

Chapter 4

My Inquiry Journey 2 What Kind of Consultant am I?

My inquiry issues

This inquiry track began with a practical dilemma: How could I continue to make a living as a feminist freelance consultant? How could I financially sustain my PhD?

Practical urgency lent a quality of immediacy to this inquiry strand. When I joined CARPP I was preoccupied with doubts about how I could sustain myself financially. To market myself effectively I needed to articulate what my consultancy methods were and what value they would add for potential clients. I also needed to position myself strategically in relation to feminist and more mainstream consultants within my professional field.

Yet I could not find the right language to describe my consultancy. When asked what my consultancy was, by consultants or clients who were not equalities specialists, I felt tongue-tied. If I used the language of management or organisation consultancy, I felt a fraud. If I described my consultancy as 'women's equality' I was instantly marginalised. Neither of these options in any case seemed to describe the highly interactive and live quality of my experience of my self in action, at moments when my work was going well.

I recognised this dilemma in a woman researcher's account of 'feeling like a fraud'. In her research on women's sense of professional identity, she described how undermined she and other women who contributed to her research felt by the mismatch between their sense of professional competence and identity, and how this identity and associated skills were represented in their professional fields (McIntosh 1985, 1989).

As I began to explore these issues in my journal writing, I found that the questions that arose were multi-levelled:

How far am I prepared to compromise in the professional identity I construct and present in mainstream environments, that do not reflect or value my own identity or beliefs? How far am I prepared to compromise in the kind of work I do, and in my choice of clients and associates? How can I represent consultancy carried out for feminist projects in ways that show how my approach will add value in mainstream environments? What is the appropriate balance between business priorities, and my political values? How can I preserve my personal and political integrity in environments that do not address gender equality as an issue?

This inquiry like my 'life process' track took on a life of its own and ran throughout my inquiry. I continued to develop its themes within the consultancy based inquiry track that becomes the main focus of my later inquiry and is the basis of my case studies (chapters 9, 10 and 11).

Feminist versus business focus

During the first three years of my inquiry I explored new collaborations with private and voluntary sector business partners. Within these I tracked a series of practical and political dilemmas related to how to develop consultancy practice that combined political integrity with business viability.

I helped to initiate 'Beijing Action Partnership,' a consortium of six feminist consultants who worked primarily in voluntary and statutory sectors, four of whom had taken part in the Fourth World Conference on Women. We aimed to promote the Global Platform for Action, adopted at that conference, as an instrument for implementing women's equality. With members of this consortium I marketed our services, pitched for business, and carried out two consultancy assignments.

I took part in a series of networking events organised by a women managers' development network, made up primarily of consultants working in the private sector. This

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

led to an association with a consultancy firm, and collaboration with a male organisation development consultant. With him I marketed my services, followed up on business contacts, and jointly pitched for and carried out a consultancy assignment.

I tracked the process of collaboration in each case, noting how the business or feminist value frames used were shaping my approach to collaboration and to business development. I identified what dilemmas this posed for me, considered how to improve our practice, making practical suggestions and inviting colleagues to discuss them. I considered the quality of discussions within each partnership and drew conclusions concerning the basis on which collaboration was fruitful for me, or not.

I kept a journal to track reflections on my responses, interventions and results as I developed these consultancy collaborations. I also networked with feminist consultants in the voluntary and public sectors and with women managers in the corporate sector. Through these activities I explored how to be a feminist consultant in a variety of different business and political environments.

In my reflections and in discussions with colleagues I contrasted feminist and business orientated approaches to consultancy. I observed myself in action and compared the approaches I adopted with feminist and with business orientated colleagues. I invited cross-fertilisation in my approach, exploring scope for transferability of consultancy practices associated with different value frames within these different environments.

In my business collaboration I learned new approaches to marketing and introduced some of them into the feminist consultancy. This generated discussions about the balance between advocacy and marketing in our approach to potential clients. We discussed whether our meetings with our potential client were about influencing policy agendas, or about pitching for business; in either case, how much 'free' advisory time we were prepared to offer, and how we would charge for our services. I became more aware of the tension between political advocacy and selling in feminist approaches to generating women's equality consultancy business, and of the absence of this tension in business led marketing for non-gender specific work.

I explored how to preserve my political integrity and address business considerations. In the business led collaboration I observed how gender dynamics enhanced or undermined my authority in relation to male and female clients, and practised interventions to sustain an equal relationship to my male colleague and in relation to male and female clients. Through debriefing with my colleague on our experiences of these gendered dynamics I tested and build common ground with him.

