

Chapter 13

Final Reflections

The making of a feminist consultant

I set out to explore a field of inquiry, 'what happens between women in organisations'. In naming my inquiry, I named my own passion - to understand more clearly what happens between women who come together to work towards greater gender equality, and to develop a language to speak about the challenges with which we confront each other.

In the course of doing my inquiry, I situated my inquiry in its specific political and sectoral context. I explored the personal meaning it held for me in the context of my life process, and how this has informed my professional practice. In discussions with women in my inquiry, within women's networks, professional associations and with colleagues and friends, I confirmed that while the issues I have explored are located within a shared territory, strategies for working with them differ, as do the meanings made of them.

I have sought to explore this territory through the lens of my consultancy interventions: the issues which emerged between the women with whom I was in client and consultant roles, how I worked with these issues as consultant, and how I conceptualised the issues within my inquiry. Through autobiographical writing I explored the personal meaning expressed in my political vision, and how this was at different times a source of energy and purpose or of frustration and disappointment. I created practices to engage with life issues that emerged during my inquiry, and to trace the ways they were threaded through my professional and personal life. In this process I have taken up new and more dialogic subject positions in relation to others.

Through introducing inquiry into my consultancy work, I made my practice more reflexive and became bolder at engaging colleagues and clients with parts of my self which I would formerly have kept hidden.

One of my goals in conducting this inquiry was to make a transition, to create a new narrative about myself, refocusing through recollection, in order to regenerate a sense of meaning and of purpose in my life. While doing inquiry has not furnished me with new purpose, it has given me a more solid sense of how I work and grounding in a clearer sense of what drives me. It has also provided a framework within which the personal and professional dimensions of my life have cross-fertilised in surprising ways.

Each of the chapters in my thesis encapsulated a different moment in my developing understanding of my consultancy process. In returning to them, I was excited by the threads of continuity in the issues that have emerged, without conscious planning or selection, in the process of writing. My inquiry practices have allowed them to surface in my awareness, provided a space to explore and to name them, and to become more skilful in negotiating them in practice as a feminist consultant.

Looking back, I can trace this journey. At the time, I wrote each chapter separately, working from intuition, driven by the issues that were in the foreground for me at the time. The act of writing an account of how I had used inquiry in my work with clients seemed sufficient. In the writing, this proved to be a starting point only; the story with which I began moved quickly into the background, other less palatable ones came forward. In this process I found my inquiry; writing with multiple voices, holding different realities in tension, and in the process moving towards a more grounded sense of myself as a feminist consultant. I would not wish to claim I have arrived at a comfortable resolution or an end point, but rather a kaleidoscope of explorations, through which I have come to a better knowledge of the territory, and an ability to negotiate it more skilfully as a consultant.

As a first step¹ in my inquiry, I went out to establish whether my interests were in any way recognisable to other women consultants. While not all of them were feminist or directly working on women's equality issues, each were in some way supportive of my inquiry and willing to engage in a dialogue to explore their experience of working with women. These six interviews served to map the territory, and develop a method. In each case I experienced a mirroring between aspects of interactions we were exploring in our

discussions and the dynamics we were enacting between us. I decided to develop inquiry practices that would allow me to continue to explore these parallels.

Returning now to the qualifying statement I made about my field of inquiry, I assert that these issues between women were lived out in organisational contexts which not only devalued them as women in leadership roles, but which also marginalised their equalities initiatives. In each of my case studies, women described organisational cultures that consistently positioned their work outside organisational or business priorities. Their work on women's equality was always precarious, under resourced and outside these priorities. This put them in a complex double bind. They needed to produce results to establish credibility for themselves and for their work, but had limited power to achieve any. They valued the relationships established with each other as part of the project work, but did not always credit these in their organisations or when referring to their own achievements.

In considering each case study now, it seems clear to me that women tended to look to other women in leadership roles to compensate for the degenerative elements of the environments in which they worked. Their experience seemed to cross ethnic cultures and organisational environments. Consciously expressed expectations were underpinned by powerful projections, which I too experienced in relation to colleagues and to clients. In the third case study I explored how as part to my inquiry I engaged with these dynamics from my own experience. Using my inquiry I was able to rework my relationship to the project leader, and to take up a more equal position in relation to her.

