

# Chapter 7

## In the Borderlands of Yearning and of Un/Belonging

### Introduction

This chapter illustrates my use of action inquiry to sustain me through a crisis. I use the terms 'yearning' and 'un/belonging' to evoke a feeling state that cut across my personal and professional identities and relationships. Inquiry provided me with a means to move myself from the passive state related to this feeling of disconnection to a sense of agency from which I could initiate inquiry activities. In this sense there was symmetry between the inquiry subject, the inquiry process and outcomes.

I describe how through a range of inquiry activities I moved from a state of 'un/belonging', into a renewed sense of generative connectedness which I have called 'belonging'. I conceptualise this shift as taking place through practices associated with practical, experiential and propositional knowing. Through my inquiry I arrive at a different ontological and conceptual stance, offering potential for a more proactive set of strategies for sustaining myself as a freelance professional.

To illustrate this process I describe a slice of my action inquiry over a defined period of time. Through self-reflective practices I explored the relationship between my conceptual framing and my experience of qualities of connection and relationship, and developed practices to sustain agency through connection. I carried out a single cycle of discursive exchange with friends and colleagues and made a critical assessment of key concepts in attachment research as a basis for developing my sense-making frame. These activities are described as parallel and related inquiry tracks in the three sections of this chapter.

Written at a moment in which I was primarily identified with loss and separation, I have chosen to include this chapter in my thesis as it highlights my need as a consultant

engaged in radical practice to develop strategies for sustaining motivation through generative connection. Thus 'un/belonging' and 'yearning to belong' introduce a set of themes which surface in my case studies and which I theorise further in chapter 12.

This chapter marks a territory at the core of my inquiry pathway that is concerned with how to sustain feminist practitioners, and how to sustain feminist professional practice (chapter 4). In I present further cycles of this strand of my action inquiry, using the conceptual framework developed by attachment researchers as my starting point. I critically engage with this framework from a feminist standpoint.

## Context and method

In this section I set the context for my inquiry, and briefly describe my method and inquiry activities.

Earlier this year (1999) my longing to belong re-surfaced strongly and dramatically in the form of its opposite, a profound feeling of 'un/belonging'. Following the ending of an intimate relationship I experienced a painful sense of disconnection and loss of agency. I sought to hold open the space that this opened up, using inquiry as a way of regaining some sense of agency in my personal and professional life. I had been introduced to relational psychoanalysis and attachment research within professional networks and drew from this literature both to make sense of my experience, and to reframe it.

I had set aside time during the summer months for writing other parts of my thesis (the analysis of interview scripts, chapter 6) but found myself too preoccupied to think about anything other than this. I decided to use this disruption as a way of initiating inquiry into how to sustain myself as a freelance consultant, and as an opportunity to critically appraise the conceptual tools related to attachment thinking which I had been using to think about this aspect of my professional practice. Opening the boundary between my life and my research led me into an inquiry track for which I had not planned, but which nevertheless proved fruitful (Marshall 1999). Through it I engaged with vulnerabilities that I would normally keep hidden from public view, allowing them to contribute to my understanding and conceptualisation of my consultancy practice and method.

Over a period of six weeks I tracked my movement in and out of a range of feeling states which I named a 'borderlands of un/belonging and yearning to belong': emptiness

and creativity, desolation and hope, apathy and energy, lack of purpose and glimmers of new possibilities. In the first of three parallel inquiry tracks, I used reflective practices to become more attuned to triggers associated with these feeling states. These are named in track 1 of the following section of this chapter. In a second inquiry track I invited friends to reflect on what 'belonging' meant to them. Through an initial round of seven one to one conversations I discovered that inquiry as a stance seemed to provide a medium for me to move from a felt need and desire to be 'rescued' by friends, into a desire to seek insight through sharing our different experiences as equals. This process is described in track 2 of the following section of this chapter.

As I engaged with my own thinking self through reflexive practices, the sense of pain associated with un/belonging faded. As I began to share my thinking with friends inner dialogue developed, and with it new thinking about conceptual frames for understanding the variety of experiences and needs associated with 'belonging'. This process generated a sense of renewed connection that I associated with belonging within new and existing relationships; and with it a renewed sense of agency: a sense of myself as a proactive, and initiating subject. From writing to survive in response to an unwanted affective state I had moved into writing with a sense of creativity, of excitement, and of purpose. I drew from feminist research literature to explore this new sense of self and of connected knowing (Belenky et al 1986).

In a third inquiry track, I considered the conceptual frames I was using to understand my process and which were relevant to my work. I discovered that the attachment concepts I was using were embedded in a friendship that had been central to my recovery from previous loss. In my third inquiry track I move from recognition of my attachment to these concepts in the context of a specific relationship to a more critical appreciation of them.

