

Interlude – From the story of Sarah Jones – September 2015

Meeting the (post)- Rational Man

The young woman turned the corridor and mounted the short flight of steps in a single bound.

- Why am I *always* late?

She mutters as she darts along the muffled corridor.

- Which room?! Which *room*?!

She flicks open her Blackberry and checks the schedule.

- 'Maple' – why do they give these room these stupid tree-names? I can never remember which one is which. Maple? Maple? Come ON!

She finds the heavy wooden door marked 'Maple' and hauls it open, and twelve pairs of eyes turn towards her.

- Sorry! Sorry! Sorry I'm late. I'll just sit...here...

She parks herself in the nearest available chair, inconveniently at the front of the room.

There is a man standing at the front of the room, clearly interrupted in mid-flow.

- Hi! Welcome. You are...?

- Sarah. Sarah Jones. Sorry I'm late.

- Ah yes, Sarah. No problem, we've only just started. I'll just continue, if you don't mind.

- No! Absolutely...please do.

She tries her best to disappear into her seat. He flashes a brief smile. He has strikingly cold, blue-grey eyes. She notices his height, accentuated by an upright posture.

- So as I was saying...Although I spend much of my time playing along with a myth of myself as in some way complete, and whole, my experience of myself, in my own skin and in the everyday flow of my life is dynamic, changing, even in some way insubstantial. During the course of a day, like everyone else, I experience a whole raft of powerful feelings, sensations, aches, pains, elations...I usually keep these private, perhaps because this is just good taste. And also because I seem to have learnt that they are irrelevant and unhelpful in the course of work. They are OK for the private sphere, to be splashed around willy nilly amongst friends and family. But in the public, serious world of work, they are beyond the pale.

As he talks, he paces across the front of the room, making little eye-contact with the gathering. Sarah notices how cold he is, how unsmiling. He continues.

- But there is a requirement in the course of my research (and in the course of living a better life perhaps) to start to acquire the craft of skilfully putting this everyday experience into the foreground. Why so?

Sarah is drawn to the intriguing paradox of this man: what he is talking about and the way he is talking about it seem so contrasting. His voice seems smooth to her. He is utterly in command. Eleven other faces stare towards him, each with a studied, serious countenance. She counts: 8 women, 4 men. To her he seems the embodiment of the comfortable, male intellectual. He continues:

- Firstly, because in doing so I am developing my awareness of a kind of practice I bring to my work as a consultant. This work is about using my own thoughts, feelings, intuitions and body sensations in the course of diagnosing and working with the human side of organisations. This skill has been given names like 'process consultation' (Schein 1969), or 'self-as-instrument' (Cheung-Judge 2001).

On the screen behind him, the references are flashed up, and Sarah sees the other students furiously scribbling them down.

- So, therefore, in inquiring into this whole experience (thinking, feeling, body etc.) I am developing the skill of reading and working with this side of my own experience, in order to help people's experience with their own, as a source of

intelligence for their decisions and choices in their lives, for their own good and that of the organization that employs them. In order to do this I need to be more aware of my own inner experience and use it in some way as a meter to gauge the inner experience of others.

Sarah reflects on her own inner experience right now. She is tired and hungry. Having come straight from work, she wasn't able to get anything to eat. Grumpily, she reflects on her enduring complaint about the bad timing of these courses.

- Secondly, because when you start to look at this type of experience, and develop some clarity about how to use it in the activity of such work, it demands that you ask a number of searching questions about some of the assumptions that we may take for granted. These questions go to the heart of some very difficult, thorny but fascinating areas of investigation. So let's look at them in more detail:

The screen flashes up a question in bold:

1) Who am I really?

