

# Chapter 2

## Feminist Action Inquiry

### My Methodological Framework

Feminism is not just a perspective (way of seeing) or an epistemology (way of knowing), it is also ontology, or a way of being in the world  
(Stanley 1990: 14 quoted in Maguire 2000: 60)

#### Overview

This chapter is in four sections. In 'Key Principles' I introduce my approach to inquiry and the key concepts that underpin my methodological framework. In three subsequent sections I introduce the concepts that informed how I enacted feminist inquiry and describe challenges; introduce my inquiry practices; and elaborate my criteria for research quality.

In chapter 5 I will show how development and conceptualisation of my inquiry methodology was intertwined with development of my inquiry. I refer to this process as an inquiry track in its own right, in which I articulated the epistemological and methodological principles that informed my inquiry practices. In writing this chapter on methodology I completed the final cycle of this inquiry track. In writing it I built on earlier papers written and discussed on the CARPP programme. I drew from feminist and action research literature to articulate more clearly the practices I had developed within each inquiry track, and drew them together within a methodological framework. I discussed drafts with my supervisor, and worked with her critical feedback.

## Key Principles

'Feminist action inquiry' brings together key strands of my purpose and approach to doing this research. These were to enact and support feminist individual and collective action for equality and for social justice; and to engage in a form of action research in which transformation of external and internal worlds are articulated and intertwined. Thus my research sets out to sustain relationships between people who set out to transform the world, and, in doing so, to transform the self.

In this section I locate my approach in relation to the key principles of feminist and action research and action inquiry. In further sections I explore challenges to enacting these principles, and the practice of doing feminist inquiry.

### ***Feminist Standpoint***

My feminism provides the political grounding of my action inquiry. It consists of a commitment to developing the tools for understanding the mechanisms of women's oppression, in order to change it through collective organisation and individual struggle. As Stanley said of feminist inquiry, the point is to change the world, not only to study it (Stanley 1990: 15).

In my inquiry I set out to understand 'what happens between women in organisations', in order to strengthen feminist action and collaboration. My purpose was to develop a conceptual frame that would address the intersubjective dynamics that in my experience undermined effective collaboration, and provide methods and tools for sustaining it through my feminist consultancy.

In order to do so I drew from the principles of action and of feminist research methodology, and the practices and tools of action inquiry. I illustrate how I drew from these principles in the subsections below.

## **Action Research**

Action research is made up of many strands, and diverse practices. It does not offer a ready-made methodology, but rather a set of general principles with which I am strongly identified. These are described by the editors of the recent Handbook of Action Research as seeking:

To bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Reason and Bradbury 2000, p. 1

These authors assert that action research is concerned with working towards practical outcomes, through being involved with people in their everyday lives; creating new forms of understanding through reflection on action; and through this process new forms of being together. Thus the process of inquiry is as important as the outcomes; research emerges over time as a developmental process, and is emancipatory, leading not just to new practical knowledge but to new abilities to create knowledge. It cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods, but is a 'work of art' (Lyotard 1979, quoted by Reason and Bradbury p.2).

My research approach shared these key features. It was informed as earlier chapters illustrated, by my previous political, professional and personal practice (chapters 1, 3, and 4). These in turn were grounded in specific organisational, political and historical contexts.

My inquiry methods were refined and conceptualised through a succession of inquiry cycles, within interlinked inquiry tracks (chapter 5). This process was multi-layered. Through my inquiry I developed consultancy tools which enabled women with whom I worked to create new knowledge and make change interventions (chapters 10 -11). I then further conceptualised the consultancy approach I developed (chapter 12). I also developed inquiry practices to sustain myself in action (chapters 3, 4 and 7) in relation to family and friends, and within my professional networks. In doing so I engaged with the politics of ontological, epistemological and professional issues, and tracked transformation of my sense of self in relationship to others in family and in my professional circles.

## ***Engagement with Research Sources***

Throughout my inquiry I drew from research literature relating to my inquiry subject, identified concepts that seemed to illumine my inquiry issues, and engaged with them critically from a perspective grounded in my feminist consultancy practice. My key concepts were initially drawn from psychodynamic and feminist research and practice; my sources were communities of practice, as well as texts. I identified relevant literature through conversations with friends, colleagues, researchers within the CARPP community; through participation at research conferences, professional development and networking events; as well as through journals, and searches in libraries. As my inquiry progressed, I engaged with these concepts critically, making meaning of them in the context of my own inquiry practice. This process often led to further learning, as I observed and critiqued my use of the concepts and, in stepping outside the conceptual frames from which they were drawn, took up new ontological and political positions. For example, in my inquiry into 'un/belonging', critical engagement with the concept of 'secure base' lead me to relinquish desire to 'find' belonging and to develop inquiry practices for 'making' connection (chapter 7). In my third case study I returned to my gender analysis of the concept to reinterpret the power dynamics between the project leader and myself, and reposition myself in relation to her (chapter 11).

At the beginning of my inquiry my epistemological frame was primarily psychodynamic, and grounded in group relations practice. This practice seeks to bring together an understanding of the emotional life of institutions with an understanding of how management and organisational structures help or hinder their ability to fulfil the organisations' purpose. It combines theories and insights arising from the work of Bion on groups (1961), Kleinian theory as applied to groups and institutions, open systems theory and socio-technical approaches (Obholzer and Roberts 1994, p. xvii).

Through participation in experiential group relations events, such as the Tavistock Institute's Leicester Conference<sup>1</sup>, I used systemic and psychodynamic frames to explore leadership, power, authority, and learning in my client organisations (Hirschorn 1993; Graves Dumas 1985; Miller 1989,1993; Obholzer and Zagier Roberts 1994). I was drawn

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<sup>1</sup> An annual group relations conference to study 'Authority, Leadership and Organisation'. This two week residential experiential event is run by the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations to study 'group, organisational and social dynamics; the exercise of authority and power; the interplay between tradition, innovation and change; and the relationship of an organisation to its social, political and economic environment'.

to this body of practice because it offered opportunities to apply my experience of many years of psychoanalysis within my consultancy practice. I drew from this literature and experience to develop a systemic analysis of gendered power relations in my inquiry within my client organisation in my third case study (chapter 11).

Much of the focus on group relations is on containing destructive dynamics in organisations. Through friendship and professional networks I was introduced to discussions about applications of attachment research in organisational settings. These discussions highlighted the potential for a different approach to leadership, based on responsibility to create environments that encouraged 'secure attachment' within human relations (Marris 1996). The concept of 'secure base' in attachment research also served as an important metaphor for me during separation and loss within my own life (Bowlby 1988; Holmes 1993). The idea of creating and maintaining a secure base for learning and change became a key element of my consultancy methodology and teaching (see for example chapter 10). In chapter 7 I describe my critical engagement with this concept in order to develop practices to sustain my inquiry.

Attachment and group relations research and practice were useful in providing a means to think holistically and systemically about human relationships within organisations, and in providing tools to work with unconscious dynamics in relation to leadership and authority. Both have been criticised for their failure to explore the nature of power relations between genders, races or classes (Berman 1994; Hoggett 1996). Within their associated communities of practice I explored gender relations, and experienced the power of projection onto women who took up leadership roles. However I found little interest either in exploring or conceptualizing women to women dynamics within these communities of practice.

