inquiry groups as a set of dilemmas experienced from different positions (Friere 1972, 1976). I hoped this would counter the strong sense of powerlessness of women and minorities that had emerged from the inquiry groups.

In the following paragraphs I illustrate how I worked with the material from the three employee inquiry groups. As I did not work directly with politicians in my consultancy I have not included their material here. My presentation was intended to convey the idea of 'situated knowledge'; to achieve this I highlighted contrasting statements and used the notion of paradox to encourage reflective, dialogic thinking rather than problem-solving in

subsequent discussion. The text below is selective and are not intended as summaries of the material discussed:

Inquiry group 1: Women and Men in Management

The view from the top: 'managing conflicting expectations'

- Elected members need quick decisions v ABC is a listening learning organization
- Managers need to 'blow a power hole' to get something done v ABC is committed to empowerment

Inquiry group 2: 'Disadvantaged' Focus Groups

The view from the margins: stolen expertise

- Focus group members are not taken seriously in professional roles: my word is not as important as my white / non disabled colleagues
- Expertise and time is 'stolen' by white colleagues who they educate about equalities and who gain promotion without passing on career opportunities.
- Image of 'minority communities and employees' continues to be negative: a drain on resources rather than a positive asset to ABC

Inquiry group 3: Women Employees

The view of women in the middle

- Management practice in ABC is poor: managers not knowing their staff, not valuing their work; not giving feedback, not praising
- Male managers seem unable to accept women as equal colleagues in the workplace; women do not experience themselves as valued
- Senior women undervalued by male colleagues, not allowed to be themselves, and isolated from each other
- Women expected to 'fit in' in to gain promotion rather than encouraged to contribute in their own way
- Some women believe that allying with a powerful man is a way to make progress. Some male managers seem to expect women to respond to their sexual advances.
- Women who work flexible hours are seen as less committed and excluded from career development
- Women believe many important pre decision discussions take place in male networks to which they have no access

I also wanted to convey the idea that participants themselves were enacting gendered power in the stories they told each other. I illustrated this idea at the conference by naming the representations of women that I had identified in inquiry group discussions:

Stories get told which perpetuate the culture

- 'Women are not interested in career opportunities'.
- 'Women do not choose to become leaders-they are invited to step in when no suitable man is available'.
- 'Women only progress when they are nice to powerful men who may choose to promote them'.
- 'Women, black and disabled people do not add values to ABC; we are helping them out through special services and equal opportunities'.
- 'The stories of women, black and disabled people who do contribute and who choose to take on leadership roles never get told'.

In order to convey a sense of choice in how representations were constructed, I decided to try to work with a story that had repeatedly been told to me of how the woman political leader of the council came to be elected. When listening to stories about her I had been struck by the contrast between her powerful influence and the way that her coming to power was portrayed. Women politicians had told me how they drew inspiration from her ways of asserting authority in relation to men in positions of power, and from her ways of making them feel valued. Men and women managers in their inquiry group described her as presiding over a local authority in transition from a 'power over' culture to a 'listening, learning organisation'. Yet the 'story' of her coming into leadership - repeated to me many times by participants and by the leader herself - was one of fortuitous circumstance, not ability:

My / her husband lost his seat

I had a hunch that this version of events both represented and reproduced the devaluing of women's leadership that the Project set out to challenge. The story acknowledged the ending of a regime yet refused to name women's agency in ending it. Thus at symbolic level it seemed to simultaneously deny the possibility of women willingly taking on a leadership role and neatly suggest a formula for making this impossibility possible.

I arranged to brief the leader before the conference. After discussing the issues with her I suggested that she try to 'tell a different story' in her presentation at the staff conference in order to illustrate herself in an initiating, leadership role.

At the conference I distinguished between level 1 (policy level) and level 2 (culture) change. I invited participants to engage with 'level 2 change', by focussing on the stories they told and how these might be devaluing women's leadership. I illustrated the power of story telling by telling a one myself:

'Queen Hapshepsut, Pharaoh of ancient Egypt, hired 3000 workers to raise the granite obelisk from the sand where it lay: 1000 men and women for manual labour, 1000 men and women to sing and dance for them, and 1000 to cook for them'.

I chose this story to illustrate the power of this woman Pharaoh who had won respect, despite hostility directed against her because she was a woman, by combining attention to the welfare of her staff with technical expertise and economic success.

The material that participants generated in their inquiry groups and at the conference certainly did tell stories of how gendered power was enacted in the organisation which contrasted dramatically with its public face of high profile, progressive equal opportunities policy initiatives. The inquiry process brought women politicians, employees and managers together for the first time, mobilised political support for the project, and inspired 20 women to come forward to joint a Steering Group to pilot the second phase.

However there was also a shadow side to this process, and a cost to women who took part.

At the staff conference both my co-consultant and I experienced strong bodily and emotional sensations of dread and anxiety during discussions of sexual harassment. These seemed to mirror reports that were made at the women employees' inquiry group of women being sexually harassed but not wanting to name it; becoming ill and being intimidated when they attempted to complain.

As sexual harassment was discussed at the conference, our knowledge of danger was literally embodied. My co-consultant said she had to over-ride a strong impulse to stop the process, and walk away. Memories had surfaced of distressing experiences of being

marginalised as a black employee and of the censoring of her work on sexual harassment. We shared and interpreted these experiences as evidence that we had broken a powerful organisational taboo against bringing this knowledge into the public arena and of the risks around breaking the silence of women who had experienced sexual harassment. Many of these women had attempted unsuccessfully to challenge unwanted sexualised interactions with managers, and at least one of them had since left the organisation.