In chapter 2 I introduced the extended epistemology of co-operative inquiry (Heron 1988; Reason 1988). In tracks 1 and 2 of this inquiry I engaged critically with experiential and practical knowing, in the third with propositional knowing. My inquiry was multi-levelled, and self-directed. It enabled me to achieve a shift in ontological stance that mirrored the conceptual shift achieved.

## Inquiry tracks 1 and 2

### Generating connection through action inquiry

#### *Track 1*

#### *Self-reflective practices: tracking agency and connection*

In this track my inquiry practices focused on practical and experiential knowing. I drew from journal entries to describe how I developed and used a range of practical interventions to recover a sense of agency through practical initiatives taken on my own and in interaction with others. Through inquiry I sustained a sense of generative connection which seemed associated with a stronger sense of myself as an active, inquiring subject. In the following I describe my inquiry activities as a series of separate initiatives, overlapping in time.

#### **Step 1: Developing critical consciousness**

- Observing myself waking in the mornings gripped with terror, spiralling downwards: 'I can't do this research: its too lonely, its worthless, I'm worthless, my life is worthless, no one wants to know me, if they did I would not be alone like this, without a lover/partner/job etc. Then: is this really me? How can I have ended up alone, without purpose or direction?
- Sharing this script with two friends, and discovering that despite our differences, all three of us wake with a script with the same degenerative structure.
- Considering our choices for interpreting this state of mind: part of the grieving process following separation; menopausal mood swing; dysfunctional pattern originating in childhood; internalised oppression: homophobia, misogyny, patriarchal family values; isolation and lack of community; as a result of the Thatcher years of promoting individualism, and so on.
- Becoming aware of practical solutions implied by political, psychodynamic, and health-related conceptual frames and selecting those that strengthened my sense of agency.
- Observing my use of cultural or political representations to affirm or undermine my sense of self worth as a single and recently separated lesbian and developing

critical appraisal of media representations of success or happiness in relation to my life and identity. Moving from 'using' negative representation to confirm a negative self-state to actively seeking affirming representations.

## **Step 2: Developing agency and connection**

I initiated practical interventions designed to affirm my sense of agency and observed which of these practices and patterns of interaction confirmed or challenged my self-sense. I discovered that my capacity to initiate and think creatively was linked to a quality of association through interaction, and to physical activity. I considered the quality of my interactions, and recorded affective states associated with them. Through experimentation I established patterns which affirmed reciprocity and invited inquiry rather than problem solving interaction. This affirmed my sense of agency and connection, and reduced the painful affects associated with loss.

Practical examples included:

- Connecting through the medium of inquiry:
  - Being present to friends in inquiry mode: 'This is how I'm feeling, isn't it interesting!' and inviting a response based on reciprocal sharing. Enjoying connection through shared activities. Initiating new connections – gaining a new sense of myself as valued, of interest, able to interact creatively with new people in new situations
  - Noticing moments of mutual connection where re-framing of negative self-state took place and a sense of agency was renewed and sustained.
- Shifting anxiety through physical activity:
  - Running, swimming, Tai Chi; I found that physical exercise with others often had a similar effect to 'now' moments; renewing a sense of agency and of being in community; shifting the sense of paralysis that comes with anxiety to a renewed sense of 'I can'. Doing this meant trusting that activity would change my state of mind and being open to the change
- Generating renewed purpose through managing task and environment
  - Choosing do-able activities to create a sense of being purposeful in interaction with others
  - Finding ways of using environment to reduce anxiety and regenerate purpose and agency; moving between public and private spaces
- Creating opportunities for professional collaboration and connection
  - Proposing joint ventures to break isolation

- Sharing process as inquiry:
  - Naming this inquiry process and sharing it as inquiry data with colleagues and students (on 'Values, Learning and Inquiry, the MSc module I teach at Bristol University). Noticing that this generated positive feedback about the 'live' quality of the session and a wider dialogue about conceptual framing

Each of these practices involved awareness of and resistance to a pull towards identifying with negative self-images rooted in experiencing loss of relationship as failure, associated feelings of shame, and a tendency to resort to ways of understanding my feeling state as pathology. I was reminded that lesbian feminist research identifies similar experiences as widely shared examples of internalised oppression (Bunch 1995; Lorde 1984; Reinfelder 1996). In inquiry tracks 2 and 3 I illustrate use of feminist friendship and lesbian standpoint to construct an alternative inquiry stance.

Through these practices of self-challenge I moved myself on a daily basis from degenerative to generative states of being. They enabled me to maintain a stance of action inquiry, from which I could engage in reflective practices. I think of this as 'creating a secure base for myself', a position from which I had the necessary sense of solidity and security to move through my feeling states and begin to take up a stance as inquirer.