In later stages of my inquiry, case studies 2 and 3 (chapters 10 and 11), I drew from feminist and relational psychoanalytic research to conceptualise the intersubjective field between women, and the relational work which I developed in my feminist consultancy practice (Benjamin 1993, 1995; Orbach and Eichenbaum 1994; Stern 1998). I wove research from these sources together with the political perspectives of postcolonial feminists Anzaldúa (1999) and Lugones (1997) to theorise the politics of intersubjectivity in the context of feminist organisation consultancy.

Throughout my inquiry I engaged with feminist organisation research; I refer to these sources in more detail as they arise in my inquiry. In the following I have selected from these references to illustrate the range of these sources.

I sought out research on gender relations (Calas and Smircich 1996; Cockburn 1991; Itzin and Newman 1995, Meyerson and Kolb 2000; Mills and Tacred 1992; and on women managers in organisations (Gherardi 1995; Marshall 1995, 1984; Sheppard 1989; Sinclair 1998; Wajman 1998). I sought out research about the specific experience of black and lesbian women (Bravette 1996; Calvert and Ramsey 1996; Hall 1989), and on sexuality in organisations (Hearn et al 1989). As my inquiry progressed I became less interested in analysis of gender difference and behavioral accounts of women's leadership, and more interested in accounts of how gender is constructed through interactions and symbolism in organisations. I illustrate this interest in my review of selected texts in chapter 8.

At the end of my inquiry (chapters 11 and 12) I reflect on the challenge of moving from gendering organisational analysis to gendering organisational practice (Meyerson and Kolb 2000).

I read and selectively critiqued this literature - referencing it to my inquiry concerns as they unfolded. Through this approach to texts I sought to maintain responsibility for directing and constructing inquiry questions and method grounded in my life process (Marshall 1992, 1999) and to guard against swamping or seeking conformity in pre-given agendas (Reason and Marshall 2000).

## ***Feminist Epistemology***

As a feminist I wished to acknowledge, contribute and draw from debates within feminist research. This however was not straightforward.

To gain an overview of current debates I took part in feminist research conferences<sup>2</sup>, read current issues of women's studies journals, and explored edited collections of feminist research literature on methodology and epistemology, for example those edited by Alcoff and Potter (1993), and Maynard and Purvis (1994). I discussed methodological issues

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<sup>2</sup> National UK Women's Studies Network conferences, 1997 and 1999; Gender, Work and Organisation National conference, Manchester 1998

with members of a feminist research support group with whom I met regularly over a period of three years, and discussed research into women's self-organisation.

In common with Burton and Regan (1994), I found much of the literature on feminist research methodology challenging and fascinating, but difficult to relate to the practice of my research. Key debates concerned epistemological questions such as the im/possibility of a general theory of knowledge; the power relationship between researchers and researched; the place of subjectivity in research practice and knowledge claims; the relationship between theory and practice, and the basis of validity claims. As Maynard and Purvis (1994) note, few of these texts explore the dynamics of actually doing research in the field (1994 p.1).

In the rest of this subsection I engage briefly and selectively with key epistemological themes that did inform my research approach. In the following subsections I return to methodological principles and practices.

One key debate with which I engaged concerned the merits of claiming a specific epistemological standpoint for women (Harding 1987, 1991, 1993; Haraway 1991). Advocates for this stance have argued that because women and other marginalised groups are outside the dominant patriarchal power regime, through which claims to knowledge are validated, they are in a position of 'epistemic privilege.' From this position they are able to reveal unexamined questions and assumptions held by the epistemologically privileged, thus producing more partial and less distorted accounts (Harding 1991, 1993).

Feminist standpoint epistemology has been critiqued on several different grounds. Black and lesbian feminist researchers challenge white feminist attempts to construct a single 'women's standpoint' and assert that feminist perspectives are multiple, grounded in differing experiences of oppression and theoretical foundations (Collins 1991; hooks 1981, 1991; Reinharz 1992). Hooks' (1991) research rebels against the oppressive boundaries set by class sex or race. She redefines the margins as a 'space of radical openness', 'a profound edge', from which to develop a particular way of seeing reality 'from the outside in and from the inside out' (hooks 1984, preface, quoted hooks 991 p.149). In this 'politics of location,' marginality becomes a site of radical possibility, of resistance, of moving 'out of place'; a ground in which colonised and colonisers might meet and join as allies in resistance:

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category coloniser/colonised. Marginality is a site of resistance. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators (1991: 152).

Colonisers who take up this invitation must give up the 'othering' of the colonised which invites them to speak only in voices of deprivation, silencing their voices of resistance, and dare to join with them within their sites of resistance. Sustaining this position on the margin requires a community to nourish ones' capacity to resist, to sustain the struggle of memory against forgetting, and to name the location from which we come into voice (1991: 146).

In my inquiry I struggled with the pain of remembering, to bring suppressed parts of myself into voice, and to resist suppressing inner voices that represented rejected parts of myself. I was sustained in this by my community of inquiry, and by the feminist research group of which I was a member. My struggle was another facet of the struggle to sustain resistance with and for women with whom I worked. I had to accept the limitations of collaboration as they emerged, set by the environments in which we worked and the strategies adopted by the women who were my clients and colleagues. I relived these struggles as I wrote my case studies, drawing from feminist and action research epistemological and methodological principles to sustain me in this work.

I drew upon the politics of location and of standpoint to conceptualise these challenges within my consultancy practice. I created spaces and within them invited women to enter into dialogue from their different locations, drawing on situated knowledge and practice to build common ground (chapters 11 and 12). Using the notion of 'epistemic community' (Nelson 1993) I conceptualised transfer of knowledge generated by women in these spaces, within gendered power regimes (chapter 12).

Haraway addresses these epistemological challenges when she explores the tension between feminist versions of objectivity, and of the radical multiplicity of local knowledges (1991:187).

She asserts 'feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges' (p. 188). From her perspective, knowledge cannot be read off identity or position (p. 193), but must be constructed through:



...partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of a web of connections called solidarity in politics and conversations in epistemology (p.191), including the ability to translate knowledges among very different and power differentiated communities (p.187).

In developing my inquiry methodology I have been concerned with the processes for surfacing partial, locatable, critical knowledges held by women, and for building and sustaining this web of connections between them. To develop and conceptualise these processes I have drawn inspiration from the politics and principles of feminist epistemology and research, while developing practices rooted within the principles and methods of action inquiry.

### ***Extended epistemology***

In my inquiry I cycled between multiple forms of knowing, and multiple conceptual frames. These were often associated with different power regimes, in organisational, professional and personal worlds. The process posed political, professional and conceptual challenges. In order to work with these challenges I developed an extended epistemology.

I drew this extended epistemology from the four different ways of knowing used within co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason 2000). These are experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. Validity is claimed where congruence between them can be demonstrated. In the following I draw from Heron and Reason's account and to elaborate how I used the concepts to support validity claims in my inquiry (Heron and Reason 2000 p. 183).

