# Commentary Series

# Challenging Partnerships: Sustaining women's collaborative relationships in changing business and political environments

# Margaret Page

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**Note**

This Commentary is published as one of a series of reports on women's organisations in the UK Voluntary Sector. The series provides a statistical and qualitative overview of women's leadership and participation in public life and civil society.

This report is published to help inform a conference on Researching the Women's Voluntary Sector on 28 May 2002. The conference is the outcome of a partnership with the Women's Resource Centre that focused on women's organisations in London.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senior managers, practitioners and users of public, community and voluntary sector services are currently struggling to develop effective partnership working within increasingly challenging political and organisational environments. Women's organisations face specific challenges to represent their sector and issues effectively within these partnerships

This research report explores and theorizes the specific challenges experienced by women who came together from different countries, organisations and sectors to create new methods for mainstreaming women's equality and for sustaining women in leadership roles.

It offers:
• An approach for supporting partnerships and collaborations between women and between women and men across organisations and sectors;

• Methods for facilitating collaboration and learning within and across organisational boundaries.

The research was conducted through action inquiry and based on consultancy practice. Through the research practical methods were developed for facilitating learning between diverse individuals from different countries, organisations and sectors, and for sustaining them as they implemented new practice within their organisations. This report introduces a conceptual framework for effective working within partnerships and across organisational boundaries and describes the methods and associated skills that were developed.

This report will be of interest to action researchers and practitioners in women's organisations and within the wider voluntary sector. It will also be of use to women and men who are seeking more effective ways of working with diversity in the context of multi organisational, cross sectoral or transnational partnerships.

**About the Researcher**

Dr Margaret Page is an experienced organisation consultant and action researcher. She developed this research at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, Bath University, where she received her PhD.

In her consultancy she facilitates experiential, practice based learning in order to effect personal, professional and organisational development and change. Her special research interest is in exploring the specific issues which arise in work based relationships and collaborations across differences of identity, culture, professional role, or sector.

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'The point is to change the world, not only to study it' (Stanley 1990: 15).

**Who should read this publication?**

This research publication offers a framework for naming and theorising the methods and skills needed to support exchange of learning, development and implementation of new practice across organisational boundaries. It will be of interest to women and men who are action researchers and practitioners, who are involved in partnership or collaborative work relationships, and is of direct relevance to women and those managing and supporting women in organisations.

'Partnership' is a word that is used in many different contexts, and carries negative as well as positive associations. In this publication I use it loosely to refer to collaboration on joint projects between individuals from different organisations. These partnerships may be made on the basis of choice or be entered into because they are required. They may concern widely differing organisations, sectors or individuals. The challenges and methods I am going to explore concern building and sustaining relationships between diverse partners in order to achieve jointly held objectives. They are about enabling diverse individuals to learn from each other, develop and implement new practice in challenging environments.

The research maintains that building partnership between women poses specific challenges and requires specific methods and skills. It also asserts that these methods and skills are widely applicable and will be of value to women and men who are seeking to work in inter-organisational partnerships.

The framework draws together key concepts from widely divergent research sources and communities of practice. These are feminist organisations studies and psychoanalysis, attachment research, and systemic psychoanalysis. The approach focuses on understanding how power is enacted and constructed in relationships between individuals, and how to facilitate collaboration and learning across differences of power within and across organisational boundaries.

In this publication I present a selection of findings from my doctoral research, *Feminist Collaboration: Relationships between Women across Political, Business and Intersubjective Worlds*. I aim to:
- provide a brief overview of the research and action research methodology (chapter 2)
- describe the challenges met in sustaining effective partnerships and collaborations in changing political and organisational or business environments

- illustrate the consultancy methods developed for supporting partnership and collaboration between women (chapters 3 and 4)
- provide a conceptual framework to show how these methods can be used more widely to support partnerships between organisations and sectors.

A full copy of the research, or individual chapters, can be downloaded from the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP). These pages are on the University of Bath, School of Management, CARPP website pages for doctoral theses. The address is www/bath.ac.uk/carpp/MargaretPage/titlepage/htm

## Breaking silence: the research context

Very little has been written about relationships between women in mixed gender organisations. In contrast there is a substantial research literature about gender difference in leadership and management, and a smaller literature about leadership and management of women's organisations.

My research aims to develop a language and conceptual frame for understanding the challenges of sustaining effective partnership and collaboration between women, and for developing practical methods and skills for addressing them. It offers and is based upon direct experience of the challenges of sustaining effective collaboration between women working towards equality in mixed or women only environments. Many of the challenges experienced arose from the lack of research documenting and naming them, and the silence in management and organisation development literature around the issues.

These challenges were highlighted in my discussions with research participants, many of whom felt that any discussion of difficulty in women to women dynamics, might imply that women in some way compared unfavourably to men.

My research aims to make a case for taking these challenges seriously as resource and management issues. It does not intend to make gender comparisons, or to make judgements about the respective merits of women's or men's leadership or management styles.

Writing about this subject has felt like breaking a taboo. My research subject never fails to trigger lengthy animated discussion between women to whom I describe it, and an outpouring of stories about relationship breakdown, feelings of betrayal and unresolved conflict. The challenge has been finding a way of putting pen to paper that does not reproduce stereotypes about conflicts between women, or increase women's vulnerability to criticism for being somehow lacking or inadequate, as individuals or in their organisations.

## Challenging partnerships: the political context:

Discussion with women active in the women's voluntary sector suggests that keeping silent about these problems is no longer an option[1].

Funding organisations now increasingly insist on inter-organisational partnership to access their programmes. These partnerships require women's organisations and individual women and men in government, funding and service organisations to build effective collaborative relationships to take forward their objectives, including delivery of equalities agendas.

Women and women's organisations who are unable to establish and sustain these relationships are in danger of losing out on current opportunities to access funding, and to influence policy and funding agendas.

Research on gender difference in approaches to leadership often claims that women prefer or enact collaborative approaches to leadership, in contrast to the more top down male identified approaches (Page 1999). This research is contested: some studies conclude that women exhibit different ways of leading to men *in their actual practice,* some that they do not[2].

Some Studies have shown women more likely to describe themselves as transformational leaders, using interactive participatory leadership styles, and men more likely to describe themselves as transactional leaders, using a more top down style (Rosener 1990).

Collaborative work between women in independent and 'mainstream' organisations and government has always been a core element of feminist organising at local national and international level. Through these alliances and partnerships women have developed new policy instruments, achieved significant policy change, and developed services to met women's needs. For example the Global Platform for Action signed by governments at the UN fourth world conference on women was a testimony to the power of these political alliances and to the relationships built between key individuals within organisations and governments locally and globally (Page 1996).

Many women's organisations have run successful capacity building projects in partnership with women's organisations in other countries, within Europe or countries in the South. These projects have developed innovative practice and strengthened links between women in different regions and countries.

In contrast recent research on collaboration between UK women's voluntary organisations confronts us with a different picture. In this research women active in women's organisations were interviewed in 1996 and 2002 about resource and capacity building challenges their organisations were experiencing (Riordan 2002). The second set of these interviews referred to partnership work as a major area of challenge, and Local Strategic

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[1] This introduction draws from discussion with members of the Programme Advisory Group to the project of Centre for Institutional Studies, University of East London, and the London Women's Resource Centre, while planning the dissemination of research publications in this series.
[2] See Eagly and Johnson (1995) for a summary of the literature; also de Matteo (1994); Ferrario (1991); Still (1994). For a full summary and overview of this research debate see my research report *Compassionate Leadership, a question of gender?* (Page 1999).

Partnerships (LSPs)[3] were identified as a key area. Involvement in LSPs was an opportunity to access resources, and to educate and influence public sector policy agendas, but a common theme was of difficulties in taking up these opportunities, some of which were due to unresolved conflicts between women's organisations in an increasingly competitive environment.

Women's organisations are increasingly locating themselves within the wider voluntary and community sector, rather than any specific women's movement or sector. Within the current political environment funding for women's organisations is rarely available. In this context the skills and experience developed by women and women's organisations should place them in a strong position to influence the political agendas. Within the sector however, recent research suggests that women's collaboration badly needs sustaining, both within and between organisations, and that this requires specialist skills and resources (Riordan 1999, 2002).

In this publication I have selected from my research findings in order to do two things:

• To offer a framework for understanding the nature of the challenges to and skills needed to support women's collaboration across organisational boundaries within the current political context;
• To demonstrate that these skills and challenges are more widely applicable to cross boundary work in the current context.

My findings are intended to be read and used alongside research demonstrating the effects of lack of resources and infrastructure of women's organisations (Scott 2002; Riordan 1999). As I will demonstrate, these scarce resources set the context for the challenges I explore and the methods I develop to tackle them.

My findings assert that the challenges experienced by women working in partnership require specific methods and skills. The conceptual framework developed through working with women is of value and relevance to women and men taking on leadership roles in the current political context.


**What brought me to this research? The personal context**

This research grows out of a history of active involvement in the women's movement. In this section I summarise my story as an illustration of the changing roles other feminists and I have taken in order to continue to work on women's equality issues. It provides contextual grounding for this research and for its focus on partnership and collaboration between women.

In 1996 Jane Grant, Siobhan Riordan and I began to meet as researchers concerned to support women's organisations and women's organising. We each felt committed to addressing the dearth of research literature on women's organisations, or on the political or organisational challenges

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[3] Local Strategic Partnerships are local authority led co-ordinating bodies for developing local services and for implementing Neighborhood Renewal Action Plans. They bring together public, voluntary and community, and business sectors and funding is available for facilitating participation by voluntary and community sector organisations.

experienced by women organising within or across mainstream and independent organisations.  Through our research group we formed our own alliance, to sustain each other as we worked through the rules and regulations of the academy to develop and disseminate our research.

During my inquiry I developed a methodology which grounded my approach to my inquiry subject in my consultancy practice and life experience.

My feminist activism began when I took part in socialist feminist campaigning and study groups in the 1970s and early 1980s. With other feminists who were part of the women's movement I chose employment positions in local authorities that allowed me to introduce feminist political analysis into my professional practice. After twelve years as a social worker, community worker, women's equality advisor, and a brief period as a manager, I took voluntary redundancy and began working as a freelance consultant.

Throughout this time women who were pursuing initiatives in or around local government sought to work in partnership to address inequality within public sector organisations and through them to improve the quality of women's lives (Maddock 1999).  They developed practices and policies to address inequalities arising from differences between women such as race, class, disability, and sexuality and discussed how these influenced access to political and organisational power.

During the 1990s I worked with newly emerging feminist organisations in Slovenia and Bulgaria, facilitating learning and exchange of practice with women's organisations in England.  As an independent researcher I took part in the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the parallel Forum for Non Governmental Organisations.

Between 1991 and 1995 I became increasingly determined to find ways of developing research which would document and strengthen feminist co-operation across organisational boundaries.  I raised funds for two research projects both of which concerned alliances between women in government and non governmental organisations in areas of practice with which I had been deeply engaged. The first with Italian co-researchers explored how women politicians, employees and independents worked through political structures to achieve change in policy and practice (Page and Lorandi 1992). The second analysed alliances between UK women in government and in non-governmental organisations at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Page 1996).

At the end of this research I was left with further questions about the challenges in women's working together which I felt I had still not articulated. I wanted to research the intersubjective dynamics between women in more depth.

My interest was fuelled by the urgency of discussion about this subject in one to one conversations and workshops where I presented the findings of my previous research. There was political risk involved, that in naming these difficulties I might undermine feminist endeavour in a political environment in which equal opportunities initiatives for women were already under attack.

However, I had abundant anecdotal evidence about women's difficulties in working together in organisational contexts and of how these were undermining individual women and the feminist collaboration which was needed in order to implement equalities initiatives.

I determined to address the lack of research focussing on women to women dynamics in organisational contexts, and to find ways of finding funding to do so. I drew up proposals for funded action research and over a two year period initiated exploratory discussions with potential clients and consultancy partners. These led to successful bids for two transnational partnership projects, neither of which included funded research time.

I decided to develop a research strand of my own that would be action orientated and draw from my consultancy projects. I approached Judi Marshall, who had written the first book about women managers - using the metaphor of 'travellers in a male world' (Marshall 1984), and whose approach to research as 'life process' seemed compatible to my own (Marshall 1999). In 1997 I signed up to the PhD programme with which she is associated at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP).

During the five years of my PhD research my inquiry became a powerful tool for professional and personal development. I developed a methodological framework that acknowledged and worked with the permeable boundaries between professional practice and other life experience, and integrated this with my consultancy practice with women. In the following section, I provide an overview of this overall inquiry.


**An overview of my inquiry**

It is beyond the scope of this publication to summarise the research from which the findings in this publication are drawn. This overview is offered for those readers who wish to situate this publication within the wider inquiry described in my thesis.

In my thesis I describe how my inquiry unfolded, and its impact within my life process. I trace parallels between themes identified in interviews with women working towards gender equality in organisations, and challenges that emerged in my life process and professional practice.

The first section of my thesis situates my inquiry in political and personal life context. 'Feminist action inquiry' methodology is introduced with its key epistemological concepts and practices and criteria for quality.

In the second section of my thesis I present findings from six discussions with women in different organisations and sectors about their interactions with women colleagues. I identify cross cutting patterns of experience, both positive and negative. The desires for recognition and for belonging, and how these were enacted between women in organisations, emerged as key themes. I discuss how to interpret these findings.

The third section of my thesis is made up of three case studies. They describe the methods I developed to facilitate learning and exchange

between women in the partnership projects, and to enable them to challenge gender power dynamics in their organisations.  Extracts from two of these case studies are presented in chapters 3 and 4 of this publication.

Finally I develop a conceptual framework that draws together key concepts from psychodynamic, organisational and feminist research sources. Through this framework I conceptualise key methodological challenges of partnership working within and across political and business environments.  I introduce this framework in chapter 5 of this publication.

Within my thesis I develop a political meta-commentary on my research and consultancy practice and draw out political and ethical dilemmas. In my conclusions and final reflections I draw together cross cutting themes that arose within different sections of my inquiry within my life process and consultancy practice.

In chapter 6 of this publication I close with final reflections on how to use this research to support partnership work and collaboration in the current context.

## 2.  FEMINIST ACTION INQUIRY

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

My research methodology drew from the principles of action inquiry and of feminist action research.  As my research developed, it became more integrated with my consultancy practice, offering spaces for reflection which enriched our working relationships and added new dimensions to our practice for colleagues clients and myself.

I have called my research methodology 'feminist action inquiry'. This methodology was not developed in advance, and then applied, but rather developed alongside my research.  While it is beyond the scope of this publication to describe this process, in this chapter I will describe my research practices and the key principles from which I drew.  In my case studies (chapters 3 and 4) I illustrate how I used them within my research.

### What is feminist action inquiry?

Action research does not offer a ready-made methodology, but rather a set of general principles.  It 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 (Reason and Bradbury 2001). 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.

Action inquiry is a specific form of action research (Marshall 1994, 1999; Torbert 1991, 2001). Through practices designed to facilitate observation of oneself in action, it aims to sharpen awareness of congruence or conflict between values and action. It can be practised individually and with others. In my case studies I illustrate the action inquiry practices I developed and integrated them into my consultancy practice.

As a feminist practitioner a core criteria of quality for my inquiry was to produce new knowledge that would sustain feminist practice. 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 different sense of myself in relation to others. This aspect has concerned both my personal and professional identities; it has been a means for me to assert the value of my consultancy within my professional field, and 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.