### **Step 3: Sustaining connection**

I discovered that the experience of being with others did not in itself establish the sense of generative connection that I needed to sustain my own agency; I needed to observe more closely how I was interpreting my experiences. In the following extract from my journal I describe this process:

*During the last week when I have been sensitive to my own need for belonging I have observed moments when I have felt its absence, moments when I have sought it, moments when I have found or re-created it.*

*I notice myself needing a boost of connection each day, finding it in interaction with friends, from each of whom I get a feeling of being cared for, loved - yet continuing to experience this as second best.*

*I check with friends who remind me that partners do not necessarily share interests, that friendship is equally important, that sense of purpose has to come from oneself,*

*and cannot be provided externally. I realise I was holding in mind an idealised representation of partnership as a secure base - to which nothing else could measure up. I am learning to view this representation as desire rather than necessity for my well-being.*

*The media are full of solutions to unhappiness and insecurity that bear no relation to the reality of my life as a single lesbian. I felt pulled towards these as explanation for my sense of un/belonging. I turn to feminist writings and recognise the importance of shared values and standpoint, in order to hold onto the value and to foreground friendship between women (Faderman 1985; Harding 1991; Raymond 1986).*

*I talk to feminist friends with whom I have shared history and core values. Although their situation may be different we have a common language and shared referents. We compare strategies and encourage each other. I feel recognised and validated - as if this is my secure base - for as long as I stay within our shared parameters.*

Journal entries, August 1999

The experience of self-affirmation through conversation with feminist friends, albeit conditional and often reliant on political consensus, reminded me of the need to consider the politics of attachment. Political stance and values do play a part in both sense making and generating a sense of belonging; 'secure base' and 'belonging' are among many possible key words that describe a cluster of experiences of desire to be 'inside' and of feeling 'on the outside'. I decided to continue to use these concepts while becoming more alert to the other possibilities, and began to critically appraise the concepts drawn from attachment research that I had been using to make sense of my experience.<sup>1</sup>

I began to hold less tightly to the idea of being 'without' belonging and to notice the many sources of belonging in my life: friendships, the voluntary group of which I am an active member, the organisations for which I work, the projects I have created and to which I consult. and my family relationships. In all of these I recognised significant relationships, structured by close working collaborations and shared history, beliefs, objectives and tasks. Focusing on these relationships, a feeling of association began to suffuse and change my self-sense. The feeling of aloneness moved from foreground to background. I began to take up the threads of purpose in my life again, and to weave a new sense of

myself. I re-framed the meaning I had invested in 'being single' from 'being alone' to being at the centre of a web of relationships that I had co-created and sustained. It was as if I had turned the lens of a kaleidoscope, or replaced one coloured lens with another. Keeping the kaleidoscope focused required sustaining activities.

I used concepts drawn from attachment thinking, in particular the 'mourning cycle'<sup>1</sup> and narrative as a means of updating 'internal working models' to understand my own process of coming to terms with loss, and of how this might contribute to understanding my inquiry process. I return to this discussion in track 3 below.

### **Transformation through moments of meeting**

Through my inquiry I became aware of qualitative shifts in my self-sense, in interactions with friends and in consultancy/client relationships. These shifts seemed to signal a quality of interaction, a sense of 'exchange' between us.

I recognised something of the quality of this 'exchange' in accounts by relational psychologists researching pivotal 'moments' in client / analyst communication (Beebe 1998; Stern 1998; Tronick 1998). In 'moments of meeting' client and analyst attune to each other, and share a state of awareness. At this moment there is potential for a shift in consciousness through mutual interaction, leading to new, shared insight (Stern 1998). These shifts are concerned with the organisation of consciousness rather than with propositional knowledge.

I introduced these concepts to my students during a teaching session on transfer of learning. In a supervision session one of my students, to whom I described this research, stated that she recognised these moments in our one to one interactions, and in my teaching sessions. She illustrated this by referring to a specific incident during a teaching session. At a particular point in this session students had become unresponsive, and my energy dropped. I had checked my inclination to press on with what I had planned, interrupted the process, and invited students to get up and discuss among themselves what was happening in the room. An excited buzz of animated discussion followed. In her feedback my student stated that this interaction had brought about a qualitative shift for herself and other students. They felt I had recognised and acted on their state of mind, and this had enabled them to make connections between their felt experience and the concepts we were discussing. I recognised a similar strengthened sense of agency and connection in my own experience of this moment. In the research to which I refer this



might be termed a 'moment of recognition', a now moment' which followed a 'moment of meeting' in our 'intersubjective field' (Lyons - Ruth 1998; Stern 1998).

In my analysis of interactions with clients and colleagues and in my interviews I described shifts in consciousness which took place during and as a result of some of our inquiry-based discussions (chapters 4, 6). The research makes the link between moments of meeting and a new sense of agency generated through mutual recognition (Lyons Ruth 1998). The concept of 'moments of meeting' has similarities with Buber's dialogical theory of knowledge; in his 'I/Thou' relationship, healing occurs through 'meeting' rather than through insight and analysis (Buber 1965, p. 12, quoted in Beebe, p.335). In my second case study I illustrate how healing occurred through a moment of mutual recognition within my consultancy (chapter 10).