Experiential knowing refers to 'knowing through direct face to face encounter with person, place or thing. It is characterised by the immediacy of perceiving, through empathy and resonance. In my inquiry I extend this notion to include embodied and emotional knowing. Presentational knowing refers to the first form of expressing meaning by drawing on imagery through sound, movement, speech and so on. In my inquiry I adapt this term to refer to the politics of how to represent other forms of knowing within organisational environments in which specific forms of knowing are privileged. I illustrate these political issues in chapter 10 and theorise them further in chapter 12. Propositional knowing refers

to knowing 'about' something through theories and ideas, expressed in informative statements. In my inquiry this refers to conceptual knowledge, developed through inquiry practices from practical or experiential knowledge. Practical knowing refers to knowing how to do something, and is expressed in a skill or competence (Heron 1992, 1996, cited in Heron and Reason 2000).

In each chapter of my inquiry I describe how I cycled between these different forms of knowing, and how in the closing cycles of each inquiry track I sought congruence between them. Thus in my second case study, where I explore this process in detail, the first stages of inquiry were concerned with developing practical knowledge. In later stages I engaged colleagues in conceptualising knowledge embedded and enacted in the practical knowing developed through the project. This required consideration of the politics of how to re-present the knowledge we had generated and conceptualised in organisational environments that favoured different forms of knowing. In the process we had to negotiate the power dynamics triggered by our different positioning in relation to these dilemmas. To do this I drew from embodied and emotional knowing. Participants in the project final evaluation event acknowledged the importance of experiential, practical and propositional knowing. Thus my use of this extended epistemology enabled me to name and honour ways of knowing which reached beyond the positivist forms of knowledge privileged in the organisational environments in which my consultancy projects were based.

### ***Relational knowing***

Marshall notes that relational work can be defined from a number of conceptual systems (1999). In my inquiry I have drawn from feminist organisational researchers' use of the term to name the work of maintaining and sustaining relationships which I have documented in my inquiry.

Fletcher (1998) elaborates a model of relational practice, which she describes as a feminist reconstruction of work. She argues that in the organisation where her research was carried out, these relational practices were not valued or considered real work, and that qualities such as autonomy, tangible outcomes and short-term results were favoured. Moreover as Marshall notes in her commentary these practices were interpreted as

personal traits such as emotional need or powerlessness, and conflated with images of femininity or motherhood such as being helpful or good listeners (Marshall 1999).

As in Fletcher's research, in the organisations in which my clients worked there was no way of accrediting relational activity as an achievement in its own right. In my second case study I explored the challenges this posed for sustaining collaboration and for asserting the value of our inquiry based work methods (chapter 10). Throughout my inquiry I used the term to refer to both the detailed negotiations of inter-subjective dynamics between women with whom I worked, and to the inner work I did of engaging with different selves, in order to bring myself into a different voice.

### ***Connected Knowing***

I have said that through my inquiry I arrived at a different sense of self, in relationship to others. Relational practices were key to the methodology through which I achieved this. These were reflection and dialogue; engaging with inner world voices, then moving my attention outwards to engage with others. In the process I arrived at a different relationship between inner selves, bringing a more integrated sense of self in to my professional practice, and introducing more dialogue into my relationships with others.

I recognised many of the characteristics of this process in concept of the connected knowing developed by Belenky et al (1986) and Clinchy (1996). Through extensive research with women students of diverse backgrounds and social identities in the US, they mapped five major epistemological perspectives used by women in different contexts and at different points in their lives (1986: 207). The fifth of these, 'constructed knowledge', acknowledges that there are multiple ways of knowing and methods of analysis. Many of these women use passionate or 'connected knowing'. Dialogue is at the centre of this form; intimate knowledge of the self enables women using it to listen to others without silencing their own voice (1986: 218).

In chapters 8 and 9, I describe a form of deep engagement with written sources, and with my contributors. Using my experience and subjectivity as an instrument, I 'get inside' their material, in order to understand and make sense of it. I then develop methodological tools for maintaining a distinction between my sense making and the meanings embedded in the data or brought by contributors. These are based on the concept of inquiry in action,

systematic investigation through reflective practices of what issues I bring to my inquiry, and may be seeking to express or resolve through it.

In her subsequent writing on connected knowing Clinchy describes connected knowing as a rigorous, deliberate and demanding procedure, distinct from subjectivism (1996:209). It involves using the self as instrument of understanding, recognition of the self in other while maintaining an ability to see them as distinct. Connected knowing is thus an intersubjective procedure, through which to engage in dialogue with a text, a person, and idea, or the self, while maintaining a sense of both realities.

In my inquiry maintaining this tension between individuality and close connection posed challenges that proved to be a core theme in my life process and consultancy inquiry tracks. In my inquiry I developed practices that enabled me to identify the issues and actively engage with them, drawing from different conceptual frames as my inquiry developed.

Feminist and relational psychoanalysts are concerned with representations of self and other in interaction as distinct but related beings, and make a distinction between subject to subject and subject to object interactions (Benjamin 1990, 1995). Feminist research on women's friendships, which draws from relational psychoanalysis, makes a similar distinction between separated and merged attachment (Orbach and Eichenbaum 1994).

In my case studies I used these concepts to theorise challenges which arose within my feminist consultancy, and to analyse my successful and failed attempts to hold onto distinct and different positions within dialogue (chapters 9 -11). In chapter 12 I conceptualise these dynamics in detail, and identify 'flashpoints' where breakdown in feminist collaboration is most likely to occur. I elaborate and conceptualise the methodological tools that I developed in my inquiry to sustain subject to subject interactions, and in my 'Red Threads' locate them in their political context.

### ***Systemic Analysis; Agentic Practice***

In my inquiry I focused on form, pattern and structure of interactions, and on how these were informed by and informed institutional mechanisms of power. I sought balance in my analysis between developing an understanding of the material structures of discrimination

and oppression, and of how these were enacted or reworked through conscious or unconscious choices.

Many years ago I saw a play by Athol Fugard, the South African playwright, which made a great impression on me. In a certain scene his black male carer explains to the main character, a young white boy, that being white brings choices. He can choose whether to sit on the seat reserved for whites in the public park, or not. Listening to this exchange I experienced a powerful moment of learning: identity makes choices available concerning social positioning, but does not determine the choices that we make. We have places offered to us within the structures of privilege and oppression, but it is up to us how and where we position ourselves within them.

This balance between systemic analyses of power, and discovery and exploration of opportunities for enacting power or powerlessness differently, is one that I sought to maintain in my professional practice and in my inquiry. In developing my conceptual frame I drew from relational, psychodynamic and feminist organisation literature in order to develop an analysis that incorporated both dimensions. In each of my inquiry tracks, I show how I work in different ways with this tension, taking up more agentic positions in personal and professional relationships. This frequently involved a shift from analyses that in focusing primarily on structures of oppression devalued and obscured opportunities for action. In my inquiry into consultancy development for example I explored opportunities for broadening my client base into more 'mainstream' organisations (chapter 4). In my third case study I explored how gendered power was reproduced systemically, and enabled women to explore opportunities for challenging and changing these patterns (chapter 11).

## Enacting feminist action inquiry

In this section I illustrate the key concepts that informed how I enacted my feminist inquiry practices, and describe some of the key challenges that arose. This section leads into my description of my inquiry practices in the following section of this chapter.

## ***Inquiry for me and for 'others'***

As a feminist practitioner a core criteria of quality for my inquiry was to produce new knowledge that would sustain feminist practice. Yet my inquiry as it first developed kept returning to my individual issues. I experienced this as a methodological and political dilemma. I could not see how my inquiry process could be of practical use to women in other contexts.