In the rest of this chapter I describe selectively the feminist action inquiry practices I developed and applied within my case studies. (For a full account, see chapter 2 of my thesis, Page 2001).

**My inquiry practices**

My case studies are selective accounts of an inquiry that explored women's experience of their professional relationships as they worked together within two international partnerships. Within these projects my inquiry activities consisted of cycles of action and reflection, undertaken on my own and with others over a period of three years. These activities took the following forms:
- Inquiry as life process: cycles of reflection on action through which I considered how I was taking up my role as feminist consultant on the project, and identity and accreditation issues which arose as I moved between business, feminist and political frames of reference
- Inquiry within my consultancy: cycles of reflection and action on my own and with colleagues to develop, test and enact the project methodology for transfer of learning
- Writing as inquiry: in the final phases of these projects I worked with colleagues to conceptualise the methods which we had developed for facilitating exchange and transfer of learning between partners; to draft the project publication; and to engage participants in discussion of how to represent the project 'product
- Crafting a case study for my doctoral thesis: drafting and working with feedback I sought ways of naming my inquiry activities and describing my inquiry process to others
- Producing edited versions of the case studies for this publication.

In their first phase my inquiries were practice based, intertwined with and adding richness to my consultancy activities.  They took the form of reflection undertaken on my own and discussions with colleagues, clients, partners, and practitioners outside the project. At the end of the consultancy projects, I sought and was given permission to tape record research discussions for use within my inquiry. These discussions opened up dialogue on a different level with clients and partners.

During the consultancy I kept journals tracking how I made sense of the dynamics of power and leadership on both the transnational and the local project. I recorded my reflections before and after working sessions, discussions with transnational partners and within the client organisation. I drew from these records selectively in order to illustrate the process of reflection that informed my analysis and practice throughout the consultancy project.

For each project I set out to write case studies that would 'tell the story' of completed consultancy interventions. In the process of writing, I found myself confronted with further questions, a Pandora's Box of uncomfortable feelings, and a strong desire to 'close the file'. I resisted this desire, fired by the conviction that many of the questions that confronted me were at the core of my feminist consultancy practice.

In the process of writing the case studies I became more interested in how my inquiries had informed my consultancy practice. In them I critically appraised how I had made sense of events and interactions at different stages of my research and how this changed as my analysis developed. I explored how these changes in my 'sense making' had shaped my consultancy interventions, and relationships with clients and colleagues. I asked:

> What had I learned about how my colleagues and clients understood gendered power, and how I had understood it in relation to them? What had I learned about the challenges of building an equal partnership, a 'coalition' between feminists in mainstream organisations? How did we negotiate issues of power, leadership and trust between ourselves? How would I now adjust my approach and methods?

In writing up a research project, it is seldom that the 'messiness' of research is described. The researcher, with her feelings and vulnerabilities, often edits herself out of the text presented to the reader. In my writing I struggled to keep myself in the frame - even when this conflicted with my image as a consultant of being 'in control'. My research process was neither smooth nor tidy; often 'life' changes intervened, crises interrupted my research, and plans had to be changed. I wrote these changes into my research, describing how my analysis and inquiry practices in my 'personal' life came to cross-fertilise my inquiry in other areas.

in the following extract form my thesis, I illustrate this process:

> In the process of my writing different voices emerged and jostled for position, each with their own story to tell and audiences to address.

The first voice spoke as a consultant, addressing an audience of clients and colleagues; she spoke in a language of roles, of tasks, of achievements, and was strongly disapproving of the second. The second voice spoke from my inner world, seeming to address an audience of intimate friends, speaking of passion, relationship and of identity between women. I had the sense sometimes that she had ambitions to be writing a novel, in contrast to a consultant's textbook. These two voices spoke from positions associated with the private world of women and the public spaces designed and defined by men. It has taken courage to keep the space open between them, in order to allow the third voice to emerge, narrator and holder of the vision for the overall case study. At points in the case study, I allow the first and second voices to 'take the microphone' to tell their story.

In writing this inquiry I recognised that an ability to work with these tensions creatively was the defining quality of my feminist consultancy. I sought to express them explicitly in the verbal content of this case study, in the sequencing of voices and narratives and their analysis, but also to convey their quality through your experience of reading the text.

As I began to write, the desire to engage more deeply with these different voices became stronger. I felt daunted and exhilarated - and alert to internal censors at work. Already they were gathering strength; and continuing with my inquiry felt increasingly dangerous and exposing. I wanted to speak with the voice of success, of achievement and adventure; but to acknowledge others too, and to speak of vulnerabilities and the darker side of women 's relationships. Somehow I must maintain the tension between the inner and outer world voices, using inquiry to keep the space open between them and to prevent one voice from drowning out the others (Page, 2001).

In writing this publication it was tempting to take the opportunity to edit my more subjective voice out of the picture. I have resisted this temptation in order to challenge the illusion that the researcher - or consultant - should have all the answers, and to assert the importance of acknowledging what we do not know as a first step towards partnership between consultant and client, conductor and participants in research.

## 3. CASE STUDY 1: THE COUNTRY OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP - ENABLING RECOGNITION BETWEEN WOMEN

### Introduction

Effective Local Partnerships (ELP) was a three-year European partnership project led by London Borough of Lewisham and funded by the European Commission[i]. The aim of ELP was to develop transferable methods for mainstreaming gender equality[4].

In this case study I explore the tensions I experienced as I moved between three different worlds: the organisations which sponsored ELP; my internal world of subjectivity, emotion and felt experience; and the project world created by women participating in ELP. I describe the challenges that arose for me from these tensions and how I negotiated and conceptualised them through my inquiry.

In the following sections I introduce the ELP project, describe my inquiry methodology for this case study, and introduce my inquiry findings.

### An Introduction to the Effective Local Partnerships (ELP) Project

*The ELP Project*

The ELP Project was funded by an EU programme designed to promote gender-mainstreaming projects. The project brought together organisations from different sectors and countries to develop practical methods for mainstreaming gender equality within their fields of policy and practice. Each national partner organisation in the transnational project was to work with local partners in their chosen field. In the transnational project, they would evaluate the methods they had developed, and select practices that might be 'transferable' to other contexts. Through a joint process of evaluation and piloting, the transnational partners would produce 'transferable tools for gender mainstreaming'. A full account of the project and of project results is given in the ELP publication (Page 2000)[5]

Partner organisations were selected by the London Borough of Lewisham and lead partners. They were: an Irish trade union centre for unemployed people; a Dutch provincial women's council; an Italian national public sector trade union federation. They worked at national, regional or local level on women's equality issues. All were new to the concept of 'gender

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[4] 'Gender Mainstreaming' is a term first introduced by the European Commission and is now widely used by development agencies and by national, local and regional governments. It has been promoted in Great Britain by the Equal Opportunities Commission and is defined by the European Commission as 'the systematic consideration of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men in all Community policies, at the point of planning, implementation and evaluation'.

[5] Available from Mpage@maya-consultancy.demon.co.uk

mainstreaming' and wanted to use it to build on their existing work.

The lead partner was responsible for reporting to the project funders within the European Commission and for project management and co-ordination. She employed three consultants to support her: a project manager, based in Italy; an evaluator based in Ireland; and a methodology consultant, myself.

In my role as 'methodology consultant', I co-designed the project proposal, with the project leader, and during the project worked closely with her and the other consultants to ensure project objectives were met. I designed and facilitated transnational meetings of partners. In the final year I took the lead role in conceptualising the ELP methodology and in writing the publication that was the final product of the project.

Transnational project activities consisted of working sessions for representatives of partner organisations. These sessions took place twice a year for three years and were hosted by each partner in turn.

*Partnership challenges*

There were significant challenges in building an effective partnership that could deliver project objectives. These concerned:
• finding ways of working which honoured diversity between partners
• building sufficient common ground to work with, and
• finding ways of representing the project, which gained institutional support.

Partners were varied in the sectors in which they were active and in their approaches to women's equality work. Individuals who took part in transnational activities also varied in levels of experience of transnational working. All except one were women and all except one were salaried.

In facilitating the transnational meetings my colleagues and I set out to build a dynamic 'learning' partnership within which partners would move beyond information exchange into joint conceptual thinking and development of new practice. This was more ambitious than the usual EU transnational project meetings where partners simply reported on their country-specific local practice.

At the end of the project translating the complex process of exchange and learning into the 'product' required by the European Commission posed significant challenges. We initiated a joint process to write the project publication and to conceptualise the project methodology and were able to show how our methodology was based on the action learning principle of learning through cycling between reflection and action (McGill and Beaty 1992). Our 'product' became our action learning 'process' - a method for gender mainstreaming through 'learning partnership'.

In the project evaluation and in discussions at transnational meetings participants identified results that included personal and professional development as well as organisational initiatives. These are described in the sections below.

There was no doubt that project objectives were met both by partners within their local contexts and within the transnational project. However, despite this, it was not so easy to establish legitimacy for project achievements.

The organisational environments in which participants worked increasingly favoured short-term results and did not prioritise women's equality in either their policy work or their resourcing strategies. Within the European Commission gender equality work was increasingly under scrutiny and political attack. This was a challenging environment in which to work and created pressures on relationships within the ELP project.

In my inquiry I tracked how these challenges impacted on relationships between women within the project, and how they were enacted between myself and the project leader. In the rest of this chapter I select from this material to describe how I worked with these tensions, and how I tried to develop and maintain a space within which women were able to value, sustain and learn from each other.

## Case study findings: methods for building and sustaining learning between diverse partners

*The power of women affirming women's work*

The ELP project ended with an evaluation day that I helped to facilitate. In this section I draw from discussions during this day to illustrate and explore the qualities of the learning environment created which enabled partners to develop and act as gender mainstreaming change agents. Participants gave permission for me to draw from their discussions for this inquiry.

At the beginning of the day participants were invited to share:

> *Something that is different for me as a result of my involvement in ELP; something I'm going to miss; and something from ELP I will take with me into the future (ELP evaluator).*

In response, they spoke of experiences that had been transformational at personal and at professional levels. Partners and consultants stated that participating had in some way enabled them to flourish.

> *I will miss, and take with me into the future the country of ELP (Project Manager).*

The positive qualities of this 'country' emerged in discussion: they concerned the environment in which they had been working, and the relationships they had made with each other. They had experienced their collaboration as challenging and mutually affirming; they valued it being international and diverse, and its political qualities, involving knowledge of the power and role of women's organisations.

Partners referred to the value of the relationships they had formed as a key

aspect of the method we had developed to sustain their work:

> *The personal and professional relationships; the method of work – in groups instead of as individuals, stopping and reflecting, affirming and evaluating; the time out in different surroundings where we became very creative together (ELP partner).*

They said that they had gained a sense of personal self worth, and a sense of the value of their work in the public sphere. One partner, a highly successful lawyer and Member of Parliament, stated:

> *I have never had so much praise for what I do! (ELP partner ).*

Yet these partners were not in any sense lacking in self-esteem or competence, or at the beginning of their career. They were in most cases highly experienced and skilled professionals who simply did not get a sense of affirmation for their work on women's equality and who as individuals continued to be vulnerable to being devalued in their work environments. Nor had they had opportunities to reflect on their work in the company of other women who shared their commitment to women's equality.

Within ELP their relationships had bridged organisational divisions and moved between personal and professional worlds. It seemed that the sense of valuing and of being valued which partners and consultants gave each other in relationships which were built during working sessions, was precious and not something found elsewhere.

> *Inspiration, affirmation that what you are doing is OK; the knowledge that this way of working has enormous value (*ELP partner).

During the three years that partners and consultants worked together we had moved from experiencing ourselves as a disparate set of individuals from widely differing partner organisations and countries, to being citizens of a 'country' that we had created together. Participants agreed that this 'country' had been a space for reflection on action, for mutual inspiration and sustaining through exchange of good practice, for generating new ideas and practice, and for personal transformation (Page 2000b). The relationships and the method seemed to have enabled us to create an affirming and transforming environment that partners internalised to sustain personal life changes. Moreover we had succeeded in creating tools for partners and others to use in their gender mainstreaming work in organisations.

In the next section I explore how we created this environment, the relational skills we developed and used, and what my role was in the process.

*From transfer of learning to cross fertilisation: Building learning partnership between diverse partners*

Transnational meetings took place twice a year over the three-year period of the project. I designed them as working sessions, aiming to meet the project milestones and to stimulate transnational exchange. It was not enough for partners to report on results achieved in their country contexts; the added value of the transnational partnership had to be experienced, articulated and demonstrated.

Partners needed to feel motivated to work together and to do so at high intensity in the short time available for each transnational meeting. These took place over two to three days, twice a year. At the first meeting differences seemed as wide as similarities.

In the account below, I describe some of these challenges, and how I worked with them:

- The Dutch partners hosted the first transnational meeting. As we gathered on the first evening I became aware of how my perceptions of participants were already influencing how I was relating to them. It felt essential to find a way to acknowledge our differences and what they represented to each of us, in order to find common ground.

- At the meeting the following day I decided to work from differences as well as similarities in order to avoid the trap of building false consensus. I wanted to surface unspoken assumptions between partners about unequal power and access to resources, and to engage in a dialogue about how these differences would need to be addressed within the partnership.

- I invited partners to explore what was unique to each and suggested this would be a starting point for joint work to develop new approaches to gender mainstreaming. This seemed affirming to partners and I spent more time than planned encouraging partners to name differences in their approaches.

- During the session we acknowledged that partners were diverse in ideologies, sector, organisation and country, and that this was likely to affect their approach to the project and the partnership. They differed in the amount of power they had as individuals as well as organisations, and were operating with different models of how to achieve change. They spoke different languages and had different levels of experience of transnational working. More importantly, as trade unionists, community activists, members of political parties, and local authority advisors, they were each identified with a context-specific history of equalities work in which were embedded beliefs about how to bring about change.

- In the course of discussion, partners acknowledged that in forming a transnational partnership they were making collaborative relationships with agencies that they might not have considered possible or useful in their local contexts.

- Partners' understanding of the core concepts of 'gender mainstreaming' as well as of 'partnership' differed, and was informed by historical, political and sectoral context as well as organisational politics.

- Once we had named differences between partners we struggled to arrive at a common understanding of gender mainstreaming. With the help of the evaluator we drew up a list that encompassed approaches unique to each partner. This encompassed 'top down' policy led approaches of local authorities and trade unions, and 'bottom up' activist driven

approaches of women's and community based organisations.

- In agreeing this framework, partners moved away from advocating their own approach as more legitimate than others' and recognised the need for multiple strategies to achieve the necessary changes. They described this as a need for both 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches.

- In adopting a common framework, which included each partner's definitions of good practice, partners made a statement that affirmed the value of each other's approach. The organisations and sectors to which each partner organisation belonged, 'government', 'trade unions', 'community or voluntary sector', or 'women's' organisations', no longer represented potential opponents who were operating from different ideological standpoints but had become potential allies enacting complementary strategies for achieving common goals.

The **naming of different approaches** to gender mainstreaming, followed by **acknowledgement of the value of each approach** within the context in which it had been developed, enabled participants to take a first step towards developing a shared 'country' within they would move on to develop a common language.

Through interaction at transnational meetings, partners **built relationships** that cut through divisions arising from their different positioning. Through this process they began to **reach a new understanding** of how to become effective actors within the policy process. They could see that each used the political power to which they had access from the position in which they were situated. As they came to understand each other's perspectives and approaches they began to **see potential** in their local contexts **for cross-sectoral influence** and to **build alliances** with partners which they had not previously considered.