The following examples convey something of the quality of my 'moments of meeting' with friends. The content of our discussions is described in track 2. The examples below are offered as snapshots of 'moments' within a dynamic process, not as idealised stable states:

- Sharing with H the feeling of un/belonging, and listening to her engage with the question I put to her, exploring together, each bringing experience that seemed to relate to the theme. At a certain moment, experiencing release through a sense of my state of mind being accepted, received as offering insight to a shared condition, not evidence of failure.
- Acting as advisor to G when she bought a camera yesterday and in response to appreciation she expressed gaining a sense of myself as giving, not just receiving; staying for dinner afterwards and relaxing together. At a certain moment, feeling and seeing evidence of being welcomed and loved; loving and included. In this context, feeling enabled to invite joint exploration of states of 'belonging'.
- Being with W and C at the Barbican on an outing that I had arranged. At a certain moment making them laugh, feeling they had enjoyed being with me and feeling shared affection; breaking a pattern of presenting myself as being 'in crisis' and in need of rescuing.

In each 'moment of meeting' I experienced a qualitative shift in the basis of connection, a shift from feeling only able to receive to a sense of my own capacity for reciprocity and mutuality. I thought of this as a shift in 'implicit relational mode'. This concept, which I introduced in my analysis of the quality of interaction between myself and my discussants

in chapter 6, was developed by relational psychologists to refer to the quality of the experience of relationship enacted between adult caregivers and children, and between therapists and their clients (Lyons-Ruth 1998).

This shift took place and was expressed through patterns of activity and interaction, in which I positioned myself and was responded to as 'giving' as well as 'taking'. It took place on two levels: in my inner and intersubjective worlds. In my inner world I enacted this shift when I took up an inquiry position in relation to my state of mind and was able to name and present an account of my experience to others. In my intersubjective I enacted a shift in relation to others when I was able to invite them to engage with me in inquiry. Through this process I challenged my internalised self-image as 'failing' and took up a position of inquiry which was based on and released a sense of agency.

The qualities associated with these interactions correspond closely to attachment researchers' accounts of 'secure attachment behaviour' that I describe in track 3 below. These were: feeling mutually cared for, loved, supported; giving and receiving; playfulness; feeling permission to be vulnerable; feeling confident that boundaries will be respected. In each case, the interaction generated inspiration and motivation to work, to write, to be creative and in inquiry mode.

During the same period of time I also experienced moments where professional or friendship connections were abused, triggering self-doubt and undermining agency.

Examples were:

- A dispute with a client with whom I thought I had an amicable working alliance, calling into question my understanding of the basis of our working relationship<sup>2</sup>.
- Repeated encroachments on agreed my time boundaries by colleagues.
- An expectation that I continue to work for a client despite late payments.

In each of these interactions I experienced expectations that I would sustain connection at the expense of my own needs. This undermined my sense of self-worth and ability to work creatively. I learned to make counter assertions, and in doing so regained a sense of agency without necessarily gaining agreement.

During the period of this inquiry I became increasingly sensitised to movement back and forth between these states. I discovered that belonging or not belonging was not static, but a dynamic field. Each had generative and degenerative qualities; sometimes 'belonging' could be at the expense of mutuality or reciprocity, or based on collusion with

denial of an aspect of self. These states of being were not mutually exclusive; I could be catapulted or move myself from one state to another by changing the focus of my awareness or activity. I gained a sense of my ability to alter the quality and nature of my responses to events. The key seemed to be to identify triggers of states of generative belonging/not belonging and pathways I could access for moving between them. This process involved re-framing at affective as well as cognitive levels. By developing a meta-analysis I stepped outside my previous conceptual frame and took up a different stance in relation to my lived experience (Marshall 1999; Torbert 1991). From this position I was able to develop a new conceptual position.

Towards the end of this period I mobilised these findings and skills to make an intervention at a group relations event on 'social inclusion'. At a moment when a homophobic phrase catapulted me from a internal sense of belonging to 'un/belonging' I was able to over ride my impulse to withdraw. Instead I described this moment of experience to participants and framed my account as a contribution to inquiry into what triggered shifts between the experiential states associated with inclusion and exclusion. This was acknowledged as a powerful intervention and subsequent discussion contributed substantial material to the event. I felt that I had been instrumental in creating conditions for self-inclusion through the way I had framed my contribution as an invitation to dialogue, and that I had combined this with a positive assertion of my values and identity.

## *Track 2*

### *Signposts to belonging*

In parallel to the reflective practices described in Track 1 above, I shared my findings with friends and invited them to respond from their own experience. I was increasingly aware that my use of the term 'belonging' was short hand for a complex set of experiences. I decided to continue to use it as a metaphor despite its ambiguity, as long as it held meaning for me and my discussants.