Feminist political and research practice asserts that the personal is political, and on the basis of women's experience has challenged social science research paradigms. Many feminist researchers have challenged the notion of a universal subject on the basis of specificity of the knowing subject, and the hidden subjectivities that underpin positivist claims to knowledge. In contrast much feminist research is characterised by taking subjectivity into account (Code 1993). Few feminist researchers, however, seem to insert their own subjectivity into the text of their research. In the two UK National Women's Studies Network conferences I attended during my inquiry I found little to support my attempts to do so, or to link specific research studies to developing tools for feminist action.

In their account of working with graduate research students, Reason and Marshall say that 'all good research is for me, for us, and for them' (2000: 413). They found that many students initially formulated their chosen research subject as 'for them', and that the links with the individual life issues which drove their research were not immediately apparent, but emerged through a process of exploration (Marshall 1992; Reason and Marshall 2000). This process was complex, and likely to require students to explore attachment to deeply held values, to confront vulnerabilities and to engage with difficult personal dilemmas.

In chapters 1 and 3 I showed how the process of doing inquiry with others as part of the CARPP community enabled me to discover the personal meaning of my inquiry topic. The methodological tools that I developed enabled cross fertilisation between inquiry activities relating to my individual life issues and my professional practices.

In her research on women in organisations, Marshall spoke of being hounded by potentially negative audiences, or weighed down by expectations to speak and act for women (Marshall 1984, 1992). My research methods evoked intense feelings of

vulnerability, and necessitated constant review of boundary issues as I broke silence through my use of inquiry methods in my consultancy, and brought my inner voices into my research. Marshall (1999) referred to this process as an edge that needs awareness, weighing purpose with vulnerability. In my inquiry working with this edge brought the rewards of personal development as well as political rewards of access to data which would not otherwise have been available. I exercised care in how I referred to colleagues and clients in my thesis, seeking permission to use material from our discussions, and inviting feedback on draft text when I could do so without undermining my consultancy relationships. I explored these issues in more detail in case study 3 (chapter 11), and in relation to validity claims later in this chapter.

Reason and Marshall (2000) claim that this form of experiential, action orientated research is personal, working with life issues, and highly political, reflecting the inquirers passionate social viewpoint (Marshall 1992). My focus on subjectivity within my methodology provided both the means and an ongoing challenge for me to hold these two perspectives in tension. In developing my conceptual framework I explore the challenges of keeping both the personal and the political in the frame. I use the device of Red Threads to reinsert the political where this is in danger of being displaced by the 'personal' and subjective.

Through my inquiry I developed methods and tools for sustaining feminist collaboration within a wide range of practical feminist initiatives. I also developed the tools for developing and sustaining myself as an individual practitioner, and in doing so achieved a profound ontological shift, a different sense of myself in relation to others. In this sense my research has been an expression of my need to learn and to change, to shift some aspect of myself (Reason and Marshall 2000 p. 415). This aspect has concerned both personal and my professional identity; it has been a means for me to assert the value of my consultancy within my professional field, and also to arrive at more self-valuing. It has also been a political intervention, a claim for wider recognition of the value of feminist interventions in organisations and of the challenges of sustaining feminist working relationships.

### ***Inquiry as life process***

My inquiry took place over a period of four years during which my inquiry stance developed and changed in emphasis.

Marshall defines inquiry as life process as 'holding open the boundary between research and my life generally' (1999). She describes working with awareness that themes she is pursuing in research are also relevant to some other area of her life, and of the associated demands as well as potentially enriching qualities of this approach.

Through each cycle of my inquiry and in each inquiry track I brought aspects of myself into my consultancy identity that I had formerly split off and kept apart from the public arena. In this process I drew from feminist researchers and action inquiry to affirm my approach to research as life process (Marshall 1992, 1999, 2000; Reason 1994, 2000; Stanley and Wise 1983; Stanley 1997). The inquiry methodology I developed enabled and articulated this process and enriched my consultancy practice. In chapter 3 I described how this enabled a greater sense of agency and opened up different choices about my own positioning.

Within each cycle of inquiry I experienced disruptions and interruptions to my planned approach to my inquiry subject. In each case I responded to the unexpected and fashioned out of it a method that deepened my level of engagement with my inquiry subject. I allowed events within my life to interrupt my planned approach, and developed practices that transformed these interruptions into openings into deepening cycles of knowing (Marshall 1992, 1999, 2000). I illustrated and conceptualised this process in some detail in my inquiry into 'un/belonging' in chapter 7. In writing my case studies (chapters 9 -11) I allowed inner voices to interrupt the narratives I had planned to tell, and through engaging with them developed a new conceptual frame for my feminist consultancy (chapter 12).

### ***Working with inner world material***

In the first year of my inquiry I developed inquiry methods that engaged with my inner world. Through these early cycles of inquiry I made a deeper connection with the core of passion that infused my inquiry subject.

Marshall (1999) refers to inquiry themes becoming 'empty' or 'full' of energy; and to the passion brought by the deeply held values of researchers to the research process (1992). Allowing passion to shape my inquiry was an assertion of 'inner world' material as a form of experiential knowing, a contribution to new knowledge in the extended epistemology of participatory inquiry. In each of my case studies I allowed emotion to alert me to an aspect



of experience I had not addressed, which was in some way excluded, left out or denied by the assertions being made or accounts which were being given. I then engaged with the emotion I was experiencing, and from this position explored unspoken dynamics through dialogue and reflective practices. This method was important in action and reflective stages of my inquiry cycles. Thus as I sat down to write my second case study my response to inner voices became a lens through which I approached my material and conducted my analysis.

Through engaging with these inner voices I was able to access and introduce a range of emotions into my account, which, although part of the lived experience of myself and some of my colleagues and clients, were not explicitly discussed within the consultancy frame. These aspects of our experience of collaboration were central to my inquiry subject. The methods I developed to access them were therefore key to enabling me to access the data I needed.

Working with inner voices was demanding, both during cycles of consultancy activity and during phases of writing and reflection. It frequently involved working with embodied knowing, as emotion was expressed through bodily sensation, or somatised in physical symptoms. In my third case study, for example, I described how my colleague and I interpreted our embodied feelings of fear as a signal that we had entered dangerous territory our consultancy process. During the writing of my thesis I re-engaged with painful feelings of powerlessness and despair and through reflective practices re-worked them in order to re-conceptualise power dynamics with a colleague in this final cycle of my inquiry. This process took its toll on my health as I found myself re-experiencing powerful anxieties which blocked my writing.

In this work I was sustained by feminist and by psychodynamic research. I drew from feminist assertions of the importance of naming emotion and of subjectivity as it was experienced within the research process (Code 1993; Stanley and Wise 1983). In her research on women managers, Marshall names the dangers of exploring some territories of experience (1995). Gatenby and Humphries (1999) cite these dangers in their exploration of ethical dilemmas associated with breaking or respecting silence, in their role as teachers and researchers. In naming these dilemmas I saw that they had meaning beyond the specific relationships from which they arose; they belonged to the politics of the research, and to the methodology I had developed.