The act of breaking taboo, of bringing a reality into the public arena which had been lived out 'in private' and shared by women who had challenged harassment, required courage, encouragement and a leap of faith by the women who were willing to speak about it at the conference. These women had stated that it was the act of coming together in a woman only inquiry group that had made a difference to them and had opened up the possibility of using the project to take collective action. In this inquiry group they had shared information, put together a picture of what was happening across different 'functions' within the council, and constructed shared knowledge. It had also required resilience and political skill to facilitate trust and mutual support between women participants and to create an appropriate forum within which they felt able to speak out.

The staff conference: Confronting Resistance and taboo

The staff conference was attended by 80 employees, including eight senior men, and several women politicians. Two of these women politicians had taken part in the inquiry groups and were in strategic positions to progress the findings of the inquiry. They lent their support, and in her address to the conference the leader of the council made a statement of support for the second phase of the project. Twenty women responded to an invitation to join a project steering group. The scene seemed to have been set, I believed, for a powerful lobby to insist on a range of initiatives to tackle the organisational barriers identified in the first phase of inquiry, and to explore scope for implementing some of the proposed strategies for removing them.

These initiatives could, I thought, be channelled through the organisation development (OD) subgroup, to which the Project had a reporting line, and be supported within political structures by women elected members who had taken part in the Project. The Steering

Group could choose an area to work on and we could together design an intervention to pilot in the second phase of the Project.

However at this point Aileen powerfully challenged my vision. There were no organisation resources to fund my further consultancy involvement; I was not invited to Steering Group meetings, and at a transnational Project meeting she stated that I had demonstrated that I could not be trusted to attend to her need to design a small, do-able Project. She did not see it as within her power or the remit of the Steering Group to ensure the material generated in phase 1 was taken up, and instead encouraged the Steering Group to focus on one specific area: sexual harassment.

I was devastated at losing the breadth of material generated in the inquiry groups, and had misgivings about prioritising sexual harassment. While it was a powerful motivator, it was also a dangerous and vulnerable area for women employees to work in, and the most entrenched. Would this confirm our positioning as another time-limited 'woman's project' and leave mainstream management practices untouched?

During research discussion at the end of the project, Aileen and I were able to establish the dialogue I had sought in my consultancy role. Reflecting on why she had not felt comfortable with the open process, she remarked that although normally this would be her preferred way of working she had felt too vulnerable to criticism if she was not seen to produce results.

I kept taking leaps of faith, but each time felt you were trying to get more work from us.

This discussion which took place outside our consultancy relationship enabled me to make a very different interpretation of the power dynamics enacted between us at this turning point in the consultancy:

The organisation had powerfully excluded the Persephone project from the mainstream of its concerns and kept it on the margins as a specialist 'women's' project. However this posed interesting paradoxes.

As I showed at the beginning of the section, during these research discussions at the end of the project Aileen indicated that she had perceived my attempts to negotiate a work programme for the project as self-seeking, equivalent to the approach of male consultants

with whom she had to deal. The 'leaps of faith' which she had taken required her to risk being blamed for not delivering to goals which were beyond her powers and to which others, including me, could not be trusted to work.

Sexual harassment was an area of policy and practice in which she held responsibility; in selecting it as a priority area for intervention she was moving the project into a territory in which she had power and authority. However sexual harassment was unambiguously a 'women's issue' and not seen as a 'mainstream' organisational concern.

In the following section I show how I worked with these dilemmas in the final phases of the project.

Phase 2

Discourses of power: breaking silence

Throughout the Project I experienced unusually high levels of anxiety which I had to 'hold' on my own. I interpreted this as a sign that we were breaking invisible taboos, confronting silences and resistance. I used psychodynamic conceptual frames to interpret this, testing my sense making with my co-consultant and in discussion with participants at group relations events I attended. However opportunities for contact with clients and my co-consultant were limited by budget and my clients did not respond to my attempt to involve them further. I found that I was building up an analysis based on an intensive process of meaning-making of my own. I felt frustrated and blocked, unable to bring my thinking into either the client organisation or the transnational project.

After an interval of time, I put together a proposal for consultancy during phase 2 of the project, tailored to our limited budget, and negotiated agreement with Aileen, Bella and Jodie. This proposal took up the issue of women's hidden contribution to the organisation by positioning Steering Group members as organisation consultants. Naming their contribution as consultancy would, I hoped, begin to change the story of 'disadvantage' that was associated with their ongoing initiatives and name their expertise and contribution to the organisation. In making this proposal I was acting on the material generated by the first phase of inquiry. This had illustrated powerfully a consistent pattern of rendering invisible the initiatives taken by employees who were women, black or from other minorities.

Two two-day consultancy skills development sessions were agreed, one of which focussed on black and white women working together, and one on sexual harassment. An evaluation conference was to be organised by the Steering Group as the final event of the project.

As I worked alongside my co-consultant I became aware of contrast between our personal empowerment and organisation change approaches. I held the vision of organisational change, and worked with participants to envision the remit, mission and position of the Steering Group within the formal power structure of the organisation. Bella held the vision of individual empowerment, and worked with participants to affirm a sense of their self-esteem and capacity for action, and to distinguish this from position power. This approach seemed to reaffirm a sense of purpose and agency, and build solidarity. For example, asked what strategies they used to give themselves confidence when challenged or challenging a male senior manager, several women on the consultancy skill course said:

Imagine him naked!

