

Section 1 - The Frame

Chapter 3 - My Story: The Professional Black woman

Introduction

Central to an understanding of the blocks and barriers to our ability to realise our potential and to thrive is the exploration of our experiences in organisations. Indeed, it was the confusion and distress stemming from some of my work experiences that first kindled within me the desire, and later determination, to understand which of these obstacles flow from my own personal pathology and which ones were symptoms of the institutionalised discrimination which riddles our system. Even though at that time the personal motives for this work were not yet consciously known.

At the time of starting this research I thought that my main concern was to understand the challenges and difficulties encountered by organisations in moving Equal Opportunities from espoused values enshrined in policies and procedures to practices. I did not anticipate that my own personal experience would in itself be relevant and important data. In Chapter 6 I describe the process of redefinition of my topic that made me conscious of the importance of my own data. With hindsight it is clear that even if the project's objectives had remained defined in relation to the needs of organisations, my own first hand experience as both a facilitator of change and as a Black woman working in such organisations would be valuable data. However, allowing myself to acknowledge the validity of my experience for inclusion in this study has been something, which has posed many challenges for me. Some of these struggles are explored later in the thesis.

In this chapter I review my career as a journey exploring the various staging posts and selecting from the plethora of stories at each stage, narratives that illustrate the nature of my experience as a Black woman manager. As I go, I identify some of the ways in which my growth and development was/is intentionally or unintentionally hindered; and unravel and reveal my learned, automatic responses (coping / survival strategies) to the situations I face.

Starting the career journey: transition from school to work

The first ten years of my working life were spent in the Civil Service. This has influenced many subsequent life and career decisions and experiences - yet my entry into the Civil Service was serendipitous. It was by no means the result of any strategic career planning process but rather a happy accident happened upon while in a state of depressed disorientation. At the time of starting this journey it seemed to be simply a means to occupying my time, gaining some skills and earning some money. It did not occur to me that I was making decisions that would influence the rest of my life. I had always assumed that I would work outside of the home and that I would have a career.

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From a fairly young age I made a distinction between a job and a career. Coming from a background where pragmatism as a survival strategy is embedded in the culture, I had planned to acquire marketable skills such as typing or hairdressing and then to allow myself the luxury of choosing the career I wanted. Reflecting back it is clear that I lacked proper career guidance. Considering the careers in which I was interested while growing up it is clear that my career choices were largely influenced by the roles of women in my favourite novels! Within that limited group I rejected some possibilities, e.g. being an air hostess, as I had not seen a Black air hostess - in real life or in the media - and I did not think that prospective employers would accept Black women. I was interested in history and fascinated by archaeology, however the possibility of working in a museum or associated field were excluded as I perceived them to be highly competitive and exclusively "White" areas of work.

At the time of applying for University, pragmatism had caused me to shift from my interest in studying English and History (perceived as two highly impractical subjects - unless you wanted to teach, which I did not!) to deciding to do a social work degree - a very female area of work. I did not know any social workers, and I anticipated that I was likely to encounter racial discrimination in this field. However it seemed less exclusive but it was my assumption that if I was willing to work twice as hard and to prove myself time and time again it was possible to succeed. I came from a world-view that as a Black person I was likely to encounter discrimination in all jobs. I was particularly interested in being a hospital social worker and I had evidence that hospitals employed Black people. Many of my family and friends were nurses or held varying positions in hospitals, also on the occasions that I had visited hospitals Black workers were visible.

In applying for the Civil Service my sense of pragmatism and of self-protection from the pain of further rejection was at play. On the application form I was asked to indicate which Government Departments I was most interested in. I remember being interested in the Foreign Office. I had always wanted to travel, and a job in that Department seemed to offer such opportunities. Nevertheless, I did not choose that Department, as I was unsure about whether I would be considered eligible for entry to it. A key criterion for entry seemed to be the nationality of my grandparents. The information was encoded in a convoluted legalistic language and despite re-reading it many times I remained unsure about whether as a British Colonial citizen I was eligible. Uncertain, I excluded myself. Pragmatism suggested to me that I should select the Department of Health and Social Security. I assumed that in an organisation concerned with social welfare I would have the opportunity of discovering whether I would be suitable for welfare work.