In the consultancy I describe in my case studies I used inquiry as a method to introduce dialogue into conflictual relationships. To do this I had to move out of sense making frames that allocated blame, and find alternative ways of conceptualising the powerful emotions I had experienced. This meant moving into an observer role in relation to my inner world; in touch with emotions and able to draw from them as a source of data, but not speaking directly from or being limited by them.

This practice resembled a form of listening developed by psychoanalysts 'listening with the third ear' to their analysands (Reik 1948, quoted in Rowan and Reason 1981). When working in this way, analysts suspend their propositional thinking in order to engage with the analysand in a different state of consciousness, and to 'listen to the music behind the words.'

In their research on what enabled transformational learning to take place in psychoanalytic practice, relational psychoanalysts identified 'moments of connection' associated with shifts in consciousness. These were moments when potential for reciprocal learning was experienced (Stern 1998). In my inquiry I identified similar 'moments' where transformational learning took place in relationship to colleagues and clients. In these moments of deep connection 'subject to subject' dialogue was sustained.

This concept of transformation through moments of connection through interaction is central to my inquiry methodology. I illustrate these moments of transformational learning in my analysis of interview discussions (chapter 6), in my inquiry into un/belonging (chapter 7), and in my second case study (chapter 10).

## ***Conceptualising inquiry***

My inquiry process was multi-layered. Representing this in my thesis was challenging, as earlier cycles of activity tended to disappear, displaced by later cycles of conceptual activity. This 'disappearing' raised the question of 'what counts as inquiry?' as I crafted my thesis. How far back in my activities should I go, in my accounts? At what point did my 'real' inquiry begin?

This issue took different forms as I crafted each chapter. In my case studies I noted that inquiry moved from background to foreground of my account, in relation to consultancy activities. In each case study, I was challenged by my supervisor to expand my definition

of 'inquiry' outwards, as I was encouraged to name more of my activities as inquiry. This process brought into clearer focus how I had used reflective practices at early and later stages of each consultancy contract. It enabled me to articulate the demands of processing difficult emotion and successive cycles of conceptualisation as I invited and worked with feedback on draft text. I was able to give more weight to the politics and ethics of how I dealt with boundary issues, in deciding what data to include, how to represent challenging interactions, who my audience was, and whether and how to take account of their likely responses. Through naming these issues as I engaged with them I gave more weight to my inquiry process.

Crafting the thesis as a whole took place in several stages. I streamlined each chapter editing out repetition and made substantial reductions in length. I selected material and devised a form that aimed to represent the scope of my inquiry within the thesis, the process through which I developed my methodology, and the quality of my sense making process. I added an extended introduction and two chapters relating to my consultancy development through inquiry, and to my personal journey through inquiry. The decision to add these was a response to my supervisor's challenge to do more justice to the scope of my inquiry, to include autobiographical material and political positioning which would ground my inquiry more clearly in its personal and political context.

### ***Enacting feminist action research principles***

In her exploration of how feminisms have grounded and informed action research, Maguire finds that despite many similarities there are only rare instances where action research and feminist theory engage with each other. In this section I comment briefly on each of the themes she identified in her discussion with feminist action researchers.

#### **Studying women or studying gender?**

Action researchers problematise the systematic relations of power in the production of knowledge. Feminists place gender, as well as other categories of oppression, at the centre of their systemic analysis (Maguire p. 62).

Women and the relationships between them are the subject of my action inquiry. While, as Maguire points out, much feminist scholarship has shifted away from studying women towards a study of gender relations, others see the need to defend women's studies as a discipline on the basis that women's lives merit study in their own right, and that women's

studies as an academic discipline should not have to compete for resources or validity with gender studies (WSN 1999; 2000).

My inquiry is positioned firmly in the latter camp. My purpose is to research the dynamics of women's inter-relationships, and to assert the value of this field of study in its own right, in order to support women's political initiatives, and in order to support my feminist professional practice.

### **Multiple identities, interlocking oppressions**

Analysis of the complex dynamics of interlocking oppressions pervades black and lesbian feminist scholarship; this acknowledges differently located knowledge, and the varied ways in which women describe and experience their worlds (Maguire p. 62).

In my research I am concerned primarily with differences between women arising from organisational location and power. While race and sexual identities are not my primary referent I do explore how they inform and shape relationships in my consultancy and inquiry (chapters 9, 10).

Black and post colonialist feminist scholars often use the notion of multiple identities, and of travelling between different worlds, to conceptualise strategies of resistance to oppression grounded in social identities such as race, class and sexuality (Anzaldúa 1999; Bravette 2000; hooks 1991; Lugones 1997). They developed notions of 'bi-culturalism' (Bravette 2000) and of 'world travelling' (Lugones 1997) to explore the skills associated with moving between different communities of affiliation and oppression.

In my research I develop the notion of multiple identities and of differently situated knowledge to explore how organisational power dynamics and positioning shapes knowledge claims, and how these differences in turn undermine or assist feminist collaboration (chapters 9, 10, 11). I draw from these to explore, articulate and conceptualise the experience of moving between collaborative spaces I have created for women with whom I was working, and their organisational environments (chapter 12).

### **Voice and silence**

The metaphor of 'voice' has been used in a variety of different ways in feminist and action research (Maguire p. 62). In my inquiry feminist political practice and the experience of psychoanalysis both influenced my use of these terms.

Feminist research and political practice have linked coming into voice to a sense of empowerment for women (Belenky et al 1986). As women gain a sense of themselves as generators of knowledge, multiple perspectives and diverse opinions are appreciated and no longer experienced as a threat. There is then potential to understand that knowledge is constructed, not given; contextual not absolute; mutable, not fixed (1986:10).

In my inquiry the practice of listening to inner voices has been central as a method for sustaining my self through inquiry, and as a method of analysis of my findings. The process of integrating different voices through doing this inquiry has empowered me in my professional and personal practice.

In my case studies I show how my consultancy practice enabled women to 'break silence', and on this basis to challenge gendered power in their organisations. I describe the dilemmas and challenges associated with this process. I reflect on the political and ethical dilemmas associated with being a breaker of silence, where silence may have been a chosen survival strategy for myself, and for the women with whom I worked (Red Thread 4).

### **Everyday experience, grounded inquiry**

Feminist scholarship and practice has prioritised women's direct experience and on this basis challenged male 'truths'. Feminist action research seeks to connect the articulated, contextualised personal with the often hidden or invisible structural and social institutions that define and shape our lives (Maguire p. 64/5).

My inquiry was grounded in my experience of doing feminist consultancy. It conceptualised material generated through action inquiry with women clients and colleagues over a four-year period. I aimed to validate women as producers of new knowledge about gendered power, drawing from my inquiry practice and life experience.

I discovered in the process of doing inquiry that I also had to address the issue of how to sustain myself as a practitioner. My inquiry into women in organisations was interrupted by financial and emotional life crises; I explored how these issues and my sense making of them interwove with my inquiry within my professional practice. This process became part of my inquiry and informed the development of my methodology.

## **Power and participation**

Feminist and action researchers both seek to unsettle and change power relations, structures and mechanisms in the social world and within social science research. Many feminist researchers have argued that knowledge is grounded in specific context; furthermore that the researcher is an active presence engaged in a political process of constructing a viewpoint (Maguire 2000; Stanley 1993). In my inquiry I explored how my own location and those of my contributors informed our working relationships and our sense making throughout my inquiry. In this sense my methodology is feminist and grounded action research.