In their reports to transnational meetings partners stated that these new relationships had enabled them to extend their influence, and credibility. A process of cross-fertilisation was occurring. Partners were influencing each other, trying out aspects of each other's approaches, and adding to their repertoire of skills.

This process did not follow the rather mechanistic plan for 'exchange of gender mainstreaming methods' drawn up for the funding proposal, but seemed to be taking place spontaneously. A process of cross-identification was occurring, as a matrix of relationships developed within the partnership. We swapped recipes, holiday plans, news of children and of significant others, and encouraged each other through relationship breakdown and separation, health difficulties, and other life crises. This process was tracked by the project evaluator and is documented in her comments in the project publication (Page 2000).

This process was far from harmonious. Participation was affected by culture difference and language barriers, by political and organisational contexts specific to each partner, and by power relationships within country partner participants.

As project objectives were met through transnational working sessions there could be little flexibility in how these meetings were run. Funding was conditional on demonstrating that project objectives had been met on an annual basis. Under these conditions tensions were high; these were managed within my consultancy sessions with the project leader and within the consultants' team.

At a meeting of partner organisations in the second year of the project, we reflected on the methods that we had used to facilitate exchange between partners. Partners stated that as a result of these methods they had felt that discussions had been unusually rich and valuable compared to their experience of other projects. As a result of their learning from this experience Dutch and Italian partners had modified their local practice, making their local conferences more interactive, building time for reflection into their meetings, focussing more on context-specific differences between participants and setting time aside to jointly evaluate results. Visits to partner organisations had also generated a sense of potential to introduce changes. As a result of their visit to the lead partner organisation, Dutch partners initiated a diversity project to increase participation of black women in local politics.

However, partners' shift towards development of new practice through dialogue and exchange of context-specific knowledge was not a shift made once and for all. Participants did not arrive at a given insight and then apply it. Working in environments of flux and change, they reported a process at transnational meetings that had to be constantly re-affirmed and re-tested over time. Their process of learning and the development of new knowledge through exchange proved to be fluid and not fixed, more of a moving back and forth which had to be sustained, and developed.

At the meeting in the second year of the project I initiated discussion with partners about the nature of their exchange at transnational meetings. With help from the evaluator we arrived at an account of this exchange as a process of 'cross-fertilisation' rather than transfer. Partners referred to an exercise I had designed at the previous transnational meeting to enable them to help each other identify elements of transferable good practice. During this exercise partners had worked with partners from at least one other country. It had become apparent how difficult it was for partners to individually identify what might be of practical value to each other or to communicate how they worked to other partners. I had asked them to select aspects of each other's work that they had found valuable, and to make commitments to help each other develop new approaches based on this 'exchange' of practice. In feedback on the exercise they indicated that questions from partners working in different contexts had given them new insight into their own approaches and a new sense of the value of what they were doing.

The importance of 'mirroring' as a consultancy method, of reflecting back to women what they have achieved, was highlighted by ELP partners and consultants. Both Italian and Dutch partners began to integrate regular time out within their local project meetings to reflect on project results. The Dutch ELP partner stated emphatically that women consistently underestimate what they have achieved and need help to pause and 'see' the results and quality

of their work.  Taking time out to reflect on achievements was modelled by the method I developed for transnational project work and partners reported that as a result of experiencing its value in transnational meetings they had incorporated it into their practice within their local partnerships.

During the project we moved from a process orientated to producing 'transfer of learning' to a process which allowed spontaneity of learning to take place within a matrix of relationships built on shared political commitment of women's equality. In the final year of the project we had to find a presentational form for the process we had experienced which validated it within the product-orientated cultures of the organisations sponsoring the work. The challenge was to demonstrate that this process was indeed a new 'product' which would meet the requirements of the funder.

*From women's knowing to public knowledge*

At the beginning of year three I was given lead responsibility for the task of writing the ELP publication, the final product of the transnational partnership. Funders, partner organisations and consultants had a stake in our producing a definitive ELP recipe for gender mainstreaming.  This product was to provide evidence of added value that could justify the time and resources invested in ELP.

Partners wanted something tangible and simple which they could show and circulate; an example given by one partner was a credit card sized checklist for gender equalities work that had been produced by a similar European funded partnership.  There was a general feeling while local results were tangible and good the partnership had failed to produce the transferable good practice, which the project had promised.  Holding the lead responsibility for producing this, like a rabbit out of a hat, felt like a real challenge!

- It was as if our working methods were so embedded in the relationships we had created within ELP that it was difficult to see what was there – and difficult to believe it could be reproduced outside the relationships we had made within the project.

- I suggested that we might think of transnational meetings as a 'holding space' for partners, within which they had energised and re-motivated each other; and that the cross-fertilisation that had taken place through interactions at the sessions had inspired and encouraged them to develop their gender mainstreaming work and to produce results at local level.

- The 'products' of ELP were the working method we had used in the transnational partnership to sustain and generate gender mainstreaming initiatives carried out by partners, and the framework for gender mainstreaming which partners had drawn up and agreed at the end of the first year. The 'results' were activities and gender mainstreaming interventions taken by partners at local and national level:

- The ELP 'product' is a method for developing gender-mainstreaming

practice within a learning partnership, using a framework of core principles that can be adapted to local context by members of the partnership (Page 2000b).

- It was difficult to arrive at this description, which in retrospect seems so clear. In the anxiety-laden context of pressure to demonstrate product, we felt that our professional competence was at stake. Could we demonstrate that this project, on which we had build our professional relationships and staked shared passion and commitment, was worth something within the culture and priorities of her organisation?

## Conclusions

This case study is a cut down version of its original, which was written to illustrate how I used my inquiry to build an environment for learning between diverse partners in a women's equality project. In the full version I explored the somewhat painful tensions between shared political and individual organisational and business priorities, and how these were experienced by project partners and myself as consultant to the project.

No amount of skill can guarantee learning between diverse partners, or effective partnership. My intention here is to illustrate the challenges and how they were experienced and met within this particular project.

I explore and conceptualise further the methods and skills needed to meet these challenges in chapter 6 of this publication.

In the following I summarise my key learning points for building and sustaining effective 'learning' partnership from the full version of my case study:

*Learning points*

- Common ground between partners is not given, but has to be made
- Inviting partners to explore differences allows the unique contribution of each partner to be identified and valued
- Power and inequality between partners needs to be acknowledged and addressed
- Understanding the context in which each partner is working enables 'situated'[6] knowledge to emerge
- Sharing 'situated' knowledge enables 'cross fertilisation' between partners
- Through joint reflection on experience, learning and development takes place
- As relationships based on mutual affirmation are built, partners inspire and motivate each other to develop and test new practice

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[6] For more on 'situated knowledge' see chapter 6

- Partners bring to the partnerships a range of hopes, desires and fears arising from their experience within their 'home' work environments. These will need to be acknowledged and worked with within their relationships within the partnership
- Enabling learning between diverse partners is complex, challenging and needs skilled facilitation.

## Introduction

The Persephone Project was a transnational multi-sectoral partnership of organisations in five countries.  The project ran for three years and was part-funded by the European Commission. Its purpose was to develop a portfolio of change interventions, designed to attract and retain women in leadership.

Within the Project, partners, clients and myself made a number of assumptions concerning women's leadership, feminist collaboration, and trust.  This led to conflict which had to be addressed within the partnership project. In my inquiry I explored these assumptions and conflicts, identified similarities and differences between my own expectations and those of my clients and partners, and reflected on their implications for feminist collaboration and partnership practice.

In this chapter I have selected from my findings to illustrate how through my inquiry practices I explored and worked with challenges to leadership and collaboration within the partnership.

I begin with a brief overview of the Persephone project. The following two sections are concerned with how I worked with partnership and leadership challenges within the transnational project and within the local authority where I was a consultant to the project.   In the first I explore how expectations of leadership were enacted between transnational partners and illustrate how I worked with these dynamics. In the second of these sections I explore the challenges that arose in establishing and sustaining collaborative relationships between women politicians, managers and employees in my client organisation.  Finally I draw parallels between patterns in the power dynamics that were enacted between participants in the client organisation and between transnational partners.

## The Persephone Project

Partner organisations were a university based women's studies department, two public service companies, a local authority, three consultancy organisations and two professional support networks for women's businesses.  These organisations were brought into the project by Individuals who I had met through European and UK based women's equality networks.  They were feminist researchers, management development and organisation consultants, and equal opportunities advisors.  These individuals drew up the programme of activities and budget on which the initial project proposal was based and negotiated approval within their organisations.  When the project was approved, they held responsibility for the project on behalf of their organisations.  While not all identified as feminist, all were highly committed to women's equality and shared a personal stake in it that they had to balance with the business objectives of their organisations.  However, they

had different degrees of position power within their organisations and this affected their degree of autonomy and control over participation in the Persephone Project.

Within each participating country; individuals formed consultant / client pairs (C/C pairs) and these were jointly responsible for identifying barriers to women's leadership and developing and piloting training and consultancy methods to promote and sustain women leaders. Transnational meetings took place at the beginning of each year. During the final year a publication was written by an editorial board made up of the project leader, the disseminating partner and myself. This consisted of summaries of the training and consultancy methods and approaches developed by partners and our reflections on the challenges of sustaining women in leadership positions (Bicker, Neumann, Page 1999).

The funding proposal for the Persephone project was developed jointly by myself and the project leader. My research interest was in exploring how women in leadership positions were perceived, what expectations they experienced from women and how they negotiated these expectations them; my aim was to develop my research alongside my consultancy within this project, using my PhD to develop methods and practice.

During the life of the project I took up three different roles:

> When the project proposal was approved, I became consultant partner to a local authority. In this capacity I developed a gender culture change methodology based on the concept of coalition between women politicians, managers and employees. In this publication I explore and analyse the challenges that arose in sustaining this alliance within the organisation.

> Mid-way through the project I negotiated an additional role for myself as transnational co-ordinator. In this capacity I used my research role to raise difficult and controversial issues concerning inter-partner relationships. Through reflection on my discussions with partners I surfaced and challenged assumptions I had been carrying concerning the enactment of power and leadership within the project. In this publication I select from my findings from this part of my inquiry.

> In phase 3 I was a member of the editorial board who co-authored the final publication. This was a valuable opportunity to identify and explore tensions between feminist, business and organisation development that informed our conceptual frames and practices. On the basis of this exploration I was able to reappraise my expectations of the project and arrive at a different analysis of power dynamics between partners and in my client organisation. In this publication I refer selectively to this process.

**Partnership challenges**

*Challenging environments*

Discussions with consultants and employees in the public sector during and prior to this project showed that reduced funding, low priority and status, and precariousness of position have become increasingly typical of gender equality initiatives within this sector. This trend had a direct impact on the project partnership: several of the organisations that had originally signed up to the project withdrew commitment when the funding was approved a year later. Consultant partners who had been 'paired' with these organisations then had to replace them, or also withdraw from the project.

The project had been approved on a reduced budget and work programmes had to be tailored within these constraints. This was particularly difficult given the marginality of women's equality work in each of these employing organisations, the low status of individuals who had originally been lead contacts, and comparatively high investment of resources demanded by the transnational project.

Several individuals who had been committed to the project in employer organisations lost institutional backing at this point and withdrew from the project. One consultant partner withdrew. Others who remained had to rise to the challenges of devising work programmes within reduced budgets, and negotiating the internal resources and ownership to enable the project to move forward. These work programmes then had to be costed and agreed with the lead organisation who then formally contracted with each partner.

This process proved to be a source of considerable difficulty and anxiety for most consultant partners. Within partner relationships communication with the project leader soon focused on contractual obligation rather than the substance of the work that partners were seeking to develop. A great deal of anger was expressed over administrative, funding and management issues. As the project developed these relationships continued to be a flash point for conflicts relating to power and project leadership. Communication between most national project partners and the project leader became conflictual, and communication between partners was minimal. Far from being a collaborative work group, relationships between project partners were characterised by hostility and frustrated hopes for support.

*Challenging leadership*

> *This project had exceptionally high dependency needs (Project leader).*

> *I've never experienced such a badly managed transnational project!'*
> *(Project partner, referring to project leader).*

In this section I show myself in action as an inquirer in the final year of the project.

During the project very different expectations of project leadership were expressed and enacted between partners and the project leader. For much of the time I felt buffeted between conflicting expectations of my own. My inquiry became a means of sustaining myself in action as I explored these

conflicts and attempted to address challenges to collaboration between partners and in relation to the project leader.

The extract from my journal below illustrates some of these conflicts and how I worked with them:

> *At the second transnational project meeting, mid-way through the project, partners gave reports of their own work but showed little interest in each other's. Challenge to the project leader was aggressive, and focussed on mismanagement. I experienced an overwhelming sense of loss, as it became increasingly clear that the collaborative project was not to be.*

> *But how to make sense of the conflict was becoming less clear to me as we reached mid-point in the project. I found myself moving between different conceptual frames, as well as different subject positions, as I talked with partners and with the project leader. Evidence from my conversations with individual partners and from exchanges at the second transnational meeting suggested that as well as challenging the project leader, partners were resisting engagement with each other. I was no longer sure how far my vision of collaborative working was shared, after all.*

> *In the final year of the project I visited each partner to try to stimulate more transnational exchange. I also invited them to discuss what in their view were the reasons for lack of collaboration, and tried to test my own views.*

> *All complained about inadequate communication, late payments and bad project administration. Two of the consultant partners took the view that common ground could have been built if project leadership had been more collaborative. When I asked why they did not take the initiative to build links with other partners themselves, or use the transnational meetings to initiate collaboration, they said that the differences between partners were too great to establish closer links.*

> *The experience of gathering this material prompted me to review my own analysis of the challenges to leadership within the project. I had set off expecting to find partners shared a vision of partnership based on learning and exchange. What I found was ambivalence and self-preoccupation. I came away with the words of one of the project partners: common ground has to be built, it does not come ready-made.*

In her research into women and leadership, Sinclair suggests female leaders re-activate the conflict between our need to be nurtured and our drive to be independent (Sinclair 1998). She states mothers may be admired for their strength, but we forgive them less than the first male leaders in our lives, and that powerful women are magnets for the largely unconscious ambivalence about mothers and the feminine that both men and women feel; (Sinclair 1998:p176).

The intensity of frustration that partners experienced in relation to the project leadership was often explosive. Sinclair's description of powerful conscious and unconscious dynamics at play captures the quality of intense and conflicting expectations that I experienced in relation to her. In the rest of this section I describe how I attempted to contain and work with the destructive elements of these dynamics, in order to arrive at a critical understanding of the expectations of leadership that we were enacting.

As co-initiator of the project I had to take up a leadership role of my own; to do this I had to work with my own anger and frustration about the project limitations; hold onto my own desire for more support in my consultancy, and anger when the project leader did not provide this. Throughout the life of the project I recorded my feeling and thinking responses and drew from a variety of feminist organisation and psychodynamic research sources to make sense of them[7]. I tested my analyses with partners and with colleagues external to the project. Through these reflective practices and discussions I developed a meta-commentary on the theoretical and political assumptions implicit in my expectations and feelings in relation to the project leader, partners and clients. Informed by this process I made practical interventions, taking on different formal project roles in order to promote more collaborative working relationships.