There is a murmur of amusement amongst some of the gathered crowd. Sarah momentarily notices her familiar feelings of separateness once again. The lecturer continues:

- One assumption that this perspective starts to question is the fixed nature of who we are. This isn't a theoretical, philosophical question only, but a very practical one. For example, in the course of my work, I am expected to know things. Companies pay lots of money for me to talk to their employees about how they work and how they can do things better. This suggests that 'who I am' is some kind of expert. But increasingly, as I have been doing this work, I am troubled by this assumption. I find that the more I just accept in an unquestioning way that 'I know this stuff', (about gender for example), that I am an 'expert', and that I pretend I know how things can work better (even when I know I don't!), the less satisfied I feel about the results. The more I stay with an idea of *not* knowing the answers, but of staying connected to the people I am working with, and helping them work out the answers for themselves, the better, more powerful the conversations seem to be, and the more useful people say they find them (sometimes, but not always). So this gets me thinking...Am I an 'expert' and if so, what am I an expert in? And who pays good money for people who *don't* know the answer...?

The thing that really strikes her is how much he mentions money. Part of her feels envious. She is ambitious and is drawn to the idea of making money. But part of her is irritated by what lands with her as a boast.

- Secondly, I can see that 'who I am', isn't just an important question to me, it is important to others. I am increasingly conscious that although I can't see 'me' in everyday action (because I am too busy doing stuff), the way I am, that for example I am over six foot tall, well-spoken, having quite a big man's body, white skin and so on; all of this has an impact on how I am seen and listened to. People hear things I say and can make quite a different sense of them than if someone else says it. This doesn't mean they always agree with me; I just have an inkling that this body has an impact; that it is much more a part of me than I realise. This man's body has an impact on people, even before I've opened my mouth.

- Your not kidding

She mutters under her breath. And writes on her notepad: But what difference does it make? Do you make? Are you a good man?

- If you look at it, having a big, white man's body might be a bit of a problem. Why so? Because many people are critical (and rightly so, I think), of what big, white men have done in the world. Both women and children have experienced

white men, over the years, as a bit of a threat. I feel very uncomfortable about this. We are told that these big white men (and I have to accept that for many people that is what I am) have been abusive and even violent towards others. They have started wars, run bad governments, exploiting companies and have hurt people. This is a perspective that I have been conscious of since I was a teenager, and it has made me increasingly uncomfortable about having this big man's body, (especially as mine has got bigger and bigger over the years, and not in ways that I feel good about).

There is laughter around the room. She doesn't join in.

- And we are also told by some that white men have dominated and bullied black people, as slaves, or in the wars we are still fighting (in Iraq or Afghanistan for example) and that this is also something I need to take some responsibility for. This is a tricky one for me, because although I do indeed have a white skin, I am also Jewish, and we Jews also have a history of being bullied.

She notices a change around the room. This lands as a kind of announcement, and her impression of him changes, before her eyes, and she feels an immediate twinge of sympathy towards him. It's as if this man, all 'in one piece', has fragmented slightly.

- Sometimes, I try to address these questions head on. That is why I have been involved in men's groups for twenty years. Sometimes I ignore it all and just get on with my life. But if I begin to think that I am not one of those (bad) men; that I am different (and better) kind of man, I may catch sight of when I am behaving in a particular way that fits the profile of these nasty, dominating men (like when I shout at my own children), and I feel ashamed again. So I am back where I started.

Sarah feels slightly guilty about her own judgements of the man. Was she too harsh, and did her pattern of holding herself as an outsider lead her to a more strident judgement of him? Her supervisor has told her before that she tends to 'black and white' things a bit too much. Somehow, now he seems softer to her, less strident, less smooth. But did the mentioning of his children, making this private fact more public, act as a disruption or an entrenchment of his dominance in the room?

- But I wonder whether there is a different response. Are there things I can do to feel better about myself as a man and still respond to this criticism of men that may be valid?

The screen flashes up another big sign, and again she is irritated by the technosmoothness of it all:

2) What does this mean about knowledge?

- This leads me to another one of those assumptions that I have started to question. I was educated into the idea that knowledge was a constant thing; that it didn't vary according to who said it. I am not sure I believe this anymore. I have glimpsed this problem in my own life: my white man's body seems to have an impact on people, even though I think I am 'just a person, like everyone else'.

Michael Kimmel put this problem very well, when he was asked by a black woman what he saw when he looked into the mirror after he gets up in the morning.