By the end of the second phase of the project, the coalition I had envisioned seemed to have been established. Jodie had agreed to resource and provide practical and strategic support to the Steering Group over a time limited period. Participants had established an independent Steering Group and named themselves the 'PP consultants'. They had practical support from women in positions of power in senior management and political structures. My consultancy input had come to an end; I had only to attend the evaluation conference that they undertook to organise.

Over the next six months, the Steering Group met and despite depleted and irregular participation organised a successful evaluation conference with the help of the woman senior manager. Anna, the woman politician associated with the project, then enthusiastically took up leadership of the Steering Group. Her leadership seemed to sustain flagging momentum and raised the profile of the project. She initiated a 'roadshow' which she took to every council workplace, inviting women to identify barriers to women in the organisation and to make suggestions for overcoming them, building on the phases one and two. This was the first time women-only workplace meetings had been held; they raised the profile of the project and increased participation. Her leadership effectively sustained Steering Group members and embedded ownership and

commitment to the project in the organisation. This was timely as it coincided with the final months of the transnational project.

The issue was now sustainability. Would the fragile relationship between women managers and employees hold? Differences between Steering Group members had surfaced but had not been addressed and participation was variable. Work was needed to consolidate membership and leadership within the group. Would Steering Group members be able to hold on to a change agency perspective, braving the risks of increased vulnerability, or fall back into a more defensive and safer position? Much would depend on their ability to resist pressures to be revert to the equal opportunities mould and to find channels for 'mainstreaming' their issues within management and organisational practice. In this, their relationship with the woman senior manager and the women politicians would be pivotal, but so would their ability to develop their own leadership. In the next section I explore these issues.

Part 3

Power, authority and trust: between feminist change agents

In this section of my inquiry I critically evaluate my use of the concept of 'coalition' as a strategy for feminist consultancy. This part of my inquiry began at the end of the second phase of the Persephone project, and in the evaluative phase of my consultancy with ABC.

I invited key participants in the ABC to take part in interviews that would contribute to my PhD research. In my invitation, I made it clear that I was offering an opportunity to reflect on the consultancy project and on project relationships outside of our contractual relationships. My invitation was circulated to members of the ABC PP Steering Group, to senior manager Jodie; to Aileen, lead contact for ABC on the transnational project, and to Anna, the politician who took on from Jodie the lead role on the Steering Group. Three members of the Steering Group, and Anna, Aileen and Jodie all accepted my invitation. Jodie organised a timetable for the interviews and as a result I conducted a group discussion with three Steering Group members and Aileen, an interview based discussion with Jodie and her senior woman manager colleague; and overlapping discussions with Aileen and Anna.

During discussions I used a topic guide, designed to enable exploration of ABC project participants' perceptions of the nature of the 'coalition' they had created through the project, across organisational divisions, and of what they had achieved. I took notes during discussions, asked and was given permission to use this material in my research, and circulated transcripts of discussions to each participant. I invited feedback on the transcripts and in response one participant, Aileen, expressed concerns concerning confidentiality. I explored these with her and agreed ways of working with the data which would adequately protect her. I have addressed these within the text of my case study.

In my discussion with Steering Group (SG) members all, except one new member present, expressed how vulnerable they felt as initiators of change. Their key issues concerned trust: could they trust that they had adequate senior level support to carry through the project initiatives? One facet of this was their need to have sufficient time to explore their issues and arrive at an agreed collective agenda to act upon. Difficulties were, being allowed enough time to develop this in an organisational environment in which time had to be justified on the basis of results and which devalued reflection. Senior level authorisation was needed in order to take time out, and in order to deliver results, and this meant there was a constant risk of being used to support the unknown agendas held by their senior supporters. It was difficult to sustain momentum in a culture where equal opportunities initiatives were often high profile but did not lead to more than surface change; were more often 'flashes in the pan' that enhanced profile without challenging existing power relationships.

In the predominantly macho gender culture, women were seen to sustain their positions by adapting and therefore to be unlikely to support, and more likely to sabotage, any counter cultural initiatives. In discussion Steering Group members expressed a feeling of wariness, anticipating that support from women with position power could at any moment be withdrawn when it no longer served their individual interests. From this perspective coalition would be too strong a word to describe their relationship with senior women; alliances with them would necessarily be shifting.

Me: How would you like Jodie or Anna to be in the meetings...

SG1 and SG3: We don't know how they fit what we are saying into their agenda.. or do they just expect us to fit into theirs? Are our needs really being met?

There was ambivalence about the nature of senior support, but also ambivalence about how much authority these women in positions of power really had. Their support was felt

to be vital, yet still insufficient to authorise the participation of SG members. The Project in its reporting lines was part of the 'mainstream' structure of the council; following deletion of the Women's Committee in the latest restructure, it was the only place with an explicit brief for women's equality within the formal structure. Yet authorisation to attend SG meetings still had to be given on a piecemeal basis by the male senior manager, and even then was not considered by line managers to be a legitimate part of their staff's workload, so that for some members SG meetings had a quality of being 'in secret.' It was as if despite their formal positions of power, the women who publicly sponsored the project, a senior manager, a senior politician, and the leader of the council simply were not seen by line managers as having the authority to provide institutional backing.

What then was the nature of the support that Steering Group members perceived to be of value to them? How did this match the support that the women in positions of power were able to give to the Project? In my interviews I explored this with Jodie (senior manager) and Anna (politician).