A key feminist influence on action research has been the restructuring of the research process itself, turning research relationships inside out by promoting the approach of co-researchers (Maguire 64/65).

In my inquiry power relationships between contributors and myself were complex, due partly to the consultancy relationships in which much of my inquiry was embedded, and partly to my inquiry subject and methods. The skill of balancing a commitment to power sharing with a realistic appraisal of what is appropriate and possible has been at the heart of my inquiry practice. For example in my case studies I describe how working with my inner voices brought parts of my self into my inquiry which would it would not have been safe to bring into my consultancy relationships. This raised ethical and professional dilemmas about how to represent painful issues that were at the centre of my inquiry. In considering these I had to balance my political purpose with personal and professional vulnerabilities. I discussed these with my inquiry group, and explore them in more detail in my case studies.

Inviting feedback from clients and colleagues on text was not on the whole an appropriate form for testing my analysis. While I shared draft text of the second case study with my client, this was on the basis of trust build within our friendship than on the basis of our professional relationship. Thus while my inquiry has been dialogic and interactive, and has invited joint sense making, this has been within parameters I have set within each inquiry cycle, and I have not felt it appropriate to seek fuller forms of collaboration.

# My inquiry practices

In this section I introduce my inquiry practices and show how they are rooted in the wider communities of action and action inquiry research.

Within the CARPP community I was introduced to a wide range of inquiry practices. From practical experience and conceptual accounts of these practices, I developed my own. My inquiry is conducted through the cycles of action and reflection and extended epistemology of participatory inquiry (Reason 1988, 1996, 2000). I drew from the attentional disciplines of action inquiry (Torbert 2000; Torbert and Fisher 1992) and the self-reflective inquiry practices developed by Marshall (Marshall 1999, 2000).

In the following I provide a brief introduction to my inquiry practices. I refer respectively to inquiry conducted on my own, with other individuals, or in an organisational context (Reason and Bradbury 2000; Torbert 2000). I used these in combinations appropriate to stages of development reached within each inquiry track.

These practices were elaborated within each cycle of inquiry and are described more fully at the beginning of each chapter of my thesis. The brief descriptions that follow are intended to provide a framework for these more detailed accounts

## ***Maintaining purpose: cycles of action and reflection***

In its classic form action research moves back and forth between action and reflection. This might take the form of planning to engage in some form of action, becoming immersed in the chosen territory in an appropriate way, reflecting on what has been experienced and done and later moving on to plan another cycle of action and engagement (Marshall 2000: 434; Rowan 2000:117).

However this account implies a relationship between intent and planning which was not always the case in my inquiry. While my inquiry developed through cycles of reflection and action, they were not always planned in advance; often I abandoned plans that I had made, because the focus of my inquiry had shifted or been displaced by events. At times my inquiry seemed to take on a life and form of its own, as I let go of my planned inquiry

activities, and allowed the life issues which were preoccupying me to move into the foreground. Sometimes, as in my inquiry into 'Un/belonging', the interruption seemed to present an opportunity to initiate inquiry into issues of immediate relevance to my subject. In this case I embraced these events with conscious intent to make them part of my inquiry (chapter 7). At other times time I continued to think of my inquiry into life events as distraction or preparation for my 'real' inquiry into organisational work-based issues, despite encouragement from my supervisor and inquiry group to make the links. This struggle continued up to the near final drafting of my thesis, when I finally accepted that this 'personal' inquiry work did indeed contribute to my inquiry into feminist consultancy with women in organisations, and should therefore be included in my thesis.

Writing this, I am reminded of Marshall's account of being both active and receptive (2000: 434) as complementary strategies for dealing with uncertainties, drawing from Bakan's account of agency and communion. In my inquiry practices I held in balance receptiveness to inner voices which were 'not allowed' to speak in professional roles, with action to challenge or otherwise engage with them, to test or enact some form of interaction or practical activity in the external world.

A feature of my inquiry method has been a capacity to go with events, maintaining focus while retaining an open mind on how to enact my inquiry.

Throughout my inquiry I maintained a strongly rooted sense of purpose. This sprang from political passion, and a deepening sense of personal transformation. Resilience was necessary to navigate high levels of anxiety associated with professional and financial insecurities, and changes in my personal life. My inquiry practices became a method for addressing these issues resourcefully, and for critically engaging with my subjectivity within my inquiry process.

## Attentional skills and reflective practices

Critical engagement with subjectivity is at the core of my inquiry methodology, and a key skill in the consultancy methods I developed for sustaining feminist collaboration. In previous sections of this chapter I introduced the conceptual base from which I drew within my thesis to theorise the practical issues and associated skills. But what were the attentional skills used for critically engaging with my subjectivity within my inquiry practice to access the data?



Action inquiry as developed by Torbert (1991, 2000) uses the notion of 'attentional skills' to refer to the practice of observation of the self in action. Practitioners of action inquiry develop a sharper sense of consciousness in action, offering opportunities for 'amendment of tactics (single loop learning)' or 'a broader reconstruction of life strategies (double loop learning)' (Torbert 2000: 250). Torbert envisions a world in which these practices are integrated into personal, relational and organisational lives:

This living inquiry seeks to integrate subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity in moment to moment and lifelong actions that are timely and potentially transformational.

(2000: 258)

My inquiry practices are based on the principle of self-observation in action, and as I show throughout my inquiry have been transformational in relation to my own life, and in certain cases for others. My attentional skills were developed through successive cycles of inquiry and are described in detail in each chapter. In the following I use Torbert's three categories of inquiry practice to provide a brief summary:

### **'First Person Practices': inquiry with self**

These practices were concerned to sustain and enable development of my awareness of how I made meaning of life events, of how this shaped my assessment of scope for change in my life choices, and through my feminist consultancy practice. They fall into the categories of grounding, sustaining, attentional, and sense making skills. They were solitary, but informed my inquiry with others. I used them in different combinations at different stages of each inquiry track.

Through autobiographical writing, I became more aware of the ontological and political grounding of my chosen inquiry subject. This brought me more closely into touch with the situated and located nature of my inquiry, and enabled me to develop inquiry practices through which I addressed my developmental needs alongside my inquiry into the dynamics between women in organisations.

I became skilled at enabling moments of connection with others who sustained and grounded my inquiry, by affirming its value as feminist consultancy and inquiry and as life process. I used email, face to face and telephone contact. The daily morning ritual of

swimming or tai chi cleared my head, enabled me to focus on the inquiry theme for the day, and invited ideas to flow, grounding me in a sense of connection with my inner selves. Physical movement built a sense of 'can do' and helped to move through writing block when thesis writing was my main activity.

I developed reflective practices that sharpened my awareness of myself in action and interaction with others. I moved my attention inwards and outwards, a process described by Marshall as cycling between inner and outer arcs of attention (Marshall 1999, 2000). Through free association, a skill developed as an analyst and as a practitioner, I used dreams and affective states to make associations between issues I was exploring in my consultancy relationships and relationships with family and friends. In early cycles of inquiry autobiographical work enabled me to identify patterns in my interpretation of current and past experience (chapters 1, 3 and 4), and this provided grounding for developing inquiry practices and for exercising judgement in how to direct my inquiry in organisational contexts. Through reflective practices and dialogue with others I developed strategies for changing some of these patterns. I illustrated this process in the chapters 4 and 8.

