

Chapter 1

Introduction

What Brought Me to This Inquiry?

My inquiry

There is increasing anecdotal evidence of difficult relationships between women in positions of power and those who are not, in both mixed and women only settings. In the women's voluntary sector inability to negotiate these issues poses serious difficulties (Grant 1999). Yet organisational research rarely addresses power issues *between* women in either gender mixed or women's organisations.

In my action inquiry I set out to explore how these difficulties were experienced, conceptualised and negotiated by women in a range of organisational settings and roles. I wanted to contribute new ways of understanding these dynamics, in order to generate and to document interventions to sustain women in positive negotiation of power difference in their organisational roles. I also wanted to come to understand my own experience of these dynamics, and drawing from this experience to write more effectively about my feminist consultancy practice.

During my inquiry I developed a methodology which grounded my approach to my inquiry subject in my consultancy practice and life experience. In this introductory chapter I describe how my inquiry developed from my feminist politics.

Political grounding

My feminist activism began when I took part in socialist feminist campaigning and study groups in the 1970s and early 1980s. I chose employment positions in local authorities that allowed me to pursue my politics. With other feminists who were part of the women's movement I sought ways of introducing feminist political analysis into my professional practice as a local authority social worker, community worker and as a women's equality advisor. Finally after a brief period as manager of a community development initiative, my post was deleted. In 1990 I took voluntary redundancy and began my freelance consultancy career.

Throughout this time I was concerned with 'insider / outsider' alliances between women who were identified with feminist politics, and who were pursuing initiatives in or around local government. We developed practices and policies to address inequalities arising from differences such as race, class, disability, and sexuality and discussed how these influenced access to political and organisational power. As a freelance consultant this vision of alliances between women working towards equality from different social and organisational locations continues to inspire my work

In my autobiographical writing I explored the challenges of working towards this vision and how my understanding of the limitations and scope of my work developed in these three key positions of employment. I asked:

Why is it that I continue to be inspired and to draw meaning from a vision that has been - and continues to be - a source of frustration and disappointment as well as a source of direction and purpose?

Page (1999b)

I found part of my answer in writing about the feminist international consultancy practice that I developed in the 1990s. During this period I worked with newly emerging feminist organisations in Slovenia and Bulgaria, facilitating exchange and partnerships with women's voluntary organisations in England. As an independent researcher I took part in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the parallel Forum for Non

Governmental Organisations. In the following I describe this consultancy and how it provided me with a sense of purpose:

International networking with women becomes a central focus in the next years of my consultancy. During the period 1992 to the present international partnerships with women were at the centre of my consultancy and high points in terms of my energy and creativity. I expressed this sense of excitement in my autobiographical writing in early stages of my inquiry:

There is something about going to the airport, knowing I am contributing to a project which is highly valued, in a context of working relationships in which there is a high degree of learning through exchange, which nourishes my sense of purpose and belonging.

Page (1999b)

Between 1991 and 1995 I became increasingly determined to find ways of developing research which would document and strengthen feminist co-operation across organisational boundaries. Equal opportunities policies had increasingly been introduced in local government. In common with many others I felt strongly that co-operation between feminists inside and outside local and national government was needed to achieve implementation.

I raised funds for two research projects both of which concerned 'insider / outsider' collaboration between feminists, in areas of practice with which I had been deeply engaged. The first with Italian co-researchers explored how women politicians, employees and independents worked through political structures to achieve change in policy and practice (Page and Lorandi 1992). In the second my focus was on collaboration and negotiation between women in government and in non-governmental organisations at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Page 1996). My findings showed how women negotiated competing structures for accountability, and identified the ingredients of success for and barriers to coalition and alliance building.

How my inquiry began

At the end of this research I was left with questions about my experience of women's working together which I felt I had still not articulated. I wanted to research the intersubjective dynamics between women in more depth. My interest was fuelled by the quality of discussion about this subject, in one to one conversations and workshops where I presented the findings of my previous research. These discussions had urgency and a flow in which I felt an accomplice, as if part of a tradition of women's complaint about an aspect of our experience that was lamentable, but could not be changed. There was a fascination about the idea of writing about these issues, from a feminist perspective, that implied I might be breaking a taboo. There was political risk involved, that in naming these difficulties I might expose feminist endeavour in a political environment in which equal opportunities initiatives for women were already under attack. However I had abundant anecdotal evidence about women's difficulties in working together in organisational contexts and of how these were undermining individual women, and the feminist collaboration which was needed in order to implement equalities initiatives.

I determined to address the lack of research focussing on women to women dynamics in organisational contexts, and to find ways of finding funding to do. I drew up proposals for funded action research and over a two year period initiated exploratory discussions with potential clients and consultancy partners. These led to a successful bid for the transnational partnership project described in my third case study (chapter 11). It also led to two further consultancy projects concerned with women's equality, in which I was able to introduce inquiry into relationships between women in organisational contexts; I describe these in case studies 1 and 2 (chapters 9 and 10).

At the same time I drew up a research proposal focusing on women's subjective experience of their inter-relationships across differences of power, and decided to pursue it as a PhD. I wanted my research to be action orientated and to draw from my consultancy projects. I also wanted to explore further the personal meaning I had invested in the research subject.

The PhD programme at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) offered a taught programme and research community designed to support mature students who wished to link their research to their professional practice. This approach met my need to be sustained in balancing my research with the professional demands of freelance consultancy, and the financial challenges of being a self-financing student. At the same time its location in the School of Management seemed to offer 'mainstream' credibility that I was seeking in my consultancy practice.

The CARPP approach to 'research as life process' seemed compatible with my conviction that to move my inquiry forward I needed to conceptualise woman to women dynamics in terms of inner world dynamics as well as organisational and social position and identity. I sought ways of conceptualising the interface between inner and outer worlds that did not simply reproduce the psychodynamic conceptual frames with which I was familiar. I also hoped to find a more lively way to write about my consultancy practice, and to find a way of presenting this to colleagues and potential clients.

I named the proposal I brought to CARPP '*Women Taking Authority within the Public Sphere: at the interface between our internal and external worlds*'. On transfer to PhD, to reflect my stronger focus on relationships between women I changed it to '*What Happens Between Women in Organisations*'.

In the course of my inquiry I lived through major life changes in professional as well as personal spheres. These changes interrupted the inquiry I had planned; my engagement with them within my inquiry deepened my approach to my inquiry subject, and informed the development of my methodology. Through my inquiry practices I developed strategies for sustaining myself through these life changes, and developed a methodological framework that acknowledges and works with the permeable boundaries between professional practice and other life experience.