At meetings of the editorial group in the third phase of the project, the project leader and I analysed expectations commonly directed at women in organisations. Among the disabling factors we identified was the projection of a range of emotional needs onto women leaders and the expectation that they meet them, regardless of whether this was appropriate to their role in the organisation. Women leaders who resisted these expectations were objects of hostility from men and women alike.

In my reflections on discussions in the editorial group, I re-appraised my interpretation of the dynamics enacted between project partners and project leader. I concluded that my anger and disappointment with the project leader for not providing a more secure base for project partners to work from might be interpreted as a gendered expectation enacted in relation to a woman leader. As project partners, we wanted her to lead in a way which met our needs to be sustained. As project leader, she might choose to respond to this expectation in a variety of different ways. From this perspective, the interplay between partners' expectations and her way of leading the project could be interpreted as 'how partners and project leader enacted gender stereotypes in relation to each other'.

Through this process of reflection I was able both to review my conceptual framing of the issues and move to a new subject position in relation to my own expectations and responses. I saw that her responses to partners and myself might have been a strategy to resist expectations that she viewed as gendered and inappropriate. This helped me to let go of expectations that my needs be met and in the process to feel less needy. I moved from a sense of dependency to a sense of greater felt equality. From this position I was better able to find my own voice and sustain a more independent position in relation to her on the editorial board.

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[7] These sources are elaborated in chapter 6

As my sense of vulnerability to her responses receded, a stronger sense of having adequate skills and knowledge of my own moved into the foreground of my awareness. From this position I wrote a substantial section of the project publication, drawing from my discussions with transnational partners to engage with the political principles which had guided the consultancy interventions each had developed and making the case for multiple approaches to achieving gender culture change.

Through my inquiry practices I had got back in touch with my capacity to sustain myself as an independent subject in relation to others. This process was by no means comfortable. It was 'messy', involved living through intense feelings of rage, despair, frustrations and well as delight, relief and joy. It required skills and methods - an ability to develop critical awareness of my thinking and feeling processes, to observe myself in action and question the assumptions that I brought to my sense making. These are the skills of action inquiry which I describe fully in my thesis, and have introduced in chapter 2 of this publication.

It had not been possible until the end of the Project to discuss these experiences explicitly with colleagues or clients. I was nevertheless able to engage with the issues myself, using reflexive skills, drawing on research sources to test and expand my sense making and to develop and sustain an independent critical stance.


*Making sense of leadership challenges*

> *'They don't let me lead... (Project leader, referring to project partners).*

During a general discussion about project findings at the final transnational meeting, the project leader remarked that women leaders are under constant pressure to lead 'in a certain way', for example to be 'not like men'.

I asked myself what leadership meant on a project with a politically inspired vision, which had to demonstrate results in the business environments of the funding and partner organisations. How could feminist collaboration work within such a partnership? How might it be reconciled with accountability to the funder and the practical constraints of the project?

> *Do women - and men - have a right to expect their need for a 'secure base' to be met by women - or men - in positions of authority?*

> *If so, women leaders who wish to resist expectations based on gender stereotypes are faced with a paradox: how to provide a secure enough base for creative work when the meaning of 'secure enough' will be experienced by participants as nothing short of providing a nurturing, caring presence?*

> *If not, my inquiry suggests that women leaders and 'followers' may be stuck with powerful projections that have the potential to destroy collaboration between women (Journal entry, project year 3).*

The under-resourced and under-valued nature of women's equality work seems likely to stimulate dependency needs which will lead to heightened expectations in relation to women in leadership roles. I have shown that I was able to contain destructive elements of my individual experience of these dynamics sufficiently to improve the quality of my relationship to the project leader and to try to increase scope for collaboration. This bore fruit in terms of self-care and self-development and had some effect in relationship to others. However this could not compensate for the cut made by the funder when the project was approved, which reduced funds for transnational development work that had been allowed in the original proposal.

It would be tempting but missing the point to say that more efficient project management, collaborative leadership, and sufficient resourcing, would have enabled partners to sustain generative project relationships. Equality projects by their nature are about political change from a minority position, and are therefore often likely to take place in adverse conditions. Moreover equalities initiatives in employing organisations must balance business objectives and considerations with political vision. These challenges place stresses on relationships between women that provide the context for powerful projection of needs and expectations onto women leaders. In this context women leaders and followers both need resources, skills, and commitment to work with the inevitable emotional and inter-subjective challenges that they will experience within their relationships.

In the rest of the case study from which this is drawn, I continued to explore these issues from the perspective of being the consultant leading a feminist change initiative within my client organisation (Page 2002: pp. 250-283). I uncovered interesting parallels between the dynamics I experienced as a consultant in relation to women who were my clients within the local authority, and the dynamics I have described between the project leader and myself. I select from these findings in the section below.


*Coalition challenges:  Power, authority and trust*

In this section of my inquiry I critically evaluate my use of the concept of 'coalition' as a strategy for feminist consultancy. This part of my inquiry began at the end of the second phase of the Persephone project, and in the evaluative phase of my consultancy with the local authority partner.

I invited key participants in the local authority Persephone project to take part in interviews that would contribute to my research. In my invitation, I made it clear that I was offering an opportunity to reflect on the consultancy project and on project relationships outside of our contractual relationships. Three members of the Steering Group accepted with senior manager Jodie, Aileen, equal opportunities manager and lead contact for the local authority on the transnational project, and Anna, the politician who played a lead role on the Steering Group. Anna, Aileen and Jodie all accepted my invitation. I conducted a group discussion with three Steering Group members and Aileen; an interview based discussion with Jodie and her senior woman manager colleague; and overlapping discussions with Aileen and Anna.

During discussions I used a topic guide, designed to enable exploration of the local authority project participants' perceptions of the nature of the 'coalition' they had created through the project, across organisational divisions, and of what they had achieved. I took notes during discussions, asked and was given permission to use this material in my research, and circulated transcripts of discussions to each participant. I invited feedback on the transcripts and in response one participant, Aileen, expressed concerns concerning confidentiality. I explored these with her and agreed ways of working with the data which would adequately protect her. I have addressed these within the text of my case study.

In my discussion with Steering Group (SG) members all, except one new member present, expressed how vulnerable they felt as initiators of change. Their key issues concerned trust: could they trust that they had adequate senior level support to carry through the project initiatives?

One facet of this was their need to have sufficient time to explore their issues and arrive at an agreed collective agenda to act upon. A major difficulty was in getting authorisation for Steering Group members to attend meetings and pursue project activities. Senior level authorisation was needed in order to take time out, and in order to deliver results some SG members felt that this meant there was a constant risk of being used to support the unknown agendas held by their senior supporters.

It was difficult to sustain momentum in a culture where equal opportunities initiatives were often high profile but did not lead to more than surface change, and were seen more often to be 'flashes in the pan' that enhanced profile without challenging existing power relationships.

In the predominantly macho gender culture, women were seen by some SG members to sustain their positions by adapting and therefore to be unlikely to support, and more likely to sabotage, any counter cultural initiatives. In discussion Steering Group members expressed a feeling of wariness, anticipating that support from women with position power could at any moment be withdrawn when it no longer served their individual interests. From this perspective coalition would be too strong a word to describe their relationship with senior women; alliances with them would necessarily be shifting.

> Me: *How would you like Jodie (senior manger) or Anna (politician) to be in the meetings…*
> SG1 and SG3: *We don't know how they fit what we are saying into their agenda. Or do they just expect us to fit into theirs? Are our needs really being met?*

There was ambivalence about the nature of senior support, but also ambivalence about how much authority these women in positions of power really had. Their support was felt to be vital, yet still insufficient to authorise the participation of SG members. The Project in its reporting lines was located within the 'mainstream' structure of the council; following deletion of the Women's Committee in the latest restructure, it was the only body with an explicit brief for women's equality within the formal structure. Yet authorisation to attend SG meetings still had to be given on a piecemeal

basis by the male senior manager. Even then the SG was not considered by line managers to be a legitimate part of their staff's workload, so that for some members SG meetings had a quality of being 'in secret.' It was as if despite their formal positions of power, the women who publicly sponsored the project, a senior manager, a senior politician, and the leader of the council simply were not seen by line managers as having the authority to provide institutional backing.

What then was the nature of the support that Steering Group members perceived to be of value to them? How did this match the support that the women in positions of power were able to give to the Project? In my interviews I explored these questions with Jodie (senior manager) and Anna (politician).

In discussions with the local authority project participants I had used the term 'coalition' to describe the relationships they were establishing. At the evaluation conference which concluded my consultancy input, Jodie had also used this term to refer to these relationships. However in discussion in her interview she expressed a more qualified view:

> Me: *So - the idea of coalition that I introduced - between women in different positions - does that have any meaning for you at the moment?*
> J: *No is the short answer!*
> Me: *But remember we both used the term at the evaluation conference –*
> J: *umm um..*
> Me: *At that point you were saying [in your presentation] that a coalition had been established between women politicians and ...women lower down and yourself...*
> J: *I should just say though there is coalition on some issues (emphasis)... It's like a spectrum ...there are some issues it's easy to achieve coalition around and then at the other end there are some issues that nobody.... That you are never going to get that coalition ....so you have to recognise that would be some areas that it's easy there are some where it's not.*

When I asked Jodie how she now perceived her contribution to the Steering Group, she described the support she had provided for six months after the consultancy training sessions as relatively straightforward. However some Steering Group members described their relationship to her as more complex and difficult. They expressed fears that she might withdraw and doubts that they could trust her, or by implication any woman manager with power in the organisation, to work to an agenda which addressed their needs. There was a 'them and us' approach, which associated position power with self-interest. Women's position power was perceived to be precarious, and women in positions of power were seen as necessarily preoccupied with agendas associated with their own survival or progression within the wider organisation.

I explored with these three members of the Steering Group what it would mean for Jodie to meet their needs. These Steering Group members wanted Jodie to create an environment in which their contribution would have been

invited and valued. But the attribution to her of the power to achieve this, in contrast to their own felt powerlessness, seemed to prevent them from seeing or taking up the opportunities she had provided. Their desire for her support seemed to underpin and to be an expression of their feeling of comparative powerlessness. In this sense it was a desire for a kind of support which was not adapted to their becoming more agentic in the environment described by Jodie.

> SG3: *Jodie's style of working is difficult.. did not make me feel included any more...*
> Me: *Hasn't Jodie opened up opportunities for the Steering Group to be represented on various working groups, to influence policy?*
> SG1: *I haven't experienced Jodie opening up channels for involvement of the Steering Group in policy...I do not feel included in structures which value my contribution. Where do I fit into any of these gatherings? Where will I be valued? What are the other agendas that are influencing senior women who are involved?*

In contrast in Jodie's account women in positions of power must demonstrate ability to look after themselves. At this level, women can and do legitimately ask for and expect to get help from each other, using organisation position power, but must also recognise that no one can reasonably be expected to risk their position. Help can be requested, but this must be done judiciously and with regard to each other's position within the wider organisation and need to work to wider agendas.

> Me: *So using political and other networks is really vital?*
> Jodie: *Yes but one of the things is that I have to be wise about which issues I take through the political network, because at the end of the day the leader [of the council] will get heartily sick of me constantly knocking on her door saying 'I'm being excluded', because she sees me as someone who should just get on with it.*
> Me: *Hold your own....*

This perception is congruent with the observation of Steering Group members: for women to survive and get on in this environment means adopting adaptive strategies, or taking your chances.

> SG member: *This might have to do with the sexualised climate you spoke about [ref. to report back at end of phase 1]...we are still in the aftermath of x [previous chief executive].*
> Me. *How would you describe that x way of being?*
> SG member: *Very male, bullying, power over, withholding information.... Women are very good at adapting to the predominant norm...to create safety, survive...women get to the top if they flirt or act like males...the chances of getting female support are very limited as we are a threat to that way of working and being.*

But this generalisation about women's adaptive strategies belied the fact that through the Project some women had taken up positions of solidarity for each other, and that some women at senior level had used their position power to support the initiatives that had been taken. I speculated that some Steering Group members' desire for unconditional support and protection

from their senior women supporters, and their disappointment that it had not been given, may have made it more difficult for them to work with Jodie on the conditional basis which she was able to offer. This interpretation was suggested by a conversation with a participant in the consultancy training days, when a participant responded to my encouragement to work with X with an emphatic:

> *But can we trust her?*

The reality that trust between feminist women in work settings must be conditional, and not total, is one that I too experienced as painful during my work on the Project, despite political and intellectual knowledge. Characterising women who withhold support as in some way untrustworthy may be a defence against the pain of acknowledging separate individual interests, despite shared political values, and of having to do the political work of negotiating areas of common interest. Until this work of separating is done there can be no firm basis for building feminist alliance.

*Equal opportunities or gender culture change?*

Is there any hope then for feminists who wish to work in coalition in mainstream organisations on a women's' equality agenda? Is the idea of 'coalition' at all useful in this context?

In this case women, lower down the hierarchy did succeed in forging alliances with senior managers who supported their agenda and with politicians. But these alliances were limited by individual women's vulnerability in an environment where women's authority was constantly eroded, and there was a necessity to protect their positions. In this situation a senior woman could and did open doors but did not do more. But women lower down were sometimes looking for more; for a guarantee that, once they spoke, they would be welcomed and valued.

Newly elected women politicians who attended the inquiry group at the beginning of the local authority project also described this desire and experience of being devalued. They described difficulties in asserting their authority to male managers and the importance of their woman leaders' modelling of challenge and confrontation. Outside the management culture of the organisation, the two women politicians who took part in Steering Group meetings brought an approach based on shared problems and issues and an informality which was both appreciated and resisted by other members of the Steering Group:

> Me: *Do you think the Steering Group members understand what your position is in the council, that you have power?*
> Anna*: Yes they do recognise our power as elected members - they said 'be quiet you are our role models!' when we were sharing a joke at the meeting…At meetings I feel the same as the other women; I forget that we have different power in the council… We are all equal; no matter where you come from in the organisation we are trying to improve things for all women; it's how we use our different positions outside the group which makes the difference.*

The leadership provided by the woman politician was associated with a common struggle, women together within a safe space, within which knowledge was shared and a common perspective assumed. In this space, women were able to value and affirm each other as long as they set aside their position power and associated roles.

However this safety was sometimes maintained by ignoring difference of opinion or challenge. Differences of opinion were often not expressed openly at SG meetings, and feedback from SG members indicated that some members who did not feel identified with predominant voices withdrew their participation. Some members felt a pressure to be results orientated before they were ready. Thus, for example, when Jodie challenged SG members to be more results and action orientated her interventions were received with ambivalence:

> SG3: *It is different when Jodie is here, partly inhibiting, partly connecting...Jodie has a drive to make everything action related...to expect us to say what things are for... its harder to think out loud...*

To be effective and to achieve their goals, the Steering Group needed to do more than to provide a place of safety; they also needed to plan and evaluate interventions, to demonstrate results. This latter way of working was more in tune with management culture and assumed a sense of confidence in ability to deliver and of power to effect change. To achieve this SG members would have had to cross a border, staking a claim to having something important to contribute in the mainstream of organisational practice.

Jodie's leadership and my consultancy interventions aimed to enable SG members to cross the border from being recipients to being initiators of change, and from framing their concerns as implementation of equal opportunities to challenging wider management practice. But this had raised ambivalent feelings in SG members. The margins of equal opportunities held a safety that could not be guaranteed in the shifting power dynamics in the mainstream of the organisation. Jodie could not guarantee unlimited support to the Steering Group, and both she and Anna lost the positions towards the end of the project that had enabled them to 'mainstream' the material generated by the project.