In conclusion I note that in the field of women's equality work there is a tendency to conflate the need to sustain the actors and the need to sustain the work they are doing. This is dangerous; women's equality work needs resourcing; partnership and coalition work needs skilful facilitation. Women in power cannot compensate for hostile or devaluing organisational environments and must balance their own needs to thrive with considered strategies for working with women who are differently positioned.

However women can choose to help each other get accredited for the work they do. This means drawing from the self-knowledge that they share and using it with political judgement, not to keep each other in place, but to challenge devaluing representations of their work and to assert that we are contributors, adding value. It also means finding ways of being in organisational roles as a presence which stays in touch with passion, love, and playfulness, and which genuinely keeps equality at the centre, a real 'gender mainstreaming'. To achieve this specific sets of skills are needed. I named these in

chapter 12 as skills associated with crossing borders, working with situated knowledge, and keeping open intersubjective spaces.

Finally I turn to my methodology; the process and place of the conceptual framing that I developed as my inquiry evolved. I moved from attachment research as a way of thinking about strategies for sustaining myself as a feminist consultant, to feminist relational psychology and epistemology. I drew these together with group relations' theory and practice, feminist postcolonial theory and feminist organisation studies to conceptualise the multi-levelled challenges associated with my consultancy projects and the consultancy methodologies I developed.

The process of developing propositional knowledge turned out to be essential to developing a stronger sense of my professional identity: who I am, in my consultancy role. At the same time, I experienced a necessity to engage with other aspects of my identity and life process in order to develop my methodological and epistemological frame. Through my reading of key feminist texts, I recognised and named elements of the experiences I was exploring in my inquiry and found new subject positions from which to articulate what I brought to my consultancy. I developed a stronger sense of being grounded in knowledge located in my life process, as well as in the professional and political contexts of my consultancy. As I introduced inquiry more directly into my consultancy, I was able to invite colleagues and clients to engage directly in dialogue about our relationships on the projects. This generated material that enabled me to articulate for the first time the nature of my unique contribution as a consultant; a breakthrough in terms of my previous inability to name and claim the consultancy methods I had developed (chapter 4).

Writing the case studies has been a means of processing and moving on from a set of issues about my own self-image as a consultant. Completion of drafts of case studies two and three was each marked by a vivid dream. Each dream was a powerful representation of a key relationship I had reworked in the course of my inquiry. In the first, this was a dream of helping my client to move on, and in doing so, becoming free to move on myself (chapter 10). In the second, I was welcomed into the home of the project leader, and had a sense of being recognised as an equal by someone who in my perception represented 'mainstream' organisation consultancy, recognition which I had set out to attain. These were dreams of reconciliation, unspecified in form but recognisable in felt quality.

Through my inquiry *On Yearning and Un/Belonging*, I came to recognise that secure bases have to be made, and remade, as does collaboration between women. Shared values, goals, identity are not enough; there is no recipe that provides ready-made security, or togetherness. Nor is there any ready-made environment that nourishes women working collectively.

I am mourning the loss of this fantasy, but at the same time feel lighter; still desiring, open to opportunities to actively engage, with whom and on what terms I choose. At the same time I am able to name the skills I bring to work towards that vision of purposeful collaboration, based on recognition of difference and ability to mobilise differently situated knowing. I have been able moreover to identify marketable consultancy skills and methods, for facilitating 'transfer of learning' in partnerships and for non-gender specific goals, as well as for gender mainstreaming and promoting women in organisations. There has been a parallel between my difficulty in formulating my inquiry method, and my difficulty in formulating my consultancy method. It is with a sense of excitement that I am now able to name these 'methods' as my own.

ⁱ To name this as the beginning of my inquiry is artificial; as my autobiographical chapter shows, these are issues with which I have been concerned for the whole of my professional life. However this does mark the beginning of a consciously held inquiry, towards writing this thesis.