Looking back at that period I am struck by my aloneness in making these decisions, and of my naivety and ignorance. My parents were willing to help but they did not have the knowledge and experience to be of real help to me. My father was a practical man with a range of manual and basic clerical skills. My mother though a teacher in the Caribbean, had only done manual work in this country. They were both uninformed about the British System. Around this time a cousin, the maths co-ordinator and adviser throughout St Vincent, visited us. I had hoped that she would be able to give me some career advice but I was disappointed to find that she was of very limited help, as she too did not know the system.

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Waiting to be called

Having been successful at the Civil Service executive entrance exam, I was put on a waiting list awaiting appointment. I waited seven months before I was offered a place! I have since realised that this was a familiar pattern for Black entrants to the Civil Service and that in many instances candidates have stayed longer on recruitment lists waiting to be selected by a recruiting department. Those were difficult and very demoralising months. It seemed as if all my school friends were well settled in the next stage of their lives, while I though having been assured a job was unemployed. They were months in which my confidence was severely knocked. From years of high achievement I was now experiencing myself as a failure. I thought that I had failed to get into University and now I was failing to get a job. In this period I felt ashamed. I felt that people thought that I was not working because I did not want to work.

Reflective Sense making

Standing back from the story of my entry into professional life and observing my various encounters a number of themes come tumbling out. I have garnered them and I will present them in a more orderly fashion than they came at me! Also I am being selective. Some themes recur so I have chosen some that have not appeared in the previous chapters.

- **Internalisation of sexist and racist stereotypes : self protective strategies**

In Chapter 2, I explored ways in which inadequacies in the school/career structures and the implicit racist and sexist assumptions of some teachers impacted on me. In this reflection my attention turns to my own actions as I tried to negotiate the hidden challenges embedded in the process of choosing a career.

I am amazed to observe the number of pitfalls and hurdles encountered in the process of choosing a career and by my aloneness in this process. These hurdles started very early on and many of them were not easily identifiable, even on reflection. I am struck by the subtle power of the images of ourselves presented to us by society. I notice the limiting of my career choices to the roles performed by female heroines in books, and then from that limited range, deselecting those in which I had not encountered Black female role models. So despite my passion for English and History the careers that I perceived to be open to me as a woman were Social work, air stewarding, teaching and secretarial work. The process of deselecting from an already narrow range is an example of the experience of residing in the overlap between racism and sexism. Having identified "female" careers I must now consider the openness of those employers to me as a Black person. Recent readings indicate that similar patterns have been observed among other Black girls (Mirza, 1992, Bhavnani, 1994)

It is intriguing to observe how influential the dominant system is in programming our perceptions of our self and of what we are able to be. I grew up in a home in which my father always told us that we could be what ever we wanted to be. I also spent formative years in St Vincent where a much wider spectrum of roles were taken by Black people, yet I assumed that roles in which I had never seen Black women in Britain were out of my reach. I needed evidence that others like me had scaled the excluding walls of those professions. This was the coded message passed between my history teacher and myself when he told me about the other Black girls getting in to the Civil Service and the Post Office (Chapter 2). This unconscious and implicit acceptance that certain roles were outside of my horizons and therefore not worth aspiring to is clearly a self protective mechanism designed to cushion my self from the harshness of rejection. Yet in so easily accepting the severely restricted roles being offered to me as a Black woman I was unwittingly colluding with the maintenance of the oppressive White supremacist system.

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As I write this, I am reminded of a conversation with my 4 year old daughter, P.L. and my 7 years old son, Jaja this summer (1997). Jaja had been talking about what he would like to do when he grew up, so I asked P.L. what she would like to do when she grew up. She said that she would like to be a pilot. Before I could respond Jaja came in and, as if he expected me to say that that was not a possibility for her, he recounted a story he had recently read of a Black woman pilot. He said that she had been told that she could not be a pilot but had succeeded against the odds. He ended his story by saying that since she had done it, so could P.L.