## Conclusions

On re-reading my account of the transnational project in the first part of this chapter, I saw similar patterns between the dynamics enacted in my client /consultancy relationships and the dynamics enacted between transnational partners and the project leader. In both partners and clients expressed resentment at not being cared for by project leader or by myself. In both partners expressed desire for more direction that was not met. In both there was reluctance to engage with difference, expressed either as hostility or a lack of interest in other members who were not in some way 'the same'. In both there was a sense from time to time explicitly stated of not being

valued by other members, and in particular by the one with the position power. Similar dynamics were present in relationships between the local authority Steering Group members and senior manager Jodie. In contrast, in relation to Anna, the politician, who positioned herself as equal and 'the same as other women' within Project meetings, leaving her position power outside the door, these dynamics were not so evident.

During the Project I felt buffeted by desires to merge, to position myself with others and to take up a position apart. I began with an expectation of shared commitment to collaborative leadership and practice built on the basis of shared feminist values and practice with both my clients and transnational Project partners. I had met individual participants in the context of feminist or women's development networks and assumed that these contexts in which we had met, together with the subject and objectives of the project, signalled commitment to sharing knowledge and practice within the partnership. On reflection now, I see that I had grossly underestimated the work needed to build and sustain that collaboration in the business and political environments in which we were operating. When my expectations proved impossible to meet, I experienced betrayal and distress; I needed time to mourn the loss of an ideal closely held.

Inquiry as a method sustained me throughout the Project, enabling me to construct a position and a language from which to engage with my own inner world experience and with my clients and partners. From this position of inquiry, I invited partners to review their experience of working with each other and clients to review their experience of the client consultancy relationship with me. Subsequent discussions seemed to create a space within which we could, to a limited extent, articulate in words some of what had been expressed through silences within the consultancy relationship. At the final transnational meeting, I successfully facilitated discussion about how partners had worked together on the project. It seemed we were able to engage in discussion that had a more open quality, in contrast to the oppositional tone which had characterised many of our interactions during the project.

During my consultancy to the local authority, participants in the inquiry groups I co-facilitated did speak from their situated knowledge[8]; in the process they broke taboos which were deeply embedded in the gender culture of their organisation. I used inquiry to establish an independent stance of my own from which I was able to break through silences that have arisen between the project leader and myself, and between myself and members of the client organisation. In a small way I did succeed in creating spaces in which women began to 'do gender' differently in relation to each other, moving out of victim position and exploring ways of speaking from positions of power.

However, I would argue strongly that it would be a mistake to interpret this entirely in terms of intersubjective skills or in psychodynamic terms. All of the partners were operating in environments hostile to women's leadership, and in which gender equality initiatives were undervalued and under resourced. In my previous case study, and in the first part of this chapter, I

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[8] For 'situated knowledge, see chapter 6

have illustrated the undermining effects on women's self-esteem of environments that devalue our professional competence and the nature of the work we do.  In discussions with contributors to my interviews, and in exploring my own experience in previous case studies, I explored how powerful needs and desires such as the desire for recognition that are often withheld from women in these environments can be projected onto women in leadership.

In the Project the funder had cut the budget for support activities, and partners attempts to get practical support were frustrated.  Under pressure we ended up re-enacting many of the dynamics which we had set out to challenge. We were, after all, shaped not just by our feminist values but also by our individual needs to survive in the environments in which we were living and working.  Each carried our own wounds from battles fought in the gendered cultures and power regimes of the organisations who employed us, and each had to steer a path between looking to our separate interests and our desire to construct a shared agenda.

In writing this case study I have explored the multiple frames through which I worked, associated with tensions between individual and organisational perspectives, and goals associated with personal, business, professional, and political concerns.  I described the vulnerability that I experienced in bringing aspects of my subjectivity into the public arena.  In doing so I am breaking silences in feminist research about the more painful challenges of collaboration. I do so in the interest of sustaining my feminist consultancy and in order to use it to sustain feminist collaboration.


*Learning points*

This case study is concerned with the challenges around sustaining working relationships between women working towards equality within challenging environments. Many of these challenges are likely to be met between women and between women and men within any partnership.  These concerned the experience of intense, conflicting and sometimes inappropriate expectations of women in leadership, and the difficulties in understanding and negotiating these conflicts within partnerships or alliances.

The case study is based on experience of relationships between women working in specific environments.  How far then can it be generalised?  My discussions with women in other working environments contexts suggest that the experience of intense and conflicting feelings towards women in positions of power and authority is not specific to women working on equalities issues, or to women who are feminists.   Furthermore, men in positions of authority also attract intense and conflicting feelings - although they will not be subject to the same dilemmas as women in deciding how to respond to them. As I have illustrated in this case study, women leaders are under intense pressure to lead 'in a certain way', and these pressures arise from deeply held desires and expectations from both women and men. When these desires are named and brought into awareness, choices can be made about how to act on them.

The learning points below are concerned with how to manage these dilemmas in collaborations and partnerships.  In the following chapter I develop a practice framework that is more widely applicable to partnership work.

Key learning points might be summarised as:

- Resistance to women's authority and leadership is resilient, takes multiple forms, and is embedded in management practice, language and culture
- Women in leadership attract powerful desires for support from women and men; these are often reinforced by expectations arising from traditional gender roles embedded in social and organisational cultures. Women who resist meeting these expectations can attract powerful hostility and conflict
- Women who wish to work across different positions of power and authority need to cultivate critical awareness of how they enact these desires and expectations in relation to each other. They need to develop critical awareness of how they 'do gender' and make this explicit within their collaboration and partnership work.
- Women and men need to be alert to how expectations of women in authority are represented and conceptualised and integrate critical awareness of these representations into their partnership and project work.
- Individual women in positions of formal power need to balance their own survival needs with desire to support equalities initiatives or to support or protect women colleagues
- Alliances between women to promote equality in challenging environments can and do work but must take account of these constraints.

### 5.  ON THRESHOLDS AND BORDERLANDS:  A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINING COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

*Introduction*

In this chapter I develop the metaphor of the feminist consultant and her clients as 'world travellers', moving between a variety of different organisational and intersubjective worlds.

In it I introduce a framework for understanding and conceptualising the challenges and skills of building and maintaining collaboration and partnership. I focus on working 'across the boundaries' of project and organisational environments.

The chapter is addressed to individuals who want to increase their understanding of how to make partnership or looser forms of collaboration work. It is concerned with how to enable diverse individuals and organisations to jointly develop new knowledge and practice, and to introduce it into their working environments.

Throughout the chapter I refer to this role as 'consultancy', or action inquiry. The skills and concepts involved are most easily and directly used by individuals in consultancy roles, but need to be understood and introduced into work practices by anyone involved in partnership or 'cross boundary' or 'cross cultural' work.

The chapter is organised as follows:
- the chapter begins with a *conceptual map*, which introduces the key concepts developed in my framework for understanding partnership skills;
- the second section conceptualises the challenges I have described in my case studies to collaboration and partnership;
- the third section 'Relational Practice for Feminist Collaboration', explores the skills needed to sustain collaborative relationships within partnerships;
- the fourth section, Working across Thresholds' explores the skills needed to sustain partnership across organisations;
- In Conclusions I link these themes back to partnership challenges for women's organisations in the current context.

## Conceptual map

*Relational practice*

Feminist research has consistently called into question the boundaries between private and public lives. Writing aspects of my self which I would not normally share in the consultancy world into the text of my thesis, evoked intense feelings of vulnerability as well as exhilaration. The discovery of feminist research that offered conceptual frames for introducing these

'private' emotions into my inquiry acted as a powerful legitimising force and reduced my sense of personal vulnerability (hooks 1991, 1996; Marshall 1992; Stanley and Wise 1983; Stanley 1997).

Through my reading of these and other texts, I came to see the work I have done to conceptualise and process emotion in my consultancy relationships and practice as a form of relational practice. In this chapter, I develop my own use of this term as a tool for understanding and transforming power relationships (Fletcher 1998).


*'World travelling'*

In black feminist inquiry, women inhabit both margins and mainstream in order to transform gendered and raced power relations and to generate new knowledge (Bell 2000; hooks 1990).

Post Colonialist feminist writer Maria Lugones suggests that knowledge is generated, recognised and acted upon within what she has called 'worlds' (Lugones 1997). In each world inhabited - and this may be more than one world at the same time - inhabitants interpret what they see in particular, shared ways and have shared sets of practices.

I have been inspired by this writing to use the concept of 'world travelling' to think through the challenges I experienced as I moved between working environments with different, and often opposing, knowledge paradigms. In my inquiry I developed my use of the concept to conceptualise the skills needed by the feminist consultant who uses inquiry to generate new knowledge as she moves between the different worlds illustrated in figure 1 below. These are the worlds of client organisations and spaces for collaborative work between women, her own inner world and the public world of consultancy.


*Borderlands*

'Borderlands' is the term I used to describe the spaces inhabited by feminists as they move between these different worlds.
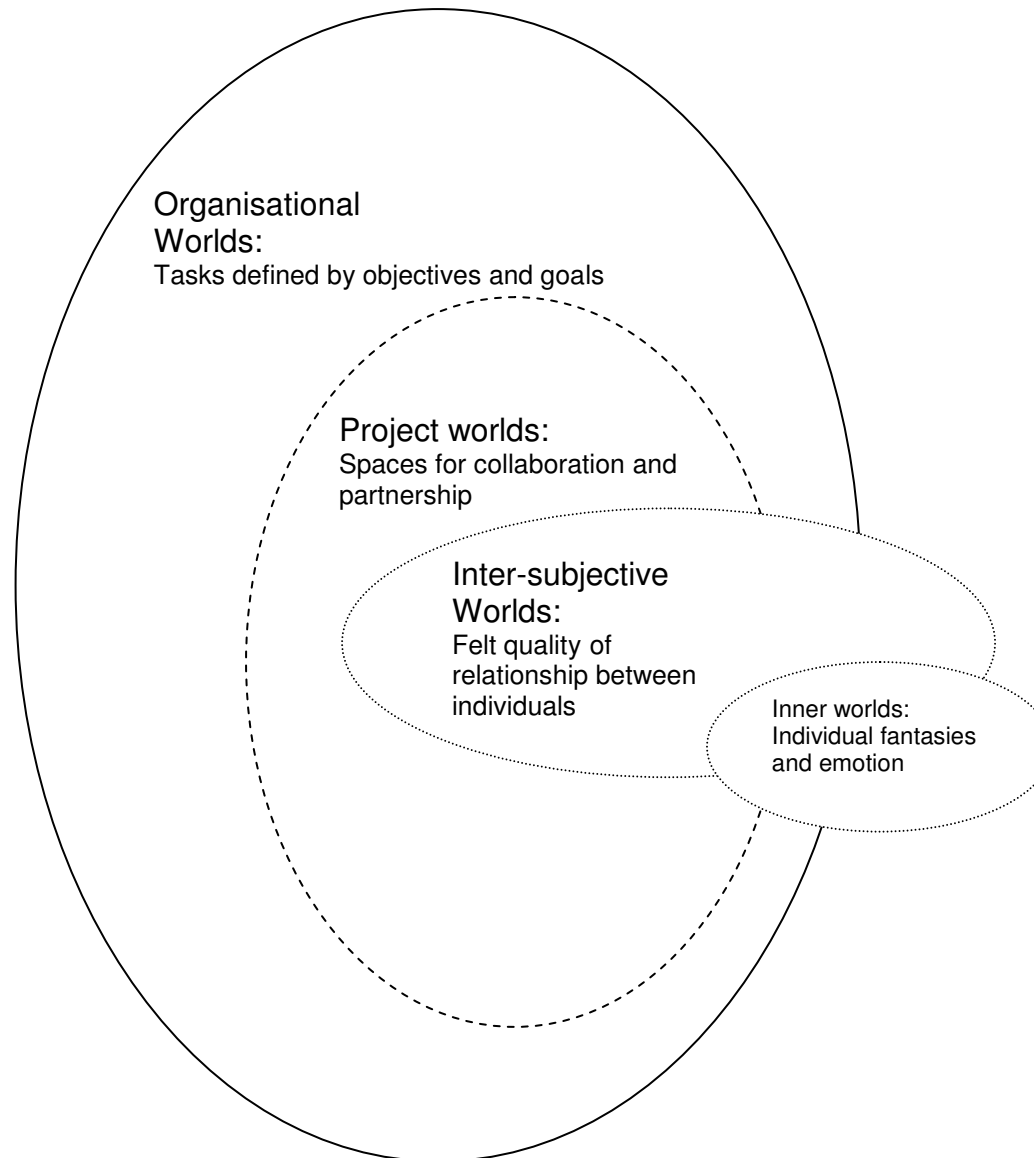
The concept of Borderlands, *La Frontera*, was first developed by Chicana US feminist Anzaldua (1987, 1999) to describe the political struggles of mixed race people in the *Aztlan,* the US Southwest. The concept refers to the political and economic necessity for these inhabitants of leaving the familiar and safe home ground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain (Anzaldua 1999: 35). It refers both to a crossroads and a frontier.

This inquiry has been a space in which I have brought together voices relating to my inner world and to the external world of organisations. In spaces I created through my consultancy, women who were differently positioned in organisations came together and generated new knowledge. In neither case was this process smooth or comfortable; in both difficult issues of power and identity had to be negotiated.

In this chapter, I use the term 'Borderlands' to refer to the subjective and intersubjective spaces that I inhabit and create in order to enact my feminist politics. Their borders are not congruent with organisational boundaries, but cross them.  Each world has its own language and values, generative and degenerative qualities, and each is associated with a certain quality of experience and of being.

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**Figure 1**

**The consultant inhabiting and travelling between organisational, project and intersubjective worlds**

Organisational
Worlds:
Tasks defined by objectives and goals

Project worlds:
Spaces for collaboration and
partnership

Inter-subjective
Worlds:
Felt quality of
relationship between
individuals

Inner worlds:
Individual fantasies
and emotion

Women who are 'word travellers' inhabit both margins and mainstream, holding the tension between different and often conflicting identities and ways of being:

This is my home
        This thin edge of barbwire
(Anzaldua 1999: 25).


## Multiple realities

The notion of holding open a tension between two (or more) realities is at the core of my sense of self and, I maintain, at the core of the skills demanded of women with whom I worked in each of my case studies.

While the concept of 'world travelling' refers to the movement between different worlds, and 'borderlands' to an ontological state of being, the concept of 'intersubjectivity' refers to the experience of holding realities associated with different worlds in tension. In my framework it offers a way of naming the skills and challenge of holding a sense of the reality of both self and other, of difference and interconnectedness.


## Situated knowledge

The concept of 'situated knowledge' was developed by feminist epistemologists to challenge the notion of objectivity in science and explore the relationship between 'knowledge' and gender (Haraway 1991; Harding 1991; Stanley and Wise 1993). It offered me a starting point for conceptualising the skills needed for 'world travelling', and a firmer ground from which to engage with gendered assumptions embedded in these organisations. I used this concept explicitly in my coalition work with women in the local authority, where I invited women managers, politicians and staff to enter into a dialogue, speaking from the positions in which they were individually situated in their organisations, and then explored how these positions informed their expectations of each other.

In each of my case studies the knowledge about organisational life that women generated through their inquiry led to a gendered analysis of power and leadership within the organisations in which they were working. The issue in each case was how to validate this knowledge within the organisational environments in which they worked, and how to legitimate and accredit our work in producing this knowledge.