Writing was a means both for documenting this process, and a primary means of doing it. Journal writing was essential at early stages of each inquiry track. I selected from this rich 'thick description' to identify and begin to conceptualise emergent themes (Geertz 1973, quoted in Marshall 2000). Through reflection and discussion with members of the CARPP inquiry group I assessed the quality of my engagement with these themes and exercised critical judgement about which tracks to develop. I drew from research literature and discussion in my inquiry group to formulate inquiry questions, and to plan further inquiry initiatives. I used journal writing throughout to track my self in action.

I worked with different combinations of these processes in each inquiry track. These are described in the methodology sections of each chapter.

In the final year of my inquiry thesis writing was my main activity and this became the medium for further inquiry cycles. I re-engaged with challenging political and professional dilemmas, and in order to find a generative position from which to write, re-processed and re-conceptualised painful emotional material.

### **‘Second Person Practices’: inquiry with others**

As my inquiry developed I increasingly introduced more reflective, dialogic approaches within family (chapter 3) and within consultancy inter-actions (chapters 10 and 11). The CARPP inquiry group was an important forum for learning these skills. My first person inquiry sustained this process, enabling me to model awareness in action in relation to others.

Torbert identified four 'parts of speech' associated with his inquiry practice and suggests that paying attention to balance in use of each can enable mutually transforming action inquiry (2000). These were framing: declaring or making explicit intent or vision; advocating: setting a goal, recommending a strategy or making a claim; illustrating: offering an account based on actual performance or activity; inquiring: inviting feedback. I made efforts to invite inquiry in personal and professional interactions by being more explicit about my own conceptual and political framing; and attempting to hold in tension my impulse to advocate with invitations to exchange feedback, discuss and jointly reflect on process. In my inquiry I explored what happened when I attempted to work in this way, and what contributing factors led to generative or degenerative exchange.

Through this face to face inquiry I tested and developed sense making initiated in first person inquiry practices. I invited critical feedback on inquiry writing and tested my current thinking in discussion with friends, colleagues with feminist researchers and in my CARPP inquiry group. I used this feedback in planning next steps for my inquiry. I made inquiry thinking a basis for opening up choices for action, and inter-action (Reason and Bradbury 2000; Torbert 2000).

### **‘Third Person Practices’: inquiry for organisational change**

My second person inquiry in organisational contexts was designed as a method for change intervention. In chapter 11 I describe my use of inquiry groups in the first phase of a gender culture change intervention, and of how organisational resistance was enacted. In chapters 10 and 11, I show how through dialogue with clients I shifted oppositional dynamics and enabled different joint narratives to emerge. This opened up new perspectives on strategies we were developing for change, and on gendered power dynamics within the client organisations. In appendix 2 I provide a summary of the inquiry based change intervention which I developed.

Within each cycle of inquiry, reflection and action took on different forms, appropriate to the stages of development within each track, and according to external circumstance. For example, I engaged in concentrated periods of reflection sometimes in relation to action, at other times in relation to literature. This led at times to periods of conceptual activity, at other times to periods of practical activity within my consultancy. I adapted my focus of activity and inquiry practices to the constraints set by time, personal and professional context, and physical location of my inquiry.

New knowledge was generated in the movement between these different forms of action and reflection. Within my professional practice, inquiry became a means for introducing reflective practices into my consultancy. For participants adapted to organisational environments which devalued reflection and placed a high value on output related activity this posed political and professional challenges. In my case studies I show how these challenges were in turn sometimes enacted within my consultancy relationships (chapters 19, 10, 11) and how my inquiry then became a means of conceptualising practices that had been jointly developed in earlier cycles of inquiry.

## Quality in my Inquiry

In this final section I pose questions which I would ask the reader to use in considering my claims to quality in my inquiry.

Reason and Marshall (2000) note the power of belief that there is an external authority that holds the key to the correct methodology for their research topic. In tune with the principles of feminist and of action research described above, I was challenged by them to become the source of my own knowing and to fashion my own tools in order make my own knowledge claims. To do this I drew from the living experience of doing inquiry that was enacted and conceptualised in my inquiry group and in wider discussion in the CARPP community (chapters 3, 4, 7).

## ***Epistemological and conceptual frame***

In my inquiry I sought to name and conceptualise multiple forms of knowing, and to track congruence and divergence between them. I used notions of situated and located knowledge drawn from feminist epistemology to theorise aspects of my practice, and to plan action interventions. I adapted an extended epistemology to validate knowledge claims in my consultancy and in my thesis.

Did I illustrate sufficiently how I drew from these different forms of knowing, to substantiate my knowledge claims?

In order to develop my conceptual frame I drew together concepts from diverse research sources and communities of practice.

Did I illustrate my creative use of concepts from these sources in order to maintain balance between personal, organisational, business and political perspectives? Did I adequately conceptualise the links and cross fertilisation between processes of personal, political and organisational transformation, as I cycled between different communities of research and practice?

## ***Subject to subject interaction***

Did I distinguish adequately between what belonged to me, and what belonged to others who contributed to my inquiry?

In my analysis of my interview findings I developed a methodology that compared my experience to the patterns described by with contributors to my interviews. These interviews were conducted as joint discussions, using a topic guide drawn from my own experience and issues. In my analysis I referred to a sense of feeling affirmed in these discussions through my discovery of a shared territory of experience. This did not mean that our experience was the same, or that we agreed on our analysis of it, but suggested a shared ground within which we named variations of pattern.

My claim to quality is based on my detailed exploration of how my subjectivity and experience informed my approach to the subject and my analysis of the findings. I developed inquiry practices that enabled me to name and conceptualise the relationship

between 'me' and 'them' and to identify the challenges of sustaining subject: subject dialogue. This became a core cross cutting theme of my inquiry. I conceptualised the challenges and practices I developed for working with it by drawing from feminist and psychodynamic research literature (chapters 7, 8 and 12). In this sense I claim I developed rigorous procedures for validity in my use of 'connected knowing' (Clinchy 1996).

### ***Tools for feminist transformation***

My feminist action inquiry was inspired by a desire for transformational change within my personal, professional, and social interactions.

Have I sufficiently demonstrated the depth and range of my personal process, and how this cross-fertilised and engaged with my professional practice, and political goals?

In my inquiry I set out to fashion conceptual and practical tools to sustain feminist collaboration and professional practice. To do this I have sought to use my inquiry to enrich my consultancy practice, and to draw from my lived experience of my consultancy practice to provide data for my inquiry.

Did I provide sufficient evidence that my inquiry has:

- Affirmed and developed women's knowing by creating spaces, conditions and practices that encouraged women to engage with each other across different positions, histories, cultures and identities (Maguire 2000; Reason 1994, 2000)
- Enacted change through cycles of action and reflection, enabling women to understand their part in enacting, and capacity to actively challenge and transform, gendered power regimes, through development of new practices based on new knowing (Maguire 2000; Marshall 1984, 1992, 1995; Reason and Bradbury 2000; Torbert 1991, 1992, 2000)
- Supported feminist collaboration by providing the tools for feminists to develop inquiry based approaches, and by sustaining 'subject / subject' interactions to enact feminist values and goals (Maguire 2000)
- Sustained the individual feminist practitioner as she moved between multiple conceptual and political frames

## ***Transferability: between mainstream and margins***

Through my inquiry I set out to reposition my consultancy practice out of the margins of 'equal opportunities' and into the 'mainstream' of organisational development (chapter 4). In the course of my inquiry my notions of mainstream and margins loosened; as I became more centred in my own practice I felt less marginalised, better able to assert its value and to adapt its methods in a range of different environments.