In discussions with ABC PP participants I had used the term 'coalition' to describe the relationships they were establishing through the ABC PP. At the evaluation conference which concluded my consultancy input, Jodie had used this term to refer to these relationships. However in discussion in her interview she took a expressed a more qualified view:

Me: So - the idea of coalition that I introduced - between women in different positions - does that have any meaning for you at the moment?

J: No is the short answer!

Me: But remember we both used the term at the evaluation conference –

J: umm um..

Me: At that point you were saying [in your presentation] that a coalition had been established between women politicians and ...women lower down and yourself...

J: I should just say though there is coalition on some issues (emphasis)... It's like a spectrum ...there are some issues it's easy to achieve coalition around and then at the other end there are some issues that nobody.... That you are never going to get that coalitionso you have to recognise that would be some areas that it's easy there are some where it's not.

When I asked Jodie how she now perceived her contribution to the Steering Group, she described the support she had provided for six months after the consultancy training

sessions as 'kick-starting the group.' After this period she felt she had followed through by providing 'behind the scenes support to Anna as lead politician supporting the Steering Group, in order to 'make sure things are taken seriously [by managers] in the organisation'.

While Jodie described her relationship to the Steering Group as relatively straightforward, I have shown that some Steering Group members described their relationship to her as more complex and difficult. In my research discussion they expressed fears that she might withdraw and doubts that they could trust her, or by implication any woman manager with power in the organisation, to work to an agenda which addressed their needs. There was a 'them and us' approach, which associated position power with self-interest. Women's position power was perceived to be precarious, and women in positions of power were seen as necessarily preoccupied with agendas associated with their own survival or progression within the wider organisation.

I explored with these three members of the Steering Group what it would mean for Jodie to meet their needs:

SG3: Jodie's style of working is difficult.. did not make me feel included any more...

Me: Hasn't Jodie opened up opportunities for the Steering Group to be represented on various working groups, to influence policy?

SG1: I haven't experienced Jodie opening up channels for involvement of the Steering Group in policy...I do not feel included in structures which value my contribution. Where do I fit into any of these gatherings? Where will I be valued? What are the other agendas which are influencing senior women who are involved?

For these Steering Group members, being involved in policy meant a sense of inclusion based on being valued; their disappointment and lack of trust in Jodie seemed based on her failure to provide this for them and on her failure to demonstrate that she valued them herself. In expecting Jodie to provide this valuing in the organisation members are both attributing her with power to achieve this and imagining that she is withholding use of these powers on their behalf.

Steering Group members wanted Jodie to create an environment in which their contribution would have been invited and valued. But the attribution to her of the power to

achieve this, in contrast to their own felt powerlessness, seemed to prevent them from seeing or taking up the opportunities she had provided. Their desire for her support seemed to underpin and to be an expression of their feeling of comparative powerlessness. In this sense it was a desire for a kind of support which was not adapted to their becoming more agentic in the environment described by Jodie.

In Jodie's account women in positions of power must demonstrate ability to look after themselves. At this level, women can and do legitimately ask and expect for help from each other, using organisation position power, but must also recognise that no one can reasonably be expected to risk their position. Help can be requested, but this must be done judiciously and with regard to each other's position within the wider organisation and need to work to wider agendas.

Me: So using political and other networks is really vital?

Jodie: Yes but one of the things is that I have to be wise about which issues I take through the political network, because at the end of the day the leader [of the council] will get heartily sick of me constantly knocking on her door saying 'I'm being excluded', because she sees me as someone who should just get on with it.

Me: Hold your own....

This perception is congruent with the observation of Steering Group members: for women to survive and get on in this environment means adopting adaptive strategies, or taking your chances.

SG member: This might have to do with the sexualised climate you spoke about [ref. to report back at end of phase 1]...we are still in the aftermath of x [previous chief executive].

Me. How would you describe that x way of being?

SG member: Very male, bullying, power over, withholding information.... Women are very good at adapting to the predominant norm...to create safety, survive...women get to the top if they flirt or act like males...the chances of getting female support are very limited as we are a threat to that way of working and being.

But this generalisation about women's adaptive strategies belied the fact that through the PP some women had taken up positions of solidarity for each other, and that some women at senior level had used their position power to support the initiatives that had

been taken. I speculated that some Steering Group members' desire for unconditional support and protection from their senior women supporters, and their disappointment that it had not been given, may have made it more difficult for them to work with Jodie on the conditional basis which she was able to offer. This interpretation was suggested by a conversation with a participant in the consultancy training days, when a participant responded to my encouragement to work with X with an emphatic:

But can we trust her?

The reality that trust between feminists in work settings must be conditional, and not total, is one that I too experienced as painful during my work on the PP, despite political and intellectual knowledge. I explored this in the first part of this chapter and in other parts of my inquiry (chapters 9 and 12). Characterising women who withhold support as in some way untrustworthy may be a defence against the pain of acknowledging separate individual interests, despite shared political values, and of having to do the political work of negotiating areas of common interest. Until this work of separating is done there can be no firm basis for building feminist alliance.

Is there any hope then for feminists who wish to work in coalition in mainstream organisations on a women's' equality agenda? Is the idea of 'coalition' at all useful in this context?

In this case women, lower down the hierarchy did succeed in forging alliances with senior managers who supported their agenda and with politicians. But these alliances were limited by individual women's vulnerability in an environment where women's authority was constantly eroded, and there was a necessity to protect their positions. In this situation a senior woman could and did open doors but did not do more. But women lower down were looking for more; for a guarantee that, once they spoke, they would be welcomed and valued.