## Intersubjectivity

In my inquiry I use the notion of intersubjectivity as an organising concept for naming and exploring the inner and outer world dimensions of relationships between women which surfaced in my inquiry and which are illustrated in my case studies (Benjamin 1990, 1995).

'Intersubjectivity' offers a way of understanding the world of passions and

vulnerabilities between women in the context of relationships between them. It offers a means of conceptualising them without either reducing explanation to individual histories, or representing them in ways which appear to undermine our professional competence.

*A framework for partnership practice*

Through my inquiry I came to see that this constellation of concepts - 'situated knowledge', 'world travelling', 'borderlands', 'relational practice' and 'intersubjectivity' - offered a means of making sense of dilemmas that emerged in the consultancy interventions I describe and of accessing their multi-layered qualities.

I drew these concepts together within a framework which can be used to analyse challenges in working together within or across organisations, in partnerships or collaborations across differences of power, position, role and knowledge base.

## Conceptualising challenges to collaboration and partnership

In this section I conceptualise the multileveled challenges of collaboration for individuals who come together across organisational boundaries. I start by using the concept of 'borderlands' to describe some of the qualities of collaborative spaces described in my case studies, then return to the concept of 'world travelling' to explore some of the qualities of relationship and exchange which took place between women.

*Multiplicity and common ground*

Anzaldua (1987) uses the term 'borderlands' to describe a state of being which is rooted in strategies of political resistance. Her struggle is to sustain multiplicity in an identity whose different elements are associated with warring national, ethnic, and sexual divisions.

Anzaldua describes the experience of traversing different cultures as an embodied process, an inner war. This experience belongs to 'La Mestiza', a lesbian feminist woman of mixed race, belonging to none, partaking of each.

'Borderlands' seems an apt metaphor for the uncertain qualities of the spaces that I inhabit. Drawing from my experience of creating a secure base for myself I have sought to create and hold open these spaces for women in mainstream organisations; these have been shared spaces which we jointly constructed and for which I as consultant have been responsible.

Partners and clients in the case studies were ambivalent about their experiences of coming together in shared spaces. In the second case study difficulties in establishing trust and in building common ground, meant that these spaces were frequently uncomfortable and anything but secure. In each case I was in touch with a quality of 'yearning' for connection and for mutual recognition that infused my experience of these spaces. This lent an edge of

disappointment and sometimes of powerful frustration where it was not achieved; and, when it was, a quality of delight. While I do not claim that this was experienced by all, conversations with project participants and discussions in earlier cycles of this inquiry confirmed that it was widely shared, in particular by participants whose main work focus was gender equality.

Borderlands infused with longing for 'home' seems an apt metaphor for the uncertain quality of collaboration that was possible within these spaces. This 'home' seemed to represent a place of belonging, of recognition and affirmation, and a sense of being valued. These were described as the positive aspects of 'country' that enabled learning and collaboration within the ELP project.  In contrast, in the Persephone project not getting them met became a trigger for animosity and withdrawal from collaboration.  The challenge was to hold onto the 'yearning' for' home' as a force for constructing common ground, while holding in check its destructive power when expectations of finding common ground were unmet.  In the following section I explore what this meant for building feminist collaboration.


*Power and Trust in Collaborative Spaces*

In each case study, women came together across organisational boundaries to generate new knowledge and practice and to sustain each other in challenging the gender order in their own organisations.

The methods we used were based on the principles of action research (Reason 1988, 1994; Reason and Bradbury 2001) and of action learning (McGill and Beaty 1992; Vince 1996). Learning was through joint reflection on action, supporting each other to develop and test new practice. These processes were time limited but open ended, without predetermined results. Outcomes depended on participants' willingness and ability to generate new knowledge through a process of joint exploration, sharing, and conceptualisation (Heron 1996; Reason 1988, 1994).

In each case study crises of trust occurred which significantly reduced the scope of collaboration. While these crises took different forms each concerned a sense that the basis of solidarity between women had in some sense been violated or could not be sustained. Similarly, contributors to research interviews conducted earlier in my inquiry interviews described crises of trust in relationships between women when individual members of peer groups achieved 'success' or external recognition.

In the Persephone project however I concluded that these expectations were sometimes misplaced; trust could not be absolute in environments where individual survival and interests had to be constantly held in balance with shared interests and goals.

Participants in each project described in my case studies were women coming together from different organisations to which they were accountable as employees, and to which their change interventions were directed. In order to participate, individuals had to travel between the world of their own organisations and the new world of the shared project. In each case, this

presented challenges arising from the different values and cultures embedded and enacted in these different 'worlds'. In each project, they found that in order to introduce learning and new practices developed within the project world into their organisations, they would need to challenge gendered regimes of power and work practices. They had to make their own assessment of how to use their new knowledge, and weigh up how to embed it in their practice in ways consistent with their career and survival.

The learning spaces we created were a base for women to go out from and in that sense 'secure', but by no means comfortable. They were subject to destructive as well as creative dynamics. New knowledge was generated in the context of relationships between participants who then developed it further in their own organisational worlds. The learning was embedded in relationships, and these relationships both sustained and enabled individuals to challenge in how gender power was enacted.

*Acts of translation*[1]

In asking participants in each project to leave the 'world' of their home organisation and to enter a new one, in which they would develop a new set of practices and a new type of perception, my colleagues and I were asking them to become what Lugones called 'world travellers' (Lugones 1997; Page and Scott 2001).

Participants in the partnerships described in my case studies each belonged to different organisations, sectors, and countries; they had different mother tongues and often spoke through interpreters. They each brought with them the values, conceptual frameworks and politics of the other worlds that they inhabited. These were in the main product orientated, gender-neutral and not conducive to inquiry.

Joint reflection on practice offered a means for building shared standards for knowledge claims. To a limited extent in the case study participants valued and practised reflection on action in order to develop strategies for change. However there were conflicts at points when project work had to be legitimated within the positivist product orientated cultures of the sponsoring organisations. That the 'new worlds' tended towards being inquiry based, and participants' 'home' worlds tended to be positivist and output orientated, added to the gendered dimensions of existing orders of knowledge/power.

In each case study, new theory or 'propositional knowledge' was articulated in the process of drafting the final publication. This knowledge first had to be extracted from the practice and relationships in which it was embedded. This was not a smooth process, as my case studies demonstrate. It was fraught with difficult issues that had to be negotiated between women participants and myself, and this involved acknowledging challenges within our relationships and projections into their / our 'other world' audiences.

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[1] The theme of what is lost in translation between languages and cultures was explored by Eva Hoffman in describing her experiences of dislocation as a polish Jewish emigrant to the US (Hoffman 1990).

The notion of travelling between different 'worlds' offers a means of articulating some of the difficulties in conceptualising the processes of 'transfer' of new knowledge and practice from partnership projects to their member organisations. If knowledge is embedded in these different worlds, then 'transfer of learning' from one to another is not neutral but subject to negotiation. It is likely to work only if members of both worlds understand each others knowledge paradigm, or standards, and are ready and willing to enter into dialogue. In 'translating' practices from one world to another, their meaning can change or get lost in translation.

*Travelling between different worlds*

My case studies showed that 'world travellers' who wished to transfer knowledge generated within one world into another required specific skills. At the very least these skills concerned 'translating' knowledge into a form adapted to make sense to members of each community, and to engage them in a dialogue within or across knowledge paradigms. However as I have shown, these 'acts of translation' were not gender neutral. Particpants also needed to be able to seek ways of influencing the inhabitants of the worlds they frequented and of enacting gender differently; and to hone their own survival skills.

Lugones describes world travelling as a positive set of skills necessarily developed by those who are outsiders:

> The outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less at 'home'. This flexibility is necessary for the outsider but can also be wilfully exercised by those who are at ease in the mainstream (Lugones 1992: p275).

This concept of world travelling seems aptly to describe the experience and challenges for women as they move between the 'mainstream' organisation of life in the organisations in which they work and the collaborative spaces that sustain them and their project or partnership work. Lugones refers to this travelling as:

> Skilful, creative, rich, enriching, and given certain circumstances, a loving way of being (Lugones 1992: p275).

I use the term 'world travelling' metaphorically, to refer both to my experience as a consultant and to the experience of women that I describe in my case studies. For participants in my first case study, visiting each other's countries literally for transnational meetings was an essential aspect of coming to understand the contexts in which each was operating, and this contributed to building the shared world of collaboration and learning. At the final evaluation event they affirmed the loving aspects of their collaborative relationships within this world.

In contrast, women in the second case study seemed to experience transnational meetings as compulsory travel. Passion was often expressed

as negative connection; there was disappointment at the lack of resources to visit each other's projects and subsequent disinterest in each other's 'worlds' because they perceived the differences to be 'too great'.  As a result new knowledge generated between partners was minimal.

Lugones asserts that it is only when we have travelled to each other's worlds that we are fully subjects to each other (Lugones 1992: p289).  Being fully subject to each other is an exchange between women at a level of spirit, of emotion, of practical experience as well as of intellect.  It is distinct from conquest, reducing the other to an object, or self image.

Lugones distinguishes between world travelling which is loving and animated by playfulness and travelling with a spirit of arrogance.  She describes playfulness as being a creative presence, open to surprise, to self-construction or reconstruction, and to being a fool.  Arrogance in contrast is travelling in a spirit of conquest.  The difference is not simply in the qualities or mood of the traveller, but in the ethos of the worlds themselves.  There are some worlds in which we travel at our peril, that have arrogance and conquest in their ethos, that we enter out of necessity and in which it would be foolish to enter playfully.  There are others within which we can be playful. This is illustrated in my second case study, where my relationship with clients was contaminated by the conflictual organisational ethos; or in the first case study, where my relationship was similarly undermined by organisational practice and history.

In the following sections I explore and conceptualise some of the skills needed for playful 'world travelling', and for sustaining subject to subject relationships with each other.


## Relational practice for feminist collaboration

### 'Doing gender'

Writing about the production of gendered power and meaning in organisations, Sylvia Gherardi and others developed the notion of 'doing gender' to explore the interactions between women and men at symbolic and discursive levels (Gherardi 1995; West and Zimmerman 1991).  In their writing they explore how gender identity is 'performed' by individuals, within interactions between them, through language and representation. Through these interactions they may subvert or reproduce institutionalised gender power relations constructed within the organisation.

Through my reading of this literature I became more keenly aware of how women's power, authority and leadership was described and represented in my client organisations.  I sought ways of drawing project participants' attention to how they were representing and enacting gender within their own interactions.  In each case study, I described how women confronted sexualised power relations within their organisation and embarked on a cycle of events that engaged them in gender power dynamics in a different way.

I extended this research on how men and women did gender to consider how women 'did gender' in relation to each other in collaborative spaces

described in my case studies. In chapter 4 for example I explored how expectations of leadership were enacted within the partnership project, and how power and trust were constructed on the basis of gendered expectations.

At transnational meetings in both case studies, identity as well as organisational role and politics came into play. Sharing of personal information was important for building trust; however revealing 'hidden' differences, such as sexuality, was a source of potential vulnerability. Sharing was often based on assumed heterosexuality; lesbian identities, although known, were not always explicitly acknowledged or referred to within the work of the project. In some instances sharing lesbian identity became a way of establishing areas of common ground which could not otherwise be articulated within the project.

In the paragraphs below I show the consultancy skills and approaches developed to 'do gender' in ways that built collaboration within the projects.

• Holding up a mirror to achievement

Women in my case studies experienced being devalued for their association with gender equality work, and ambivalent status in gendered power regimes. In these circumstances mutual affirmation and valuing of each other's gender equality work took on a special significance. In the first case study, participants stated that the process of exchange had helped each of them to see their achievements, in contrast to their experience in environments that did not affirm them. However this happened through facilitation, not spontaneously, and in other case studies not at all. Women who I interviewed earlier in my inquiry identified the skill of reflecting back the value of work carried out by women who did not 'see 'their achievements and whose work was undervalued by others.

• Care and repair of relationships

In my case studies I showed that women's collaborative relationships were doubly undermined, by the devaluing of women's equality work and by devaluing of women in their organisations. In each case study, building and sustaining relationships with each other was a core aspect of their work to challenge women's inequality. Similarly I showed that care and repair of my relationships with clients and colleagues was central in each of my case studies, and how I used inquiry to help me to do this work.

In each case study the 'project world' was a temporary staging post, constantly evolving, reflecting difference as well as communality. In generative moments its inhabitants were world travellers, agents of creativity, making new meaning through playful interaction with other inhabitants of this world and the worlds to which they would return. Through this process, they developed a common language. However this creative mode was constantly threatened by the impact on participants, and their relationships with each other, of externally defined power differences. Sometimes it could not be sustained and degenerative merging, arrogance, or distancing prevailed. Sometimes the necessary repair work to return to creative mode could be done, sometimes not.

- Asserting the value of relational work

In my case study I called this difficult work of care and repair a form of relational work. In her research Fletcher uses the term relational practices to refer to practices motivated by a relational belief system, a belief in 'growth in connection' (Fletcher 1998). In relational theory, growth is conceptualised as occurring in a specific kind of interaction, and as requiring specific skills. These are characterised by mutual empathy and empowerment, an expectation that sites of relational interaction will be sites of growth for all parties involved (1998:167). Her research illustrates the devaluing and disappearing of 'relational' work in organisations, and within widely used definitions of work. She claims that this devaluing is an important mechanism for reproducing gendered power relationships in organisations and in organisational theory.

At moments when participants were more identified with the 'worlds' of their organisation than the 'world' of the project, they found it hard to assert the value of their relational practices. Thus it was difficult for partners to assert the enriching quality of their experience of the project or the value of project methodologies within their organisations, unless they presented them in 'product' related terms.

Thus participants could not be relied upon to credit their project for their achievements in their organisational worlds, or to sustain awareness of the connections between these worlds. This became apparent when difficult issues arose concerning accreditation of work done in the 'world' of the projects. There was then a real risk of invisibilising the relational work and its facilitation in the project world, even thought this had sustained interventions in participating organisations.

- Accrediting the project in organisational worlds

In case study one I developed the concept of 'thresholds' between these different worlds. As consultant responsible for the relational work within the projects, I was dependent on my clients to assert their power of dual citizenship by demanding that recognition and affirmation between women in the project world be represented publicly, in their organisational worlds. This sometimes led to tensions between my clients and me, as asserting the value of relational methods developed within the project sometimes challenged adaptive strategies they had adopted in their organisations. I had to choose how far to accommodate these strategies, and how strongly to assert the project need for accreditation. My choices, as were my clients, were based on a political reading of the contexts in which we were operating, as well as more individual considerations. As I have shown in my case studies, these choices were not made easily or comfortably. Strong negative as well as positive emotions had to be held and processed in order to sustain collaboration.

I suggest this was a territory within my consultancy in which a special kind of relational work took place: women working across thresholds, transforming power relationships through feminist collaboration. I will now return to relational psychoanalysts to conceptualise in greater depth the issues that arise between women who cross these thresholds.

*Recognition between women*

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity and suggested that it offered a way of understanding the world of passions between women through a relational lens. In this section I will use her concepts of intersubjectivity and of 'recognition' (Benjamin 1990, 1995) to conceptualise the relational skills I used to work with blocks to collaboration, exchange and learning between women.