Each of my discussants was employed in a professional role. All except one was associated with a specific organisation, of which two were founder members. In six separate conversations I asked whether belonging was important to them, and if so how where they found it. In their responses each confirmed it as an important and desirable quality. Three out of five referred to family resemblance or shared values and history in a family context. One who was self-employed specifically asserted her ethnic and national

identity as a primary source of belonging. All except the latter referred to their work relationships as a primary site, however this work-based belonging could not be guaranteed and was dependent on power, influence, and struggle to sustain value-based practice:

*From my professional association – I have made myself so powerful in it that I feel I belong – it expresses my values.*

Self-employed therapist

*From the group practice I have created, where I have long term relationships with practice members who are my colleagues.*

Manager, therapy group practice

It was based on a sense of being valued which had to be worked for and could not be guaranteed:

*Belonging is linked to the need for recognition; at the end of 10 years I was only just beginning to get it.*

Local government equalities officer

Frequently it came from teamwork, supporting each other in adversity; but this could be undermined by organisational arrangements such as performance-related pay or managerial roles:

*There is a feeling of being in it together- but this is now under attack as performance related pay has just been introduced.*

Legal advisor

To summarise, discussants' examples conveyed an impression of belonging as desirable but precarious. It was described as a quality of relationship that had to be worked for and maintained. It was subject to context and could be undermined or even destroyed by unfavourable environments, or shifting power relationships within organisations.

Further discussions led us to the conclusion that social representation of identity, including gender, sexuality, race and our place in social and organisational structures, also shape our sense of potential and self worth, and that these in turn shape our approach to making belonging. I develop this theme in my reflections on attachment

research in the next section.

## *Tracks 1 and 2*

### *Conclusions*

Reflection on my inquiry findings confirmed my earlier conclusions that the sense of belonging to which I aspired is achieved in moments, through an active process; it is not an end state. It is relational and not the same as membership. It is a state of mind, a quality of connection based on mutual perception of acceptance in the context of relationship. In this sense it has to be constantly re-created; it can be yearned for, but cannot be guaranteed. As a condition for inquiry, a sense of belonging can be generative or degenerative, stifling or providing a secure base from which to explore and make new meaning. It has similarities with the qualities associated by attachment researchers with secure or insecure attachment; or by feminist researchers with positive or negative effects of community. I will explore this in the following section.

In writing these sections I recognised similar patterns of interaction to those explored in my interview discussions (chapter 6). These concerned tensions between connection based on merging and connection within which I maintained a sense of separate identity. Feminist research that explored these tensions linked these strategies to women's different ways of knowing (Belenky 1986).

In 'connected knowing' the self is used as an instrument for understanding the other, and employs empathy to 'feel into' the other person while maintaining focus on her uniqueness. Connected knowing can also be a means to come to know the self, paying attention to inner experience, and taking an active stance in relation to thoughts and feelings (Field, 1936/81, quoted in Clinchy p.229). Connected knowing is:

*A rigorous, deliberate and demanding procedure, a way of knowing that requires work (Clinchy, p. 209).*

However when a sense of the other person as a separate being is lost, and merging takes place, dialogue breaks down and connection can become degenerative. In the following section I draw from research on separated and merged attachment to conceptualise this dynamic. In later cycles of inquiry, I will draw from relational psychodynamic research to conceptualise this dynamic further (chapter 12).

## Inquiry track 3

### Attachment as a conceptual frame

#### *Introduction*

This inquiry began with a state of being which I called 'un/belonging'. I have suggested that this sense of un/belonging was relational; that a sense of belonging had to be proactively worked for and maintained rather than given. I suggested that a feminist approach to attachment research might provide a useful conceptual frame for understanding these processes.

In this third cycle of my action inquiry I consider some of the conceptual tools developed within attachment thinking. From a feminist standpoint I critically reflect on whether these provided an appropriate propositional frame for this part of my inquiry. I was aware that there is considerable a body of literature relevant to this subject within disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, politics, and psychology. Interdisciplinary studies such as cultural studies, anti-racist, feminist, lesbian and gay and anti-disablist literatures explore how political movements had addressed the politics of 'belonging'. It is beyond the scope of this inquiry to embark on a full review of literature relevant to this subject. I offer this section to demonstrate how I engaged critically with concepts that were embedded in my practice before my inquiry began, and that played a significant part throughout my inquiry.