As I moved between collaborations I gained a stronger sense of my core values and practices, and became better able to articulate them. I became more effective at working with colleagues who had different approaches.

In the following I illustrate some of my inquiry activities within this track and how I drew from literature on women in management to reflect on how gender influenced and informed my interactions.

November 15 1997

I have been reading Helgeson's 'Female Advantage, Women's Ways of Leadership'.

Her study is based on tracking four 'successful' women leaders and contrasting the way they interpret their roles and use authority to six male leaders tracked by Minzberg (1973) in 1968. She contrasts her approach to Hennig and Jardim's 'The Managerial Woman' and Harragan's 'Games Mother Never Taught You' which urge that 'business is no woman's land' and that that women need to learn the mindset and how to play the game in order to get on.

Helgeson shows that women can succeed using their own authentic leadership style. She writes powerfully, and describes these women in a way in which I could willingly identify, in fantasy. One of the women she describes carries an affirmation on the dashboard above her cellular phone in her car that reads, 'I am powerful, beautiful, creative, and I can handle it!'- which echoes me perfectly in superwoman/megalomaniac frame of mind-usually after at least two cappuccino's! These women are used to being in control and having men and women and children at their bidding.

She draws from Pearson's archetypes to describe these women as Magicians who have made it by their own efforts (Pearson 1986). Magicians know how to sacrifice and give care without losing identity, and break down dualities such as male/female, mastery, nurturance, logic intuition, and work from awareness of their inner connections.

Pearson recognizes the Warrior's talents for tapping into and drawing strength from energy sources outside herself (p. 126). She quotes Gilligan and Miller in associating the male warrior figure with the traditional male hero who charges into battle with the aim of dominating and winning, but also with a quest for autonomy, the main task of male development (Gilligan 1982; Miller 1976).

What is the message? Definitely 'be yourself and you will succeed'. 'The warrior is a dinosaur who will have outlived his time'.

Helgeson quotes Belenky et al to illustrate how her subjects use the metaphor of voice to depict intellectual and ethical development; the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined (Belenky 1989). The notion of being true to oneself is the very essence of finding one's voice.

This reminds me of women managers' presentations at Bodo [an annual conference I attended for members of the European Network of Women Managers]:

It's not hard work that wears you out, but the repression of your true personality
Participant at women managers' 's business-networking event, June 1997

A similar theme -or perhaps a subtext - has been running in my head in thinking about my reactions to my new male business colleague. He presents a similar business orientated, 'positive thinking' to my mind denial of all vulnerability approach. Yet I am finding it refreshing and energizing, and am becoming more proactive in my approach to generating business.

Will I be able to bring my ability to work with inner connections into this collaboration, as well as drawing energy from his 'warrior' like qualities? Will I through this get more in touch with my own warrior like qualities?

November 20 1997

Last week I wrote the following notes in my diary:

P's approach and goal is solely and single mindedly to generate 'business' and homing in on opportunity to do this. Mine is also political, social justice. My approach seems to be more developmental, collaborative. Is this association of practice with values necessary?

His business focus gives me confidence to be more up front about the business reality of the interaction when meeting with a potential client. I am seeking work and need to focus not on 'how we could work together' or on 'exchanging ideas' but on 'how I might be able to help you as a consultant'.

In one of our debriefings after a first meeting with a woman client, I discovered he had not picked up the detail of her reactions. There were points at which I had noticed hesitation, and that she was testing us on our equal opportunities values, a territory in which I felt comfortable but with which he was unfamiliar. In offering him this feedback I was affirmed in the specific qualities and knowledge base I was bringing to our collaboration and reminded of my expertise as a basis for equal partnership.

In interviews I conducted in further cycles of inquiry, I explored sectoral differences and similarities in women 's experience of being valued, or not, by women colleagues in their organisations. The spectrum of political and business led associations through which I aimed to develop my consultancy is reflected in my selection of contributors to this cycle of interviews (chapter 7).

By the end of the inquiry I had established, to myself, that my consultancy skills and experience were transferable across sectors. I could hold my own and learn business skills from a male business partner, who was not a gender equalities specialist, and did not hold feminist values. Through this partnership, I found that I could generate more 'mainstream' organisation development consultancy, and had learned more about the approach to gender issues in the corporate sector.

I noticed I had become more impatient with the difficulties in sustaining collaborative approaches within my feminist business associations. Yet as a feminist I was unwilling to give up the value base of my consultancy practice, or relinquish advocacy for it within consultancy relationships..