Newly elected women politicians who attended the inquiry group at the beginning of the ABC project also described this desire and experience of being devalued. They described difficulties in asserting their authority to male managers and the importance of their woman leaders' modelling of challenge and confrontation. Outside the management culture of the organisation, the two women politicians who took part in Steering Group meetings brought an approach based on shared problems and issues and an informality which was both appreciated and resisted by other members of the Steering Group:

Me: Do you think the Steering Group members understand what your position is in the council, that you have power?

Anna: Yes they do recognise our power as elected members - they said 'be quiet you are our role models!' when we were sharing a joke at the meeting...At meetings I feel the same as the other women; I forget that we have different power in the council... We are all equal; no matter where you come from in the organisation we are trying to improve things for all women; it's how we use our different positions outside the group which makes the difference.

The leadership provided by the woman politician was associated with a common struggle, women together within a safe space, within which knowledge was shared and a common perspective assumed. In this space, women were able to value and affirm each other as long as they set aside their position power and associated roles.

However this safety was sometimes maintained by ignoring difference of opinion or challenge. Differences of opinion were often not expressed openly at SG meetings, and feedback from SG members indicated that some members who did not feel identified with predominant voices withdrew their participation. Some members felt a pressure to be results orientated before they were ready. When Jodie challenged SG members to be more results and action orientated her interventions were received with ambivalence:

SG3: It is different when Jodie is here, partly inhibiting, partly connecting...Jodie has a drive to make everything action related...to expect us to say what things are for... its harder to think out loud...

To be effective and to achieve their goals, the Steering Group needed to do more than to provide a place of safety; they also needed to plan and evaluate interventions, to demonstrate results. This latter way of working was more in tune with management culture and assumed a sense of confidence in ability to deliver and of power to effect change. To achieve this SG members would have had to cross a border, staking a claim to having something important to contribute in the mainstream of organisational practice.

Jodie's leadership and my consultancy interventions aimed to enable SG members to cross the border from being recipients to being initiators of change, and from framing their concerns as implementation of equal opportunities to challenging wider management practice. But this had raised ambivalent feelings in SG members. The margins of equal

opportunities held a safety that could not be guaranteed in the shifting power dynamics in the mainstream of the organisation. Jodie could not guarantee unlimited support to the Steering Group, and both she and Anna lost the positions towards the end of the project that had enabled them to 'mainstream' the material generated by the project.

Part 4

Inquiry skills for coalition and consultancy

I began this consultancy by attempting to reposition the ABC Persephone project, moving it from equal opportunities to organisation development (OD). In doing so I was determined to assert that valuing women's leadership was a mainstream organisational development and not a marginal equal opportunities issue. On the surface I succeeded; the PP Consultants group was formally constituted, and received political and managerial support. I was allowed to develop and implement a methodology which used inquiry to build wide participation and which brought staff and politicians together for the first time. An innovative rolling programme of women only staff meetings was initiated, and these confirmed the findings of my first cycle of inquiry. Women were able to use the spaces created by inquiry to break silence in taboo areas, and came forward to act on the results.

However the work of taking up the issues which were identified by members of the inquiry groups in the 'mainstream' of ABC management practice relied on PP participants' use of position power and ability to work 'in coalition'.

In my inquiry I explored the issues which arose between women who came together across different positions in the political and managerial system. I found a complex set of expectations and desires in relation to leadership. These reflected both a need for a place of refuge in a hostile system and a desire to act as change agents. The Steering Group needed champions, a protector figure, and challenge to develop the skills to become more self-reliant. However women with position power were themselves vulnerable to attack, and could not guarantee unconditional support.

The ABC PP project had set out to address the specific barriers experienced by members of the 'disadvantaged' focus groups which had been initiated prior to the PP by Aileen and by my co-consultant Bella. However while black women did participate in all of the consultancy events, and speak from their specific experience, they saw the focus group for black employees rather than the PP as their main focus of activity. Their time for new

activities was limited by extra responsibilities relating to their role as members of the focus group, providing expert advice to managers on equal opportunities issues.

I had discovered that formal positioning of the PP 'in the mainstream' of ABC was not enough either to persuade managers to introduce gender issues into organisational development initiatives that were running parallel to the Persephone project, or to address them within mainstream management practice. The place of women's initiatives in ABC was 'equal opportunities'. Through a series of events initiated by my client contact Aileen, and by players outside the project, the Persephone project remained positioned outside the mainstream, despite its sponsorship by the leader of the council.

Each of these 'places' in the structure carried their own discourses and practices, and each implied a specific set of values and approaches to change. The women associated with equal opportunities, corporate management, or politics each held and spoke from a perspective shaped by these practices, values and change models. As consultant I moved between them. I had hoped that coalition between the women located in these different 'places' would enable each to 'see' the world from the other's position, and to take account of the situated knowledge they were each carrying.

In the following transcript, Jodie took a long term view of sustainability of the Persephone project and explored the inter-relationship between her role on the project and recent changes in her own position:

Me: What do you think is the key to sustaining the momentum of The Project now?

J: Championship: having people like Anna (woman politician) championing it, and maintaining it so a critical mass builds up, because [otherwise] it will have no credibility. Bearing in mind it's the first time there have been workplace discussions for women only, there has to be some reaction and follow through, and that's going to be the problem.

Me: Do you feel, because you did a lot of work using the material generated in the first phase and tried to incorporate it in the policy papers you wrote, that you succeeded in using that material in the restructuring, and that it has somehow influenced it?