#### *Feminist standpoint on belonging*

Feminist writing - and in particular black feminist writing - has identified 'belonging' as a mixed blessing. Those who are on the margins may experience a pull towards the appearance of belonging, represented by the life style of those who inhabit the mainstream (hooks 1990). External forms of relationship may be mistaken for the quality of belonging with which they are associated in cultural representations. This distinction between desire and representations of its fulfilment opens a space for the experience of 'yearning' as potential for radical possibility (hooks 1984), rather than as evidence of deficit. As I discovered in my inquiry, when experiencing loss it is easy to confuse external

representation of relationships with the reality, to allow desire for belonging to lead to idealised perception, and to forget that 'belonging' cannot be guaranteed.

Black feminist political writing asserts the need for locations from which to affirm and to nurture subjectivity:

*That space in the margin which is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonised/ coloniser.*

Hooks 1990:152

However sites of affirmation of belonging based on shared identity become degenerative when confused with sites of radical coalition that require working together across different identities (Reagon 1983). In this case sophisticated skills are needed for building sufficient common ground to sustain coalition work, without compromising identity, political stance or beliefs (Albrecht and Brewer 1990). These skills have been developed and named 'transversal politics' by feminists working across ethnic, national and religious divides (Cockburn 1998, 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997, 1999).

But what of feminists working as change agents in organisations whose values they do not share? Where are the sites of 'creativity and power' to nurture the subjectivity of feminist consultants? These dilemmas are in part addressed through the notion of 'tempered radical', a term which refers to individuals who are committed to their organisations and also to a cause, community or ideology which may be at odds with the dominant culture of their organisation (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Tempered radicals must maintain their role as boundary crossers, able to maintain affiliation with both outside and inside; from this position belonging is a dangerous luxury that must be foregone. Maintaining ambivalence becomes the key to resisting co-option by the organisation, and ties with like-minded people outside are a source of sustenance. Affiliations are expressed through language, but shared language may rule out other forms of talk, thought or identity (1995: 592). Affiliation can keep passion alive but also presents challenges with ambivalent identity:

*Perhaps a tempered radical can never go home to one community and identity or another; tempered radicals are often lonely.*

1995:591

In the previous cycles of inquiry contributors to interview discussions suggested that

ambivalence presented challenges for maintaining trust within relationships of affiliation and coalition. In the case studies that follow I explore how these issues arose for me in my consultancy role and relationships (chapters 9 -11) and in chapter 12 I conceptualise these issues further.

The feeling of 'un/belonging' which was my starting point in this chapter both signposted my need for 'home base' and challenged my conception of its possibility. Towards the end of this inquiry track I began to identify more strongly with 'yearning' as a generative state of being (hooks 1991) and to link this to early feminist research on representations of women's desire (Coward 1984). Feminist writing I have cited is concerned with addressing the desire and the needs associated with 'yearning' to 'belong' from a political perspective which calls into question the ways in which desire is defined and the assumptions that desires can be fulfilled. Attachment research and relational psychology are concerned with the associated psychodynamic.

### *Lesbian feminist standpoint*

Feminist standpoint theory suggests that analyses from the perspective of lesbian lives contribute insights not visible from within heterosexual culture (Harding 1991: 253). Several of these insights relate to findings of the first two tracks of this inquiry and to core themes of this thesis. The first of these is that from a lesbian standpoint one sees women in relation to other women - or at least not only in relation to men and family (1991: 253). Harding quotes Zimmerman who argues that 'lesbians brought female bonding to the centre of feminist discourse, and now most feminists see women in relation to other women' (Zimmerman 1991). From this perspective she argues that women's valuing of each other and loving and caring relationships become more visible as a bedrock for social activism for women (Aptheker 1989 p. 93, cited by Harding 1991, p. 257); the lives and social contribution of single women assume a value lacking in heterosexual culture:

*Looking at the world from the perspective of many lesbians' lives today brings into sharp relief the pains, pleasures, and achievements of single women's lives.*  
(Harding 1991)

I drew from this standpoint to sustain the sense of generative connection that I had experienced and to engage critically with the conceptual lens I had been using. This lens



offered an affirming propositional and political frame for my experience of separation from my female partner, from which I was able to critically engage with the attachment lens from which I had drawn to make sense of my experience of loss.

### *The Attachment Lens*

Key concepts drawn from attachment research had been part of my sense making framework for several years before I began this inquiry. I had co-facilitated a training group for the Centre for Attachment Based Psychodynamic Psychotherapy for a year. During this time my co-facilitator and I explored uses of attachment concepts within our group facilitation. I had also, with encouragement from my friends and colleagues at the Centre, used these concepts to make sense of significant experiences of loss in my personal relationships. My use of attachment concepts had taken on a meaning from these living relationships, and from the practice and research produced by my colleagues (Southgate 1996; 2001).