The screen flickers again:

"Well," I said, "when I look in the mirror, I see a human being." I'm universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I'm the generic person! (Kimmel 2006) p 3.

Sarah reflects on her own self-consciousness in the mirror. She is more than aware of being seen as a young woman, especially at work, when people talk to her in particularly patronising ways. She realises how she accepts this as normal and, in her own terms, just 'gets on with it'.

- Like Michael Kimmel, I am uncomfortable about this idea that in some way how I see the world is how everyone does, or should see it; that we all see it the same way. Men don't tend to see the way things are in the world and how they are seen by others, a bit like a fish doesn't see the water it swims in. Because we are men, and men have this special powerful, position in the world (especially white, middle-class men) we can't see what it is. You have to be a woman, a child or a black person to see it. This is what is meant by subjectivity. So in this research project, I have to start to see myself, and also see *how* I see. But *how* does this *how* work?

So how do I see the world? It was a confronting idea. Was how she saw things bound up with who she was, as a woman? This was a novel idea to her.

- Normally, when we research something, we look at it as if we can see it objectively, without any bias, but just as it is. But how can we do this about ourselves? This is a real challenge, and it means we have to do our research in quite a different way to, say, how we research something outside of ourselves, that we don't feel quite so emotionally involved in. How does a fish do research into the water it swims in?

Part of the problem of why men don't really see themselves (as men) but as generic human beings, in the way Michael Kimmel describes it, is because over the years, the way we see the world, and make sense of it (what we might call 'reason'), has become totally confused and bound up with being a man. The modern, scientific view of the world, as put together by men (particularly in Europe and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period of the 'Enlightenment'), seemed to conflate the idea of Masculinity (that is, a way of being a man) and Reason (that is, of thinking the 'right way' about the world). This isn't surprising, as these were white, European men, and they would think that, wouldn't they? As Victor Seidler says:

Another quote:

We have inherited a historical identification of masculinity with reason and morality. (Seidler 1989) p2

- Influential philosophers from that time, like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), deliberately sought to separate the ability to reason from the feelings, desires and experiences we have, (the very things that I would maintain I am trying to learn more about in order to do my work as a Consultant).

The central concern of Kant's greatest masterpiece, the Critique of Pure Reason, is with the possibility of metaphysics, understood as philosophical knowledge that transcends the bounds of experience. (Allison 1999) p116

- So these men associated this reason with their own 'universal reason' and the lack of it, (in the desires, feelings, their everyday experiences, bodily sensations and all these things that weren't 'reasonable'), with everyone else

(women, children, black people etc.). This is how they 'disappeared' their own personal experience and bodies (other than their rational thought) from public life and scientific research. They had good intentions in doing this; they wanted to get rid of unreasonable superstition and prejudice, but in doing so, they forgot some of their own prejudices.

It is our reason that allows us to calculate the rightness of our action, through a process of abstracting from particular situations and working out whether our action is in principle universalizable. Yet the claim to objective rightness, as well as the fragmentation of the self on which it is built, and the shifting of questions of morality into a realm of abstraction, can be argued to be itself a normalization of a particular kind of masculine experience. (Seidler 1989) p3

- In recent times, philosophers have been very critical of this universal, general perspective (which they argue is the perspective of an elite group of mostly men). They have become very critical of the 'modernism' that was based on this reasonable worldview. Postmodernism and critical theory have developed to include the subjectivities of others; black people, women, children.

Critical theorists see the modernists' project as sick and see hope for reconstruction in recovery of good parts and redirecting the future. Postmodernists pronounce its death and proclaim the absence of a thinkable future. (Alvesson and Deetz 2005) p66-67

- But in the course of this critique, it has left us men in a strange kind of double-bind, as Vic Seidler says:

So it is that men become strangely invisible to themselves. (Seidler 1989) p4

Sarah is startled. The strange circularity of the situation she is in is uncomfortable. She seems a man, talking *about* something which is clearly important to him, and in terms with which she has great sympathy. But she also sees a man, a 'king in his own court', declaiming on something in a way which strikes her as pretty traditional, to an (almost) universally dotting audience. How visible is *he*? The paradox of the situation intrigues her.