In my case studies, recognition between women was not a straightforward or easy process. As Benjamin asserts, to give recognition the other must be recognised as a person in her own right:

> Recognition is that response from the other that makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realise its agency in a tangible way. But such recognition can only come from an other that we in turn recognise as a person in his or her own right. (Benjamin 1990: p12).

Drawing from Benjamin, I conceptualised as intersubjective fields the spaces within which consultants and clients, women in organisational roles, came together. In these spaces women's relationships were sustained on a number of different levels as women spoke alternately in their organisational roles, from their political positions, and from their individual needs and desires.

The close association between the substance of our work on gender equality, and our individual desires for equality and recognition, lent a quality of passion to our approaches that suffused our interactions. At the same time, differences in our political approaches and strategies for organisational survival lent a messy and often explosive quality to our working relationships that I have described in my case studies. Each individual spoke both from her private inner world representations of the other, and the intersubjective shared world of relating with another person. The needs and desires which came into play may not all have been consciously held, but were expressed directly or indirectly in the intersubjective field.


*Relational practices for intersubjective spaces*

What then are the relational skills associated with doing consultancy within these intersubjective fields?

I have shown that relationships between women in organisational roles are riven by powerful emotions. In my inquiry these included desires for nurturing, protection, friendship, love, passionate engagement, recognition, legitimation and accreditation. I explored how these dynamics were enacted between women at different levels of power in my consultancy projects. Other psychodynamic organisation research studies document women in Western cultures who experienced this dynamic (Graves Dumas 1985; Hirschorn 1993). In this research the desire to be nurtured, or to be nurturing, often sabotaged women's capacity to perform in their

organisational role, and created a double bind or no-win situation.

It is not the job of the consultant to prevent breakdown of subject to subject relationships, but to develop in clients the ability to repair these relationships when they do break down.  Repair and breakdown are not permanent states, but rather moments of creative or destructive connection, or disconnection.

Important relational skills for the consultant, then, are those associated with creating environments in which the intersubjective field between women is recognised and named as a part of the lived reality of women in organisations.
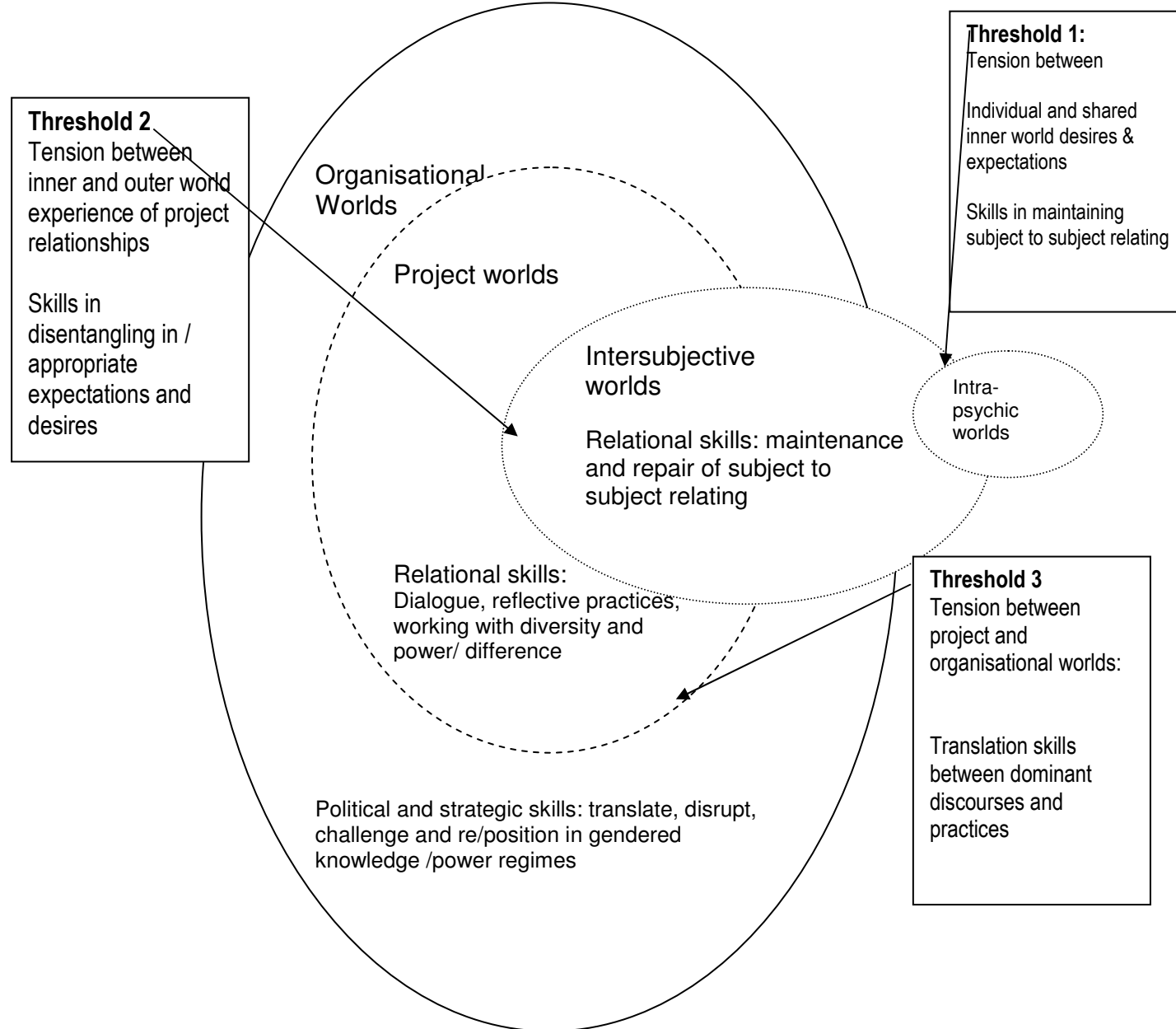

**Working across thresholds**

*Between project and organisational worlds*

Figure 2 below illustrates the thresholds between intrapsychic, intersubjective, project and organisational worlds inhabited by individuals in my case studies.

- Individuals inhabit these worlds simultaneously; boundaries between them are permeable.
- Travelling between worlds involves an ability to operate skilfully with different systems of representation and meaning, and to 'translate' knowledge across thresholds, into different languages and cultures.
- These skills are political, in the sense that they require making strategic assessments of how to operate within, and challenge, gendered power regimes.

**Figure 2:**
**A framework for understanding partnership challenges**

Threshold 1:
Tension between

Individual and shared
inner world desires &
expectations

Skills in maintaining
subject to subject relating

**Threshold 2**
Tension between
inner and outer world
experience of project
relationships

Skills in
disentangling in /
appropriate
expectations and
desires

Organisational
Worlds

Project worlds

Intersubjective
worlds

Relational skills: maintenance
and repair of subject to
subject relating

Intra-
psychic
worlds

Relational skills:
Dialogue, reflective practices,
working with diversity and
power/ difference

**Threshold 3**
Tension between
project and
organisational worlds:

Translation skills
between dominant
discourses and
practices

Political and strategic skills: translate, disrupt,
challenge and re/position in gendered
knowledge /power regimes

- They are relational in the sense that they involve an ability to manage subject to subject relationships, in the context of political and organisational tasks and goals.

Threshold 1 concerns managing the interface between issues arising from the individual's inner world - the 'intrapsychic' - and issues that arise within relationships between two individuals – their 'intersubjective' worlds. Breakdowns in dialogue and collaboration that I explored in my case studies arose when individual desires and needs were projected into project leaders and could not be met. Using Benjamin's and Lugones' notions, at these moments subject to subject interactions broke down and subject to object interactions took over.  These could and did occur between consultant and client, and between project participants.  The consultant needs to develop critical self awareness, a capacity to maintain awareness of desires of her own that may come into play, an ability to suspend them when they are not appropriate to context, and to make judgements about how to interpret them when they are relevant.

Threshold 2 refers to maintaining collaborations constructed in organisational or project worlds when individuals cross the thresholds between these worlds, and to holding the tension between the different roles and expectations constructed in each of these different worlds.

At threshold 3 these tensions are played out through the politics of representation: how to 'translate' knowledge produced in and embedded in relationships within one 'world' in a form that will be understood, and can effectively challenge power relationships in another.

The consultant and her clients require specific methods and skills to work across these thresholds.  They must not only create 'project world' environments in which partners can develop knowledge and work practices which support their political collaboration; but also equip their clients to assert the value of the working practices in which they are engaged, in relation to their sponsoring organisations' objectives.  As I have shown above, this transfer of knowledge across a threshold between worlds is complex and involves multi-levelled challenges.

As my case studies demonstrate, the consultant and project partners may find their work is 'disappeared' by individual partners with whom they are working.  In some work environments relational methods may be characterised by women and men alike as to do with friendship: nice, but not real work (Fletcher 1998).  She must be prepared to recognise this as a manifestation of dominant systems of power/knowledge, and their reproduction. In order to build credibility she must demonstrate bicultural skills: ability to perform and to enable her clients to perform, within the dominant discourses of their organisations, without losing the ethos of the project values and approach.

In each case study there were 'flashpoints' where sets of values associated with different worlds came into conflict; these flashpoints occurred on the thresholds indicated on figure 2.  In each case study, strong emotions associated with these flashpoints had to be 'held' within the consultancy relationship or in relationships with co-consultants.  They were tackled as

crises on two levels. On a practical level, a form had to be found for representing our work as valuable within the dominant discourses of sponsoring organisations. On a 'relational' level the crises were lived out within my consultancy as crises of recognition and affirmation.

## Conclusions

In writing this chapter I developed the metaphor of the feminist consultant and her clients as 'world travellers' moving between a variety of different organisational and intersubjective worlds.

In their critique of the research literature that promotes the idea that women bring specific 'feminine' attributes to management, Calas and Smircich suggest alternative metaphors to convey more radical political qualities which women might bring into leadership in organisations (Calas and Smircich 1993). From the position at which I have arrived through this inquiry I offer the following to add these images:

> The feminist action researcher, more than a traveller, is a political actor who uses inquiry to challenge gendered power / knowledge regimes, to envision and bring into being new epistemological and intersubjective worlds. To do so she needs to develop a repertoire of relational and political skills. She tries to hold open intersubjective spaces between women, naming the tension between inner and outer worlds, fantasy and reality, concerning women's expectations and desires of each other. She holds the tension between yearning to find refuge in each other and her political assessment of what common ground it is possible to build. To do so she will explore the links between women's inner world responses and organisational outer world realities; and draw upon feminist theory to legitimate and validate women's contributions to organisations. She will need to be aware of the dangerous and seductive appeal of merged attachment between women - and of how this might be played out in her consultancy relationships with women who are her clients. She will draw on all these skills to remain grounded in her own ontology, and from this position, seek to create and sustain her own 'secure enough' base. From this base she will make political assessments of how to position and present herself, in order to assert the value of her work. In Stanley's words, she works at:

> 'An interface between different knowledges, different knowledge claims, in which difference is spoken through the conjunction knowledge/power' (Stanley 1997:p2).

In this chapter I introduced the framework I developed to understand and work with the challenges to sustaining collaboration which arose in two different women's partnership projects.

What you might ask has all this feminist theory to do with the practicalities of partnership work for women's voluntary and community organisations – many of which would not identify as 'feminist' in any case?

In reply I will end with a quote from Liz Stanley, a reminder that women's equality continues to be controversial, to provoke hostility, in whatever form it is presented:

> And what should not be forgotten is the intensely emotional character of much of the reaction and resistance to dissenting feminist ideas, including reactions by incorporated feminisms to those other Others, the feminists who are not like 'us', who are too extreme, or too different…we are not like that! (Stanley 1997: p8).

These divisions, and the intensely emotional character of resistance to feminist ideas, characterise the borderlands that we inhabit as women who organise to promote equality within 'mainstream' and within voluntary or community organisations, or who support this work as consultants, policy makers or funders. As individuals we 'do gender' differently, balancing our political principles with our strategies for professional or business self-promotion and survival.

In order to build sites of individual and collective resistance and change we need to work in partnership. The framework that I offer in this chapter is intended to support this work.

In my research I set out to understand more clearly what happens between women who come together to work towards greater gender equality, within and across organisations, and to develop a language to speak about the challenges with which we confront each other.

I was challenged many times to re-consider my focus on relationships between women.  Is there anything specific or different about the challenges women experience in building collaborative relationships?  Does the act of making this the focus of my research play into stereotypes and imply that women have more difficulty in doing what men do more easily?

My findings establish that women do experience specific challenges; and that these concern both 'inner world' desires enacted towards women – by women and men - and 'outer world' expectations embedded in organisational and social structures, cultures and practices.

Through my action inquiry, I developed methods for coming to a deeper understanding of these challenges through my consultancy practice.  The framework I developed conceptualises the challenges and offers a lens for naming the skills needed to build and sustain collaborative relationships and partnerships in the challenging environments in which we live and work.

Since I completed my research I have tested this framework with women and men who are seeking new ways of understanding and addressing challenges they are encountering in their partnership work.  These partnerships brought together individuals from widely differing organisations, sectors of countries. In each case challenges concerned how to work with different expectations, embedded in specific cultures, organisational contexts, values and practices. Their feedback confirmed that the framework is widely applicable as a means of understanding the methods and skills needed build collaboration and learning between diverse partners.

In my action inquiry women brought specific subjectivities, desires and needs into their collaborative and consultancy relationships. This gave rise to expectations that may have been specific to the individuals and the contexts in which they were working. However, it may also be the case that working with conflicting and passionately held beliefs and expectations may be a feature of 'cross boundary' or partnership work. To facilitate effective collaboration across organisational boundaries and roles specific methods and skills are needed.

In my inquiry I named these methods and skills associated with crossing borders, working with situated knowledge, and keeping open intersubjective spaces.  They required a high degree of critical self awareness, a variety of relational skills and the ability to exercise political judgement.  Within the project spaces we used these skills to create environments in which women's achievements were named, affirmed and accredited, and from which to assert the value of these achievements in the organisational worlds in which we worked. When collaboration failed, we drew from the same skills to

understand the reason for breakdown and seek to repair the damage and protect and promote the work of the project.

As I introduced inquiry more directly into my consultancy, I was able to invite colleagues and clients to engage directly in dialogue about how we constructed and enacted our relationships on the projects. This increased potential for learning, deepened collaboration, and generated new knowledge and practice.

Through my inquiry I came to recognise that collaboration and partnership cannot be assumed or pre-given, whatever the shared values and politics. Partnership has to be made, and remade, and cannot be guaranteed.

Action inquiry can be used as a means to help create environments and relationships that nourish and sustain working collectively. For example:

> In a recent discussion with a senior manager in social services we exchanged metaphors as a way of exploring the challenges of partnership work. In her organisation social care staff from different agencies and sectors are working in new multi-disciplinary teams, as a move towards more integrated care management. She was planning to invite them to contribute to an action research project to explore the challenges of making partnership work.

> If we think of inter-organisational partnerships as 'mixed marriages', what would the issues be that arose for participants who will have different mother tongues and identities, originating from their different professional, organisational cultures and practices? How did these intersect with gender, race and sexual identities?

> If rather they thought of themselves as being in a no person's land - were they adventurers, pioneers, prisoners, deportees?

> Did they experience partnership work as being 'set up to fail' by government – or as an opportunity to develop new practice and work to new priorities?