Further, it felt to me as if our way of relating in some sense modelled attachment as an active process rather than a state of being which is 'given' (Heard and Lake 1997). As part of my inquiry we drew from their research to conceptualise our interactions as ways of 'doing attachment'. In this research intersubjective relationships are conceptualised as taking place within an attachment space, which may take a variety of different forms of secure or insecure attachment. The quality of this space determines capacity for generative or degenerative relationships (Southgate 1996). We arrived at a description that suggested that within the attachment space created through our relationship we shared and made sense of current concerns, testing the concepts we were using and creating new thinking. As in my inquiry track 2, doing inquiry created a particular quality of connection, which combined acceptance of separateness with belonging.

Through engaging with the attachment research literature I set out to explore whether 'attachment' adequately described the quality of connection that generated 'belonging' and agency in my inquiry.

Attachment theory was first developed by Bowlby (1988) in the post war period (Holmes 1993). His research demonstrated traumatic effects for small children of separation from their caregivers during hospital stays and in their experiences of evacuation. It resulted in changed practices in childcare and was used to justify social policies designed to keep women with young children at home and out of the employment. As a result his work is

associated with anti-feminist measures to shore up traditional gender roles; the emphasis he gave to the need for support to caregivers has been lost.

Attachment researchers assert that 'secure attachment' is a fundamental human need (Ainsworth 1982; Bowlby 1988; Maine 1999). Key concerns are the development of our capacity to form and to sustain satisfactory relationships. These capacities are said to be central to the health and well being of humans - and indeed other species - throughout the life span; they relate to our ability to function in the full range of our roles as caregivers dependants in family, professional, community, and public lives.

Current research is mainly concerned with clinical applications, and is only beginning to acknowledge that development and use of these capacities are shaped by political and social relationships (de Zulueta 1993; Kraemer and Roberts J. 1996; Marris 1996). Feminist critiques criticise the attachment frame for idealising the relationship between mother and child, and point out that Bowlby's theory has been used against women who challenge traditional motherhood (Burman 1994). Bowlby's research did claim that children needed a consistent attachment figure; due to the prevailing sociocultural and political culture at the time this was taken to mean mothers staying at home. Further research however demonstrated that the attachment figure did not have to be the mother but could be another person or a group of people.

Many of the concepts of attachment theory do resonate strongly with my felt experience. In this inquiry track I have mapped and critiqued these concepts and my use of them.

### *Key concepts in attachment theory*

The 'secure base' is a key concept in attachment thinking. It was developed to describe the bond between young children and their caregivers (Ainsworth 1982, Bowlby 1979) but also refers to qualities sought by adults in their intimate relationships (Bowlby 1988; Heard and Lake 1997; Holmes 1993). Secure base is a particular kind of attachment space; it describes the 'ambience created by the attachment figure for the attached person' when this provides safety and security, and offers a springboard for curiosity and exploration (Ainsworth 1982, Holmes 1993). In this sense it is similar to the feminist concepts of 'home base' (Reagon 1983) and of locations for nurturing subjectivity (hooks 1991). Home base is a space for nurturing and affinity where the emphasis is on shared values and empathy; it as a safe space to go out from. However it cannot replace the

necessity of forging political alliances in which political differences have to be addressed and common ground built. The concept acknowledged the special skills and challenges associated with working in alliance, as well as the need for a sense of nurturing based on shared identity and/or politics. Similarly, black feminists have asserted their need for spaces that nurture subjectivity through affirming their culture and identity (hooks 1991).

The concept of 'secure base' has served as an important metaphor for me to express what I have lacked in times of felt insecurity. I used it during this inquiry as a referent to the positive aspects of the relationship I had lost and to qualities for which I was seeking. Within my consultancy I used it to refer to qualities which I sought to offer and which I hoped to receive from colleagues or peers. Through my inquiry, I have come to understand secure base as something to be co-created, a dynamic concept rather than a stable condition that could be 'found' or 'provided'. As in attachment research, I use it to signal a state of inner being created through reciprocal interaction between two subjects (Rutter 1981). This insight and shift in stance from a quest to find a secure base to acceptance that a secure base has to be made and maintained in a relational context, is similar to the shift to which some of the contributors to my interviews referred in different ways. Contributor C for example described how she worked to shift her clients expectations that she nurture them, and her own habitual nurturing response, in order to enable them to develop their own leadership qualities. I explored a similar dynamic in an interaction with F and in my case studies will explore this dynamic further in relation to colleagues and clients.

Attachment researchers make a fundamental distinction between 'secure' and 'anxious' attachment, and see the latter as the precursor of developmental difficulty. Bowlby understood in/secure attachment to be a result of patterns of interaction of the child with her caregivers. Patterns characterised by a care giver who is responsive and has the capacity for attunement and 'secure holding', are associated with children who have capacities for self-reflection, and ability to make meaning through narrative of her experience (Holmes 1993). These interactions, and the meaning made of them by the recipient of care, are summarised in 'internal working models', templates of relationship which are formative throughout adult life. However while early years and environment are formative, they are not definitive. The adult capacity to change and shape the quality of our attachments is central.