Is my inquiry methodology and conceptual frame sufficiently grounded in specific context to make sense, yet sufficiently explicit about its general principles to be transferable to other contexts? Does it provide methods that can be used to sustain feminist consultancy, and which might also be transferable to more 'mainstream' organisation development initiatives?

## ***For me and for us; for us and for them***

While my overall inquiry has been a self-driven process, it has also been informed by numerous discussions with feminist practitioners and researchers. With them I have tested ideas, checked for resonance of my core themes, and received confirmation that these issues were widely shared.

In writing my inquiry I had expected to come up with solutions for women - and for myself. As I began to bring more of my subjectivity into my inquiry I sometimes experienced the encouragement and interest in my research expressed by women clients and colleagues as a weighty responsibility. I began to anticipate their potential disapproval and disappointment in what I was actually producing, and recognised similarity in the vulnerability described by Marshall in her account of responses, anticipated and actual, to her research on women managers (Marshall 1984, 1992). The stance I have taken up through my inquiry may not be popular, nor the public exposure of difficult issues that although widely talked about between women rarely find their way into research publications.

The inquiry method I developed required me to set aside defences that I had constructed in my organisation consultancy persona; sharing material would have risked being negatively judged by women identified with 'mainstream' workplace cultures and

ideologies. In persisting to write my inquiry in this way I have had to wrestle with the question which has run throughout each cycle of inquiry: is this inquiry for me or for them? Does it do more than provide an account of my personal journey? Is there sufficient balance in my account, between celebration of the achievements of collaboration between women in mainstream organisations and adequate account of the challenges?

Finally, I re-pose the challenge enacted within each of my case studies: does my inquiry name the political and ethical challenges of holding the tension between generative adaptive strategies and feminist ways of being in mainstream environments?

### ***For you?***

To test these criteria I invited two colleagues to read and send critical feedback on drafts of case study 2 (chapters 10) and the chapter which theorises challenges to feminist collaboration (chapter 12). Of these Anne Scott is a feminist philosopher and activist who shares my interest in transfer of learning. The other is the friend and client who was lead partner on the ELP project described in case study 2. Both gave permission for me to include their emails in my thesis.

In their responses both state that they recognised elements of their own experience in my text, and furthermore, that reading the text had re-evoked this lived experience. Each of them expressed equally strong doubts that their or my experience could be validated as 'knowledge' in the mainstream of the academy.

In her email Anne describes the vulnerability evoked as she recognised aspects of her self that she would not bring into her academic research. Her strong reaction seemed to mirror my own powerful anxieties that I worked through in order to write my case studies:

#### ***Your case study***

*Have come back to work, and finally picked up your case study. It's an enormously powerful piece of writing. It set off all sorts of things for me... I think you are doing something very original, and very important, in regards to feminist epistemology. Writing that must have taken a great deal of courage!*



*Am about to start on the other chapter, but thought I would share the above with you.*

*I made notes of some references that may, or may not, be helpful to you in the margins as I read. Will send them all to you after I finish both chapters. I don't really have any other comments to make on your case study itself. This is a style of writing, and of thinking that is well outside my expertise... I really wouldn't have any idea how to make it better!*

*Reading it brought up all sorts of feelings for me. Excitement and energy. A kind of activist passion. and also fear and uncomfortableness. As you've probably guessed by now, I'm not a person who feels very comfortable with my own vulnerabilities. Or with other people's, for that matter... that's why I like 'academic' writing. Even in its women's studies style, it tends to be distancing. So - reading your case study threw ME into a bit of a reflexive loop. Strong reactions. Then asking myself: 'Why am I reacting like that?' 'What's the issue for me here?' 'What am I scared of?' ... and so forth.*

*I kept thinking, 'We could just rewrite this to make it more academic, could foreground the method, could add references, could highlight theoretical issues, etc and etc'. ...And then suddenly recognizing, with a start, that doing too much of that would lose the essence of what YOU are trying to do! And moreover, that I wanted to do it so that I wouldn't have to face my own vulnerabilities. So on reflection, I think your case study is fine the way it is. The theoretical, distancing, bits can always be added somewhere else! Although I think you will need to choose your external & internal examiners very carefully if you want a PhD out of this. You mustn't have anybody who is too defended, and who will be scared out of their wits by all that emotion!*

*Anyway, just thought you might want some immediate reactions.*

*Will be in touch anon...*

*Love, Anne*

*Dr. Anne Scott*

*Lecturer in Women's Studies & Social Policy*

*Dept. of Applied Social Sciences*

*University of Bradford*

In the second email my contributor affirmed both that she shared the emotional experience of the project work I described in my case study, and that working with this

emotion was an integral aspect of our working method. She also expresses doubt that this aspect of our lived experience could count as 'knowledge':

**Hello!**

*I am half way through the first reading of the Case study. Very powerful! Very open amazing material made me cry in some parts.*

.....

*I had no idea you were working at that depth - I feel humbled!*

*I want to read the whole thing !!!!!!!!!!!*

*I am conscious of the effort pain exhilaration risk application focus commitment rigor involved. No wonder you are exhausted.*

*You asked whether I think it misrepresents any aspect of our work. It IS how we worked in the larger project - that what was so refreshing.*

*It's incredible that a form of academic research could include that material.*

.....

*Love, F<sup>i</sup>*

In their feedback both readers from their different perspectives affirmed that the experiences I described and conceptualised were jointly held, and furthermore that in the act of reading them, aspects of their own similar experiences were re-evoked. In reading them they became more keenly aware of aspects of experience that could not be claimed as knowledge, because it would expose them to vulnerability or because it was unthinkable as knowledge.

This response suggested a further cluster of criteria for quality in my inquiry: does it, in the act of reading, sharpen your awareness, as reader, of boundaries you have set to bringing your subjectivity into research or other professional arenas? Does it provoke thought about the generative or degenerative aspects of choices you may have made? Have I adequately considered the ethics and politics of breaking silence, or of coming into voice within my thesis? In considering these questions, has my sharing brought similar issues of your own to mind? Are we, as writer and reader, in dialogue now?

## In Conclusion

Writing this inquiry has been intensely demanding of my physical, emotional and intellectual resources. During the writing process I experienced moments of satisfaction, joy, and pride in my achievement, as well as frustration and exhaustion and symptoms of illness. In the process I re-engaged with the difficult experiences of which I have been writing and through inquiry made new meaning and took up a different stance in relation to them.

Tracking this process within my inquiry enabled me to articulate my inquiry stance as it developed through my inquiry. I have emerged with a sharper sense of how my feminist political stance has informed my inquiry and consultancy practice with women, of how my research and biography have been closely interwoven. My inquiry has been and will continue to be 'life process' (Marshall 1992, 2000) in which methodology, epistemology and ontology are intertwined (Stanley 1997).

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<sup>i</sup> F was a contributor to my interviews and the client to whom I refer in case study 2.