> Did they experience homesickness, a sense of belonging to a country they had left? Was it possible to generate a new sense of belonging through relationships within the country they might be creating within the partnership? Would they create a new country- as did the participants in ELP (chapter 3 of this publication) - or prefer to stick to their home territory?

My research and subsequent discussions of the findings suggests that partnership work can be a rich source of creativity and learning, or an embattled war zone. Partnership work is multi-levelled and to be effective requires commitment as well as specific personal, interpersonal as well as professional, organisational and political skills.

The framework I have developed offers concepts and practice for organisations and individuals in partnerships to explore the challenges and understanding the complex skills needed to sustain collaboration within their

work[1].

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## APPENDIX: MAPPING THE TERRITORY OF WORKPLACE DYNAMICS BETWEEN WOMEN

This appendix contains
- an analysis of key findings from a series of six interviews I conducted in the first phase of my inquiry;
- a political commentary on these findings.

The women interviewed were speaking of their experience of interactions with women colleagues in voluntary, statutory and corporate organisations. Four of them were referring specifically to work with women on women's development programmes or with women's organisations.

In these interviews I identified similar patterns of experience, both positive and negative, and discussed how to interpret them. I refer to the women I interviewed as contributors to my inquiry.

### Analysis of interview findings

Contributors identified specific features that they associated with working relationships with women.  For each of these they identified they identified contrasting approaches that they associated with men.  They also identified positive and negative features of women's relationships.

The first section of this appendix sets out gender specific features they identified. The second section sets out positive and negative aspects that they identified of women's expectations of each other.  The third section sets out key factors they identified as determining women's interactions.

*What women bring to work roles: gender differences identified by contributors*

- Bringing (more) emotion and passion into their work and finding it less easy to set these aside where necessary to carry out a task; men tend to compartmentalise
- Being (more) overly concerned with relationship, being more holistic; looking at the whole dynamic, where men just get on with the task
- Wanting to or being expected to nurture by women and by men: men are expected and more likely to challenge and compete

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- Being expected to work within consensus and not being allowed, by women or by men, to rock the boat or expected to challenge
- Having more fluid boundaries between friendship and work, being more likely to make friends or introduce references to 'home' into work relationships; men keep more solid boundaries and are more likely to sexualise friendship or friendly gestures by women colleagues
- Seeking to build professional relationships with each other on trust, empathy, shared values/project, collaborative; men more likely to focus exclusively on task without attending to process, and less trusting, more sequential division of labour
- Women often adapt to male expectations in how they relate to men. Women often move between male and female ways of relating – between shadow and formal systems
- Caring for individuals and caring for process to achieve task; managing the tension when these are in conflict
- Managing boundaries: juggling social stereotypes and professional roles and setting boundaries when this is necessary to keep to task

Stories which contributors told suggested that these features of how women prefer to work were not valued in their working environments. Yet they also showed that these qualities were features of their own working relationships and were the enjoyable aspects of their work with women.

The depth with which contributors engaged with the discussion seemed to indicate that these relationships with women were important, but little explored; their stories suggested that risk emanated from the devaluing environments in which they were working.

Contributors' initial ambivalence about the inquiry topic may have signalled fear of being devalued once again by oversimplified negative comparisons to behaviours based on a male norm.

In discussion contributors stressed that they did not consider these qualities 'better' or 'worse' than those associated with men; vigorously contested any suggestions that all women shared these characteristics; and referred to other differences such as national or regional culture, ethnicity, sexuality, class as just as important as gender in determining how women approached their roles and each other.


*Women's expectations and experiences of each other in professional relationships*

*Negative experiences*

This was a painful and difficult area. Two of the contributors denied having any specific expectations of women and then moved on to describe painful or negative experiences from which they distanced themselves. Two owned specific expectations that they held and/or experienced from women, based on stereotypes which had negative consequences and which undermined their authority.

Stories of negative experiences illustrated expectations not being met in the following areas:

- Women not valuing each other's work on women's equality:
    - younger generations of women not appreciating the role feminists have played to make their career progression possible
    - a woman manager devaluing her work with women on equal opportunities
    - women's organisations devaluing their own work
- Women not allowing each other to lead, negative descriptions of women's leadership
- Women liking each other / needing to be liked given too high a priority and getting in the way of working to goals
- Women in positions of power more defined by their relationships than their positions; e.g. in hierarchies relationships with other women at lower levels in the hierarchy are experienced as threatening by male peers
- Disagreement between women experienced by other women to which they referred as unsupportive - unfeminine and unfeminist
- Envy and resentment at individual success, in the public sphere
- Competitive dynamics between women when in male presence
- Loss of women's friendship when refused to conform to gendered expectations
    - women resisting and resenting challenge, expecting to be nurtured by each other
    - hostility from women when not affirmed in 'oppressed' victim / oppositional roles
- Permeable boundaries and a desire to care for the other making it hard to say no or assert task related needs; over-reliance on and clumsy use of formal processes. Discomfort with exercising power over, experiencing this as dysfunctional and not a part of themselves they like very much - 'Fuhrer mode'
- Wanting to be 'one with the girls' – to be liked- friendship or collaboration rather than exercising responsibility or power over
- Rejection of friendship / love where this was experienced as in conflict with managerial roles.
- Having to be constantly 'on guard' against breaches in authority – from men, from women, from inner voices

*Positive experiences*

All of the contributors identified and described positive experiences specific to their professional and working relationships with women; without exception they also identified more problematic aspects.

- Feminists / women working together towards shared goals, challenging, debating and arriving at agreements to work on defined tasks across difference of opinion and leadership styles
- Excellent leadership and management by a woman boss in a mixed organisation - corporate setting
- Passion and friendship without losing sight of task focus (all aspired to this model): looking after the individual and the process

- Building relationship through shared values; jointly building something, sharing credit, trust
- Paying attention to the small things: the individual not just the role
- Mixing the personal and the professional
- Shared passion for the work and fun
- Connecting easily with women about ideas, buzz, creativity, shared humour

These positive experiences were identified less easily than the negative. In four cases negative stories were told first to illustrate woman to woman dynamics.

In two cases positive examples were given first, but in one of these it was a surprise to the contributor to associate these with a woman-specific pattern. In the other, the example given illustrated qualities the contributor associated with her own enjoyment of working with a woman client, in contrast to her client's male or female peers who did not appreciate these qualities.

*Problematic aspects*

Why were these positive and enjoyable experiences described with such ambivalence? In the following I indicate how I analysed the reasons for this ambivalence in terms offered by contributors, and indicate where they have been substantiated by research:

- These ways of working are devalued within malestream cultures (Fletcher 1998; Marshall 1984) and these cultures often predominate in organisations
- Process and relational work is perceived to be at odds with effectiveness within performance cultures rather than as enhancing performance
- In gender-mixed organisations, senior men often closely monitor women to women relationships across differences of power. They often perceive these relationships as either 'breaking ranks' with the order of power based on male hierarchy or as a basis for devaluing the status of the more senior woman by association
- Women have difficulty with 'power over' and are not good at reconciling this with their preferred way of building work relationships through empathy and collaboration working on women's equality issues is no longer valued within my organisation
- Many men and women have an investment in reproducing gendered stereotypes and cannot tolerate women who break them
- Women are threatened by each other's success or exercise of power in the public sphere 'unfortunately women do not value each other' (referring to women's organisations).

The evidence suggested that my contributors, whose value bases differed widely, all valued the positive aspects of woman to woman interactions they described and shared different degrees of disappointment and pain around the negative aspects. They identified two factors as essential to maintaining their authority in professional settings. These were having an affirmative alternative value base, and learning how to use power to maintain their authority in professional settings.

None of them considered either their belief in or commitment to women's equality or the attributes they brought from gender role socialisation as

sufficient to equip them to deal with the realities of expectations and responses from men and women in work based relationships.

What these contributions suggested is that women needed an ability to work against social conditioning, their own and others', in order to access and exercise leadership and position power. They needed this in relation to each other, as well as in relation to men. Their stories suggested to me that women need to navigate between the different worlds of professional work-based relationships and gendered social expectations and to develop a set of competencies that are adapted to that challenge. However this was not stated explicitly by contributors, nor was it a conclusion with which they would necessarily agree. I developed this theme in my own analysis throughout my inquiry.

In the next subsection I summarise what factors contributors did identify to make sense of their accounts of gender difference and woman to woman interactions. I then move back to explore their accounts of their strategies and practice in working with these dynamics with women clients and colleagues.

*What key factors did contributors identify as determining women to women interactions?*

*Political and social environment*

For one contributor key factors determining interactions between women in organisational roles were their political views, the organisational context in which they were operating, and political environment. For another contributor who was talking about mixed corporate organisations, key factors were other differences through which gender was mediated such as individual temperament, levels of experience, cultural context, age. In both cases their lens reflected the organisational cultures of which they were a part: feminist politics and the US corporate sector's focus on the individual and diversity. Both made reference to changes in the work environment to which women were adapting. In the US corporation, team based flatter structures meant women and men had learned to be effective team members. In the UK women's organisation, the performance and contract culture had introduced a move towards service and away from feminist social change and political campaigning which had consequences for organisational structure and roles. Managerial values had replaced the collective while loss of shared values had led to breakdown of working relationships.

*Alternative Values*

For three contributors, an alternative value base from which to actively counter normative social expectations of women was key to positive women to women interactions in professional roles. One stated at the beginning of her interview that her expectations and disappointments in relation to women were related to their feminist and not their gender identity.

'Earth-based philosophies' had offered two of them a way of valuing their own leadership qualities and a framework for development work with women and women's organisations. Both described themselves as working against prevailing norms and expectations associated with traditional gender roles expressed by both women and men.

Three of them did not refer to holding alternative value frames, but did describe themselves or women with whom they were working as sometimes in conflict with the prevailing organisational values as expressed by women or men.


*Experience, learned behaviour and ways of being*

Three of them referred to learnt skills as key in knowing how to exercise authority for women – and being new to position power as a disadvantage. Two described their own process of learning and teaching from a new value base which challenged women's socialisation and gender based expectations from men and women. The latter showed that while leadership skills might come naturally, women needed to learn how to exercise them in male-defined social and organisational environments where both women and men enacted traditional gender stereotypes and kept them in place.


*Gender norms and socialisation*

All contributors referred to and illustrated gender difference in professional roles, qualified with a statement of doubt about the validity of making generalisations. It was as if the act of naming the differences was painful, and risky.

Contributors made statements about gender difference as we explored specific incidents. They emphasised that women were as able and as competent as men at performing within norms of effectiveness defined within their organisations. They also referred to aspects of their own work relationships with women that they valued, but which were at odds with or at a tangent to organisational expectations. This tension between what they valued and what was valued in their organisations created tensions that were problematic.

As the quotes below illustrate, they spoke of hopes and disappointments – and often isolation:

> In a women's organisation like X for e.g. there is that lack of a shared vision of what feminism is - the most awful things have been going on - women being really nasty to each other in the organisation. Taking grievances against each other as staff members and part of that I think is the professionalisation of voluntary organisations - all now have targets in order to get money they're supposed to run like commercial organisations - how many widgets you produce.
> *Interview with A*

> I had these expectation of X because she was a woman and I expected

her to behave in a certain way and certainly if there was a conflict with a man I expected her to take my side .....it was only on the very last day of working with her and I........... took on board what her organisational role was and her position in reorganisation and relationships and how these affected what she could and couldn't do....
*Interview with E.*

*The politics of my inquiry*

In my approach to these  interviews I attempted to steer a difficult path. In my framing of my questions and approach to analysis, I invited contributors to take part in dialogue on their experiences of women's interactions in organisational settings without assuming that these were gender specific. However, my approach was primarily informed by research which identifies women specific attributes and asserts their positive value for managers and leaders in organisations (Fletcher 1998; Gilligan 1993; Helgeson 1990; Oseen 1997).

In the closing stages of my inquiry it became clearer to me that feminist collaboration between women has its own distinct character; research on attributes which women bring to business based leadership and management roles must therefore be read critically for its relevance to my inquiry.  I needed to re-examine my approach, which had been informed by the research on the specific attributes that women bring to leadership and work roles.

My contributors were speaking from experience situated in a variety of different environments.  All of them did without difficulty identify specific patterns in their interactions with women in work contexts and these had both generative and degenerative qualities.  However, they all resisted drawing general conclusions and asserted the specificity of their experience in relation to context and location.

Calas and Smircich develop a political critique of research associated with what they refer to as the 'feminine in management'.  They ask 'what is the historical significance of recent discussions about 'women's ways of leading'? Do they really create new opportunities for women?'  (Calas and Smircich 1993, p 71), and argue that these approaches simply re-state existing management practices under a different name.  They assert that what is needed is a critical re-examination of the theoretical and political assumptions sustaining the notions of 'management' and 'leadership' (p. 72).

> The feminine in management would help in converting 'diversity' into homogeneous team players under a caring motherly gaze.
> (Calas and Smircich 1993: p75).

Re-reading this article acted as a wake up call to me in the closing stages of my inquiry.  In asking what *political* purpose the 'feminine-in-management' research may serve, I was reminded that the patterns I had identified were based on the experience and analysis of women in specific in their political, historical and organisational contexts.  These women recognised the institutional structures of gender inequality, and had experience of strategies

for addressing them through policy and practice in organisations. I recognised that I had been drawn into a more universalising frame through my own identification with attributes described in the management literature on gender difference and my interest in psychoanalytic research and practice. This research spoke to my need for affirmation of these qualities in my professional practice.

Calas and Smircich do not reject claims for gender specific attributes, but rather assert the need to examine the political basis on which they are made. They refer to concerns about the cultural specificity and empirical basis of the research claims (p. 73). They then offer a different way of thinking 'feminine' which would bring a different set of images of 'women' into the global economy (p. 78). These alternative images are firmly rooted in a global vision of social justice, equality and feminist values, countering consumerism with images of the 'frugal housewife' and 'female ingenuity'. Their vision includes an extended network of information through 'women's gossiping', and of the 'hysterical woman' who releases emotion to 'cry and scream in moral indignation for the crimes against humanity committed in the name of economic rationality' (p. 79).

The women who contributed to my inquiry, like myself, experienced a double devaluation, as women and as women identified with work that was not considered necessary or priority. In this context the feminine-in-management research can serve a purpose in affirming qualities which are devalued in many organisational environments.

As some feminist researchers have suggested, this might offer a basis for challenging narrow definitions of 'leadership' and reframing them in order to affirm a range of different approaches and leadership qualities (Alvesson and Billing 1992). However, this would not address the devaluing of gender equality interventions, and its undermining effects on the self-esteem of women and men who are their primary initiators.

Calas and Smircich's alternative images of 'the feminine' led me to ask how could I refer to similarity of pattern which contributors had identified across differences of context and sector, without falling into universalising claims which I wished to avoid? How could I avoid implying such claims, as an unintended result of my intention to document the challenges of feminist collaboration and to develop successful ways of working with them?

At this point in my inquiry I resolved this dilemmas in two ways.
❑ I reaffirmed my initial motivation for embarking on this inquiry, to bring an under-researched area of women's experience of organisational life into the public arena, in order to sustain and promote feminist collaboration.
❑ I moved away from reading research on gender difference and into research on how women (and men) actively construct gender through interaction with each other (Gherardi 1996; West and Zimmerman 1991). I took this concept of enacting gender into my inquiry about relationships between women and asked: 'how do women 'do' gender roles in relation to each other?'

In chapter 5 of this publication I have shown how I developed this further

within my consultancy and my framework for partnership and collaboration.

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