The concept of 'moments of meeting' provides one mechanism for 'updating' internal

working models of attachment, through reciprocal interaction. In my inquiry tracks 1 and 2 I identified shifts in patterns of relationship and in consciousness which I associated with a greater sense of agency. In a later chapter I turn to feminist relational psychoanalysis to develop this discussion within my consultancy practice (chapter 12).

The focus on narrative in attachment research opens up ground for a range of developmental and organisational interventions concerned with enabling people to come to terms with change in personal, institutional and organisational settings. Agency is asserted and preserved through capacity to make meaning, in the development of new narrative, in the most challenging of circumstance. While internal working models play a part in shaping narrative, they can in turn be shaped. Research into how adults construct new narratives in ways which challenge and 'update' mental models contributes to understanding developmental shifts. These concepts offer scope for working in depth using autobiographical awareness and action inquiry (Marshall 1999; Torbert 1991).

### *Gendering Attachment*

Women have traditionally been seen as the primary source of secure attachment, as mothers, as lovers, sisters, daughters, colleagues, friends and wives. Feminist writings have exposed the extent of hidden care that women provide – in the home and in local communities - and its still unacknowledged economic and social value (Campbell 1996). Feminist organisation research suggests that women managers and leaders in organisations are still widely expected to provide for attachment needs from within traditionally defined roles as nurturers (Graves Dumas 1985; Wajman 1998). Women, however, are less likely to receive the quality of care that they are expected to give either in the home or in organisations where they work (Campbell 1996).

The need for a secure base is likely to be felt particularly acutely by those whose subjectivity and identity is not represented positively in predominant cultures. Images of financial, domestic or other forms of security may feed a sense of inadequacy for those who do not have access to them or the resources to protect them from the material effects of economic uncertainty (Marris 1996). The desire for refuge from uncertainty may be experienced as a deep yearning for 'home base', for a location of belonging - a yearning that may prove dangerous if confused with an actual location, rather than a quality of interaction. As I show in my third case study women in positions of power are often the recipients of these longings (chapter 12).

A feminist approach to attachment research would move away from generic and universalising references to 'secure attachment' and focus on the variety of social, organisational and domestic relationships within which women and men offer and find an attachment base. Comparative research identifies culture and gender difference in attachment patterns (de Zulueta 1993). An attachment lens could contribute to understanding of expectations expressed by men and women towards of women managers in organisations.

Some practitioners draw from attachment theory to make a case for designing organisational environments to sustain secure attachment behaviours within peer relationships, leadership and management practices (Byng-Hall 1995). Policy makers and politicians are beginning to draw from attachment research to advocate social responsibility for addressing these questions (Kraemer and Roberts 1996). However with few exceptions this research rarely addresses the gender politics of attachment (Campbell 1996).

Attachment concepts used creatively and with political judgement may be useful in lending authority to interventions designed to promote more recognition of women's needs for affirmation as autonomous, creative and inter-dependent human beings. They might help in sustaining spaces of radical openness, within which women and men might nurture and regenerate each other (hooks 1991). Interventions would need to address, validate and sustain the variety of life-enhancing connections and relationships created by women in relation to women and to men, and the ways these are represented symbolically. Feminist organisation consultants and researchers have a role to play here and may themselves find attachment concepts useful, as I have done, to more adequately sustain themselves.

## Conclusion

I have established through this inquiry into 'un/belonging and yearning' that there is a correlation between my ability to do creative work and my need for a positive self-sense that is rooted and sustained in generative connection. This correlation resonates with attachment theory's concept of secure base, of attachment space, which is created and sustained in inter-subjective spaces. However it also resonates with feminist research into

women's need for a 'home base' and black women's need for spaces for 'nurturing subjectivity'.

Attachment takes many forms, some of which are constantly eroded by negative images, social and organisational practices and policies. I have used this inquiry to identify and develop practices which sustained a generative sense of connection, which I have called belonging. These issues are at the core of my professional and personal well being and must therefore be at the centre of my inquiry.

In the case studies that follow I explore how this 'yearning' was enacted in my consultancy relationships, with generative and degenerative effects, and how women's need for affirmation was enacted between women in the mainstream and on the margins. In this chapter I have referred to feminist research into women's connected knowing (Belenky 1986; Clinchy 1996) to conceptualise ways of knowing the other within intersubjective relationships. In the chapters that follow I draw from feminist relational theory to conceptualise the intersubjective dynamics between women within my consultancy projects.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'mourning cycle' was developed to describe the process of grieving in response to bereavement. It is conceived of as a process of recovery to loss, a repair cycle for broken attachment. It could apply to recovery from loss associated with any kind of trauma or change (Bowlby/Southgate in Southgate 1996).

<sup>2</sup> The issues arising from this dispute are the subject of my inquiry in Case Study 1, Chapter 10