J. Not really... I think its probably served to alienate me to the extent that I have now been really marginalised in the restructuring --- So all of the work I have put in to lots of the policy dimension in the organisation is still all there on paperbut the reality is we've still got a huge journey to travel.

Me: Are you saying that your position is worst because of the project?

J: Not just because of the project - my position is worse because of a changing set of factors - - but its moving [and changing] so 2 years' time I might be back on the ascendancy; you never know!

According to this longer-term view, empowerment of individuals and an ability to develop a systemic and political organisational analysis would be needed to achieve gender culture change. I would add that in the meantime coalition between women would be fragile and need careful maintenance. Leadership would need to enable differences and inequalities to be acknowledged and addressed. Notions of limited conditional trust would need to be cultivated and made explicit. Working arrangements would need to be reviewed in the light of changing political circumstance and the needs of individuals to protect their positions.

Practices developed by feminists engaging in 'transversal politics' might be well adapted to this context. Developed by women working to build feminist political alliances across divides in war zones, these feminist political practices allow women to back off areas of difference of identity, opinion, ideology or custom that become too explosive to discuss during times of conflict. Instead of focusing on conflict and difference they focus on the common ground which they have built in order to sustain trust and alliance (Cockburn 1998; Yuval Davies 1999).

These women have learned from necessity that trust cannot be absolute between individuals who are members of communities in conflict. Relationships that acknowledge areas in which differences cannot be resolved, due to membership of communities in conflict, can be sustained even in times of war. I suggest that feminist women seeking to work in coalition from different positions in organisations need to make a similar distinction. Conflicts of interest that are structural belong to the survival needs of individuals within a conflicted environment. Expectations of trust may not be appropriate but belong to the shared territory that has been constructed between women, within which conflicts can be negotiated.

I used my inquiry to work with inter-subjective dynamics in relation to my clients in order to construct and maintain shared territory within which my consultancy to the ABC PP could take place. In my inquiry I tried to cultivate my awareness of the power of the symbolic in constructing women's relationships to each other and gender relations within ABC (Gherardi 1995). I drew from this awareness, as well as my feminist political analysis and

psychodynamic practice, in order to construct sufficient common ground to enact my vision of 'coalition'.

In the following section I explore further what this meant for my understanding of feminist consultancy practice.

Part 5

Silences and disappearing acts

In this part of my inquiry I set out to discover what it meant to be a feminist consultant in a mainstream organisation.

To write this case study, I have had to re-engage with accumulated distress and to do this, I have worked through considerable resistance. Ending the project had been a relief; project achievements were well described in project reports. I was ambivalent about reawakening memories of anxiety, of conflict, of vulnerability. How could I find a way into this material that would be generative to me, and of value to my inquiry?

I began to think again about blocks that I had experienced in relation to my women clients and subsequent revelations that they had seen me and at different moments the senior woman manager with whom I was working, as 'other', 'not us'. Who had I been acting for in their eyes? Was I 'for the organisation' or 'for the women', 'for them' or 'for us' in relation to partners on the project team?

These questions opened up a stream of thinking about the meaning of the silences, of the unspoken, in the consultancy process. In this final section I make my own reading of these silences, drawing from feminist research.

In writing this part of my case study, I explored the contours of these silences as a way of exploring how to do feminist consultancy. In doing so, I positioned myself as a feminist researcher, asserting subjectivity at the core of my inquiry and reflexive practices at the core of my methodology (Marshall 1995,1999; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Crafting this case study has challenged me to override powerful drives to keep silence, reminding me of the personal risks of bringing my subjectivity explicitly into professional relationships. In the process, I have become more sharply aware of the difficulties in putting together

discourses belonging to the world of organisations and those belonging to the worlds of women in organisations.

The feminist project of 'gendering organisational analysis' (Mills and Tancred 1992) offered an approach to bringing these discourses together. Research studies which adopt this perspective explore how gender and sexual divisions are produced through the gender neutral language of organisation studies, and how gendered power can be reproduced and enacted by individuals through apparently gender neutral management practices and interactions. I have shown that the inquiry groups that I ran in the first phase of consultancy in ABC generated abundant evidence that supported this approach.

However, when I attempted to act on this approach in the second phase of the ABC PP I was confronted by a paradox. I found myself blocked by my client who held responsibility for equal opportunities, for whom the priority was to design an intervention that would produce results. From her perspective, the only way to make a difference was to keep the project within the territory of equal opportunities within which she had some managerial power and control. Extending the project's focus to general management practice would require direction from a more senior level, but her experience indicated that neither male nor female general managers could be trusted to address gender or race inequality within mainstream general management practice. The inquiry groups had produced an analysis of how women's inequality was enacted and reproduced through mainstream management practice. However, to move the project into the territory of general management required acting in alliance with senior management and risking loss of control of the project to general management agendas. Thus it seemed that although the analysis clearly located responsibility for addressing barriers to women with general management, it could only reliably be acted on a way that framed the issues in terms of 'equal opportunities'. However as a specialist function within the organisation, designed to address disadvantage, equal opportunities was unable to confront the 'male standard' that was embedded in general management practice. Feminist researchers continue to identify the resilience of this standard, and its effects in positioning women as 'out of place', travellers in a male world (Gherardi 1995; Marshall 1984, 1995; Wajman 1998). However, this research also, as I have demonstrated, offers hope that women and some men are persisting in enacting leadership and gender differently (chapter 8).