- To understand and investigate ourselves, to make ourselves more visible, is to break the rules of the very scientific 'rationality' which we have created, bringing our bodies, with their irrationality and irregularity, back into the public sphere. And also, how do we know how to judge what good might be now? If reason and rationality had a moral power in Kant's time, and yet it is unmasked as in some way a prejudicial perspective in our own, and we want not just to know how we can re-appear to ourselves as men, but also to have some idea what *good* might be, in our own knowing and action, this double-bind tightens in on us still further.

Sarah has thought about double-binds, but usually in the context of women; in her own context. She is aware that she is expected to behave like a man to get on in her organisation, but then feels ostracised for 'having balls'. So, do men have double binds too...?

- To take the Post-modern turn at its most extreme, to be a white, middle-class man is potentially to risk disappearance completely, because the whole future,

unthinkable as one cohesive project, is one best left to the 'others', those we have marginalised and oppressed, with their diverse subjectivities. Action towards goodness, in our own case, as men, becomes at best very problematic and at worst, impossible. Any definition of such is in some way an oppression, because of its source, which is us white middle class men, with our invisible bodies and a reason only of our own making.

The man turns to the audience and stands still for the first time. He seems to look at Sarah very directly.

- I reject this extreme because as a man it doesn't lead me anywhere useful. It doesn't help me relate to my children, or be better at my work, or help women or black people in their liberatory project, to which I have always been sympathetic (maybe because I grew up with women and black people who I cared about).

Again, she feels drawn towards him. But she also notices something else that she was half consciously bothering her – it is his fluidity. There is something so seamless about his talk. Yet how could he hope to have such an impact without this fluidity? She saw some of the double-bind he was talking about, and yet she was still bothered by it.

- On the other hand, I don't want to entirely reject the challenge of this critical perspective. Perhaps it can help me too, to be more in touch with these other subjectivities, to consider them and my own ones as well. So as a research approach, I am walking along an edge that tries to encompass both these critical viewpoints of the white, male world, and a developmental perspective that can help move beyond it. Like Bob Pease:

I side with those expressions of post modern thinking that do not totally abandon the values of modernity and the Enlightenment project of human emancipation. ...I believe that a 'weak' form of post modernism informed by critical theory can contribute effectively to the construction of an emancipatory politics concerned with political action and social justice. (Pease 2000) p24

- But for a white, middle class man, doing research from this perspective is a bit of challenge because there is always the spectre of that sure-or-itself, (disembodied) reason that haunts the success of this project. The myth of a (rational) male wholeness has been exploded but like the echo of the Big Bang in the white noise of a TV screen, it still reverberates and occasionally deafens us white men to other ways of knowing. Nevertheless, and driven by a hope in my heart (which as an embodied impetus, is a good a sign) I am wondering if there is another 'wholeness', on the far side of (post-modern) fragmentation and (useful) feminist/critical challenge, one that is more fleeting, 'in the moment', embodied and relational, (even ironic?), with which as men we can replace the mythical wholeness of the 'rational' (enlightened) male self?

Half an hour later, Sarah is standing by the door of the seminar room, chatting to a fellow student. The lecturer comes past.

- Dr. Porter?
- Yes? ...Sarah isn't it?
- Yes. Sarah Jones. I wonder if...could I ask you a couple of questions?

The man looks at his watch and shifts nervously from foot to foot. She continues hesitantly...

- I mean, if now isn't very convenient...

- No, well, yes, actually I am late for my next meeting. Could we organise something, some other time?
- I just wanted to ask you...about some of what you were saying, I wondered if you could say more about the practice of doing the type of research you have been doing?
- Yes of course, but now really isn't a good time. Could you...? I tell you what: have a look at my PhD thesis, it's all in there. It is in the Learning Resource Centre. It explains a lot. About those practices of inquiry. Then we can have a chat.
- Should I come...?
- ...to my office. Fourth floor, you can't miss it. At the end of the corridor.
- Thanks. I will.
- Yes, sorry, I must go.

He strides off. She watches him go. His jacket billows up and fills the hallway behind him.