It seemed I was at a crossroads. Now that I had established that I could 'go mainstream' in my consultancy practice, a different set of questions opened up about whether I was ready to do so. Was I willing to let go of my identity as gender equality 'specialist'? Was I confident that I could retain enough sense of my own integrity in the 'mainstream' of organisation consultancy? What implications would either choice have for future collaborations and business partnerships?

These questions cannot be easily answered, and are ongoing within my consultancy and inquiry. However in exploring their ontological grounding I was able to approach them from a position of greater awareness and choice.

What kind of consultant am I?

In this section I describe how I engaged with some of the ontological issues raised in this inquiry, and track how I brought a different self into my consultancy role.

Through journal writing I tracked my feelings of competence or incompetence within interactions with consultancy clients and colleagues and sought feedback on their experience and conceptualisation of learning within the interaction. Using reflection and free association I identified patterns of relating in relation to family history and other significant relationships.

I recorded snapshots of my self in action as consultant and inquirer, focusing on how I enacted gender and sexuality within my professional identity at different stages of my inquiry. I reflected on interactions with individual clients, colleagues at consultancy events; in one to one or group settings. I focused on the emotions generated in and following these interactions and drew from dreams as well as memories through free association to

link them to experiences that generated a similar quality of emotion. I identified patterns and used them as a basis for discussion in professional networks and discussions with my inquiry group at Bath. In these discussions I tested for recognition of patterns I had identified, for validity of my conclusions, and usefulness of my inquiry questions in the context of my overall inquiry.

In the following I illustrate my inquiry process with two contrasting extracts from my journal writing. In each one I am exploring the theme of my sense of professional competence as a consultant. In both I show how my sense of professional identity and personal history were intertwined, and how I worked with these connections to build my professional competence in relationship to others.

In the first I describe a moment when I lost touch with my sense of professional competence:

I am standing outside K's door - a tall elegant Georgian house. Feeling nervous - and catch a visual image of myself as a governess standing at the porch of at a stately home. I ring the bell and K. lets me in. I am struck by how sophisticated and attractive she looks. We go upstairs and into a drawing room. The house seems to be filled with light and beautiful objects, paintings, Chinese vases and books. I feel overwhelmed and think: this is how I would like my life to be, everything perfect. Then immediately feel full of the sense of not being like that. In the same moment of breathing in the light and elegance and wanting, wanting this to be me, I am confronted with the knowledge that it is not. I am filled with sense of lack, of desiring, and in desiring, have lost touch with what I already have.

She serves green tea; I notice and admire the teapot. Long afterwards I continue to drink this tea myself, as if by drinking it I could absorb and prolong for a little while longer the sense of being there.

I take a hold of myself - I am here to provide consultancy, not adulation. I have professional expertise; K has invited me here because she knows and values me in this role, and she is paying me to share it. I had better pull myself together, and get into role!

But somehow I have reversed the roles, I have given away a part of myself, the part that feels professionally competent. I need to take it back, but it's a struggle; my sense of having something of value to offer has been washed away and I can't help feeling a fraud. Besides, I am overwhelmed by desire to be like her. To be her and what she represents in my internal world. To be 'not me'.

I ask her to talk about the issues she would like to discuss, and we begin the consultancy session. I reclaim my competent professional self, but the other is close beside me, listening. My sense of identification with her becomes a source of playful vitality, which I continue to associate with the consultancy.

Journal writing, July 1997

This account seemed to capture key issues that I struggled with in this inquiry track; an elusive sense of security in my professional identity and a difficulty in keeping hold of it that I noticed particularly in relation to women clients. If I could not retain a sense of my own value to myself, how could I represent myself as valuable to others? The association between feeling 'competent' and 'feeling myself,' the permeable boundaries between social and professional identities, and the dynamic of cross identification between women are themes that I develop in my cycle of interviews (chapter 6).

I described this interaction to a Swedish women participant at a feminist research seminar in Finland. She found it instantly recognisable, even though we were talking across cultures, and sectors. Together we described this pattern as a chain of cross identifications between women, who recognise in each other a representation of what each imagines 'success' to be, and desires to have because of the success that it represents. In these interactions women perceive each other as successful, as having something they desire and lack, make an unfavourable self-comparison, and experience feelings of inadequacy and incompetence. However we agreed that identification between women can in other circumstances be a powerful force for change. As I write I can taste the tea which K served and a sense of vitality returning.

Through tracking my consultancy activities I continued to explore what enabled me to bring my self into my work in the fullest sense. What was it and when was it that I felt 'competent', and fully myself? What triggered a sense of 'incompetence', of self slipping

away, of not having anything to offer, and how could I conceptualise this process? What was the nature of my competence and how could I describe it in my marketing material?