The inquiry groups revealed and mapped how this male standard was reproduced and upheld in ABC, and through the collaboration which Steering Group members established with Jodie, the senior manager, and Anna, the politician, they did name and challenge

barriers to women in ABC. They used the project to move beyond the equal opportunities frame for women's inequality, developing the 'roadshows' as their own form of inquiry, and presented their findings to senior management. Their findings confirmed the patterns identified in my analysis of the inquiry groups of phase 1.

A recent research study demonstrated that there is no clear pathway for moving from gendering organisational analysis to gendering organisational practice (Acker 2000; Meyerson and Kolb 2000). In an inquiry based on a consultancy intervention in a manufacturing company, consultants could not hold together the business and gender equality objectives of the project (Coleman and Rippin 2001). The gender culture was reproduced, ironically, within the woman only production team which women employees successfully initiated. In ABC, inquiry findings relating to general management practice were at first rejected as areas for intervention, and sexual harassment prioritised. While this was undoubtedly a priority area for women, it also removed the challenge directed towards general management to examine their role in reproducing gendered power relationships. The project was effectively identified with 'women' rather than with 'organisation' and could safely be left to women to lead. In mobilising position power across political and managerial structures, women developed a form of collaborative leadership. They challenged predominant representations of women and enabled women to assert alternatives based on their own experiences of management and leadership. In positioning themselves as consultants, they rejected the notion of 'disadvantage' and took up a new position as experts.

Working with my source material, I concluded that in my consultancy to ABC different ways of knowing and sets of knowledge claims had pulled me apart. I had tried to reconcile the gender-neutral language of the organisational world with its shadow side, the world inhabited by women in the organisation and women's accounts of this world that they had shared within my inquiry. I became more conscious of their edges, more skilful at moving between these two worlds. In chapter 12 I develop the metaphor of 'border-crosser' to explore this ontological experience of crossing between territories:

In which some voices sound, resound, more than others, and in which echo connotes power.

(Stanley 1997: vii)

In writing this case study the conceptual frames I took up to make sense of the material continued to shift and change. I moved between the lenses of feminist inquirer and

organisation development consultant and actively engaged in dialogue with others. I struggled to arrive at a story that reconciled discordant values embedded in discourses associated with each of these and with their associated worlds. I experienced this struggle as an ontological one, asking myself and reflecting in conversation with others: what does it mean to be a feminist organisation consultant, and inquirer? On what value base are my consultancy relationships constructed? How can I build them on a foundation which reflects my politics, as well as working with the realities of power / role difference and of my business and professional needs?

I had aspired through my work on the ABC Persephone Project to become an OD consultant, able to move beyond the limitations of an equal opportunities specialist approach. To achieve this I had to hold the tension between these worlds. In my consultancy relationships within ABC, the discourses of management and of organisational development often clashed with the voices of the women with whom I worked, and with feminist discourses of empowerment, of sexually and gender specific power dynamics. In the transnational project I tended to voice and hold the feminist political values and practices embedded in the project objectives and design, while the project leader held and spoke to the organisational accountabilities of partners, from the organisation development approach of her organisation. These different discourses often seemed to represent conflicting expectations held by partners, and clashes were often enacted through a series of silences and miscommunications. Each discourse resonated with different parts of myself; as a woman, as a feminist, as an organisation change consultant. These conflicts triggered a din of anxiety, of self-searching and of analysis, drawing from a variety of conceptual frames and external sources.

Harlow, Hearn and Parkin use the concepts of silence, din, and 'gendered noise' to explore overt and covert gendered domination within organisations (Harlow, Hearn and Parkin 1995:105). They extend this analysis to the din of certain kinds of organisation theory and the silence of others, leading to conceptual constraints. They note for example that gendered power cannot be reduced to the formal and informal structures of the 'gendered organisation', but is much more complex, subtle and paradoxical (1995: 104).

In this inquiry, I have shown that much of my own experience as a feminist consultant, and the experiences of women with whom I worked, were unspeakable within organisational contexts. On the transnational project, project leadership did not allow subjectivity to be expressed or explored within the work of the project. Within the client organisation, sexuality and sexual harassment were 'taboo' subjects. In my role as

feminist inquirer, I have acted as a breaker of silence in order to open dialogue and challenge power regimes that blocked feminist collaboration. In both cases it would have been easier to keep silence. As I have shown, the personal cost in terms of vulnerability, as well as the developmental rewards of placing subjectivity at the centre of my inquiry methodology have been high.

As feminist research has suggested, silence and voice can be at once acts of resistance and surrender, constructed through the complex nature of relationships in which they occur (Cockburn 1991; Gatenby and Humphries 1999). During my work on this project I learned to interpret my client's silence in response to my attempts to engage her in collaborative work, as a strategy of resistance and self-protection. Silence in this instance was a strategy employed by women who saw themselves as less powerful in relation to others they perceived as powerful, and untrustworthy. As a consultant in a position of power I experienced being on the receiving end of this silence as painful; later in the project I was able to break through it by using inquiry to step outside consultant / client roles, into more reciprocal relationships. In contrast, within the transnational project I used my research role to break silence and speak through it from a position of comparatively less power. In doing so, I considered the risks associated with of making myself professionally vulnerable and decided the political and developmental rewards of my inquiry outweighed them (Marshall 1995).

Re-reading my journals I was struck by the silence with which my colleagues and clients often met my interventions and the intense internal din of feelings and sense making that this triggered for me.

I had often the sensation throughout of being somehow 'disappeared' by the Steering Group women with whom I worked. At the ABC staff conference at the end of phase 1, and the evaluation conference at the end of phase 3, I played a high profile role. My contribution was acknowledged by appreciative remarks by politicians, and the content of my presentations was engaged with, yet it was as if I was kept at arms' length as a powerful outsider. Was this evidence of ownership, or of being disowned? Was this another instance of how gendered power relations were enacted in ABC, the keeping at arms' length of women's attempts to do gender differently, enacted by and through women themselves? Or was it evidence of my role as a breaker of silence, of being able to say as an outsider what cannot be said from the inside? In our inquiry discussion my client described the value of my role thus:

Me: What feedback can you give me about my role as an external consultant?

Aileen: Through your being external: being able to tease things out, outside the politics of ABC; your being able to ask questions others haven't dared to ask; not being within the hierarchy.

But was I not, as my supervisor suggested, also seen as dangerous, not moderated enough, or sufficiently appreciative of the daily dangers of their lives?

As I struggled to make sense of what was happening, and to assess the impact of my interventions, I was pulled between different purposes and realities. I had to construct a purpose and reality of my own, and keep this in balance with the needs of clients colleagues; to maintain my own sense of direction, and to work within the limitations of my limited consultancy contract. Accepting the limitations of my influence and intervention was painful but also led to growth.

Re-reading my own and my clients' project reports now, I am aware of the intensity of my subjective experience of being a consultant and partner in the project, but its power has subsided. I am impressed with the results we achieved, and these have moved into the foreground. I have the strange experience of wondering what all the angst I had recorded myself experiencing was about, much as if I have conducted a disappearing act of my own.

Part 6

Conclusions

On re-reading my account of the transnational project in the first part of this chapter, I see similar patterns between dynamics in my client /consultancy relationships and between transnational partners and the project leader. In both partners and clients expressed resentment at not being cared for by project leader or by myself. In both partners expressed desire for more direction that was not met. In both there was reluctance to engage with difference, expressed either as hostility or a lack of interest in other members who were not in some way 'the same'. In both there was a sense from time to time explicitly stated of not being valued by other members, and in particular by the one with the position power. These dynamics were also present in relationships between ABC Steering Group members and senior manager Jodie. In contrast, in relation to Anna, the politician, who positioned herself as equal and 'the same as other women' within Project

meetings, leaving her position power outside the door, these dynamics did not seem to apply.

During the Project I felt buffeted by desires to merge, to position myself with others and to take up a position apart. I began with an expectation of shared commitment to collaboration built on the basis of shared feminist values and practice with both my clients and transnational Project partners. I had met individual participants in the context of feminist or women's development networks and assumed that this, together with the subject and objectives of the project, signalled shared commitment. On reflection now, I see that I had grossly underestimated the work needed to build and sustain that collaboration in the business and political environments in which we were operating. When my expectations proved impossible to meet, I experienced betrayal and distress; I needed time to mourn the loss of an ideal closely held.

Inquiry as a method sustained me throughout the Project, enabling me to construct a position and a language from which to engage with my own inner world experience and with my clients and partners. From this position of inquiry, I invited partners to review their experience of working with each other and clients to review their experience of the client consultancy relationship with me. Subsequent discussions seemed to create a space within which we could, to a limited extent, articulate in words some of what had been expressed through silences within the consultancy relationship. At the final transnational meeting, I successfully facilitated discussion about how partners had worked together on the project. It seemed we were able to engage in discussion that had a more open quality, in contrast to the oppositional tone which had characterised many of our interactions during the project. During my consultancy to ABC, participants in the inquiry groups I co-facilitated did speak from their situated knowledge; in the process they broke taboos which were deeply embedded in the gender culture. I used inquiry to establish an independent stance of my own from which I was able to break through silences between the project leader and myself, and between members of the client organisation and me. I would argue that in a small way I did succeed in creating spaces in which women began to 'do gender' differently in relation to each other, moving out of victim position and exploring ways of speaking from positions of power.

However I would argue strongly that it would be a mistake to interpret this entirely in terms of intersubjective skills or in psychodynamic terms. All of the partners were operating in environments hostile to women's leadership, and in which gender equality initiatives were undervalued and under resourced. In my previous case studies, and in the first part of this

chapter, I have illustrated the undermining effects on women's self-esteem of environments that devalue our professional competence and the nature of the work we do. In discussions with contributors to my interviews, and in exploring my own experience in previous case studies, I explored how powerful desires for recognition withheld from women in these environments can be projected onto women in leadership.

In the Persephone project the funder had cut the budget for support activities, and partners attempts to get practical support were frustrated. Under pressure we ended up re-enacting many of the dynamics which we had set out to challenge. We were, after all, shaped not just by our feminist values but also by our individual needs to survive, in the environments in which we were living and working. Each carried our own wounds from battles fought in the gendered cultures and power regimes of the organisations who employed us, and each had to steer a path between looking to our separate interests and our desire to construct a shared agenda.

I will end my conclusions with a comment on the consultancy methodology that I developed. In the transnational and local projects, I set out to enable women who were differently positioned in organisations to overcome barriers to working on common goals related to gender equality. My approach invited women to speak from their different positions of identity and organisational role, in order to establish a partnership, or coalition, on the basis of a programme that they would construct together. This case study has illustrated the multi-levelled challenges of this approach, and has explored them first in relation to the transnational partnership, and secondly within my consultancy project.

In writing this final draft I found myself grappling with further questions. Was it right to break silence in the way that I have described? How would I now answer these questions, and what would be my measures of the quality and ethics of my intervention? I will take up these questions in the Red Thread that follows this chapter.