In my writing I re-discovered the importance of travel and being in movement; of positive and pleasurable associations with landscape and place, of being invited as evidence of feeling valued. As I travelled to Italy, and to Finland for new assignments, it was as if I had joined up different parts of my life, linking consultancy work with associations of previous fun and adventure. I sensed a new vitality and more playful approach to consultancy. This new consultancy self appears in my second case study (chapter 10).

The following journal extract is one of many examples of 'travel writing' within this strand of my inquiry. It illustrates the sense of adventure linked to place; of positive connection through association with positive memories; and of the sense of being valued generated by invitation to peak at an event.

On being keynote speaker at a seminar in Oulu, Finland

Feb. 5 2000

I looking out of the plane window and see frozen lakes and pine forest - wild - reminders of childhood in Canada, and feel my heart leap. Stepping out of the plane into snow, snowflakes blowing into my face – I feel the keenness of the cold, and laughing out loud with delight.

Why is my adrenalin so high, my sense of excitement so intense? I do not feel tired! Somehow these encounters give me a keenness of meaning and purpose that I do not find elsewhere. A sense of 'me-ness', of having something positive to give, of having ideas, of being exciting, worth knowing, able to give others sense of the importance of what they are doing. How I love the challenge of exchange, of mutual inspiration, affirmation in a gathering of women committed to working for equality in a range of different contexts!

The intensity of the encounters, the seriousness, even passion of the presentations, connects me to my own passion for using my skills to contribute to social justice, enables me to speak from my deepest held views and values without having to hold back, feeling a power to inspire and bring people into interaction with each other - doing it!

Walking together at night to the restaurant - a local fishing boat moored in the ice-covered sea, enjoying the sense of adventure and camaraderie among travellers. A sudden sense of potential for bringing different parts of myself in to new consultancy identities: of being an adventurer consultant, a philosopher thinker consultant, an inspirational consultant, a maker and affirmer-of-connections consultant.

Love, meaning, adrenalin, energy, focus, affirmation, purpose, competence, pleasure, sensuality, humour and laughter, satisfaction, belonging...

Journal February 2000

In this inquiry track I explored the dynamic and fluid quality of my sense of myself and of professional competence, and of how this was enacted in relationship to others. I became more attuned to what triggered low or high energy and begin to develop a more playful sense of my self in different roles. Inspired by a presentation on use of irony as a strategy for women's leadership in organisations (Wahl 1997) I began to seek out feminist psychoanalytic writing on identity, power and sexuality as a way of conceptualising my experience of inter-subjective dynamics between women (Benjamin 1990; 1995; Orbach and Eichenbaum 1994). I illustrate my engagement with this literature in chapter 8, and show how I used it to develop my conceptual frame in chapter 12.

I tapped into this energy to sustain a different sense of my consultancy self within collaborations and marketing.

Marketing feminist consultancy

Alongside exploration of feminist and 'mainstream' consultancy collaborations, I drafted publicity and marketing material as a way of articulating more clearly how I work. I experimented with different ways of framing my consultancy as feminist or gender-neutral, and powered by experience of successful consultancy interventions, wrote these up as a series of strap lines. I drew up draft fliers and worked with feedback from my supervisor and CARPP inquiry group to make clearer statements about my role and value added in my consultancy I describe.

Throughout my inquiry I continued to draft publicity material alongside my reflections on how to position my business and professional identity. I describe this process in the journal extract below:

August 10 1998

I've noticed myself drafting and redrafting my self-description as I travel back and forth from affirming work experiences – currently sessions with women ' s project activists: so that's what I am! or that's what I am not!

Here are some samples:

Margaret Page, MAYA Consultancy

Dialogue in organisations, networks and partnerships

Margaret Page, MAYA Consultancy

Equality - diversity - innovation - change

Consultancy to organisations networks and partnerships

Margaret Page, MAYA Consultancy

Ideas into action

Consultancy to organisations networks and partnerships

MAYA Consultancy

Spaces for thinking and acting together

Consultancy for women and men in organisations, networks and communities

MAYA Consultancy

Organisations networks and partnerships

MAYA Consultancy

Consultancy and research for sustaining women in organisations

Networks, partnerships, innovation, change

MAYA Consultancy,

Promoting gender equality in diversity

The process of this inquiry was playful and painful, uncomfortable and exhilarating. Its varied stands cross-fertilised and added depth to my consultancy practices and to my strategies for self-presentation in professional spheres. I illustrate these outcomes and my process as it unfolded in my case studies (chapters 9 -11), and integrate them into the conceptual frame I elaborate for feminist consultancy in chapter 12.