This story indicates how early such learning starts and reminds me again of the power of books on the minds of children and young people. (Dixon 1977, Moodley 1983) This time the book is being consciously used to challenge the oppressive system. I am thankful for the writer who had scripted Black girls differently; for the publisher who had chosen to take a chance with a book that may appeal to a narrower market; and for the teacher or librarian who had made conscious choices to select books that presented Black children and girls in leading roles. In a world where racism and sexism are embedded in the very fabric of our societies, books with positive Black female role models cannot be taken for granted.

- **The powerlessness of unemployment**

I am noticing how resistant I am to returning to that short period of unemployment between school and starting my career. It is still a sore and tender place in which tears arise very easily – though at the time of living it I did not cry! The period is cloaked in a sense of powerlessness, confusion and shame. I had wanted to go to University and had not been accepted. I had then, with help, shifted my goals and applied for the Civil Service. I had proved my ability in the examination. However, my elation was rapidly whittled away as the weeks rolled on and I did not get the long waited letter advising me of which Department I would be appointed to and agreeing a date of starting. This period in limbo seemed so long, lonely and featureless. I occupied myself by temporary clerical work, and it gave me an important sense of independence. However I was engaged in work I did not want to do and I was creating a self-image for others and myself that I did not want. Yet I felt powerless to change it and ashamed in my powerlessness. As I try to stay engaged in this period, statistics play in my head.

Bhavnani (1991) reviewing research on Black women in the Labour Market provides the objective context for my subjective experience. She says:

" In examining the unemployment rates of black groups, recorded by the Department of Employment between 1973 – 1975 [the time of my experience] it was found that the proportionate increase in unemployment levels amongst 'minority' group women was nearly three times as large as amongst the total female unemployed. For minority men the increase was twice as large as amongst the total male unemployed. "

She cites the CRE 1978 comment that *"Black school leavers were more than three times as likely to be unemployed and took much longer than their white counterparts to find work"*.

The PSI Studies informed us that:

"By 1982, [...] whereas unemployment had risen to 13 percent for white men and 10 percent for white women ... West Indian men and women had rates of 25 percent and 16 percent respectively and South Asians had a rate of 20 percent for both sexes. (Brown 1984)"

The 1991 Census indicated that Black Caribbean women had an unemployment rate of 13.5 % whereas White women's rate of unemployment was 6.3%.

Such statistics indicate that unemployment is a familiar experience in the lives of many Black women. It is an aspect of our lives in which we interface with the wider social system and

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where we are dependent on that system for acknowledging and rewarding our ability. Institutional racism and sexism means that we are often denied opportunities to make our unique contribution in ways that we would like to. (Bhavnani 1994). In being denied access to work we also have our worth undermined and possibilities for economic choices reduced.

It is concerning to note that Bhavnani (1994) indicates that there may be an increase in discriminatory employment practices among employers.

Becoming a Civil Servant – first steps on the career ladder

In January 1973 I started in one of the largest Central Government Departments. I was put on a 6 months training programme at the end of which there was an exam, the results of which were made available to Local Office managers who presumably chose the staff they wanted to join their team. The training was challenging. I found myself having to get to grips with understanding, and applying legislation. I enjoyed the challenge, set out to do well and I did. My exam results were excellent and I was immediately allocated to a Local Office in Bayswater.

On arrival there the deputy manager greeted me with great surprise. I did not understand his surprise as I thought that he must have been expecting me. I was latter fascinated to learn that my name had led him to believe that I was a Scottish man - as a Scotsman himself he had been looking forward to welcoming me. Over the years I have often wondered if the outcome would have been different had they realised that the new manager was going to be a young Caribbean woman - rather than a Scottish man.

I worked in that office for four years. In that period I managed two different staff teams, developed expertise in three of the four main areas of the work. I consider myself to have been fortunate in having a manager who was a good staff developer. He became my mentor for the period during which we worked together. From him I learnt about the importance of understanding the politics of the organisation. He taught me how to decode situations and how to know what was valued and rewarded in the system. This finding of mentors has indeed been a pattern of my working career. Initially they were white men, and then later white women who have monitored my career. I consider myself unusual and fortunate in that respect.

This was both a period of being assisted and blocked in my development. For most of my time in this office I was actively supported and encouraged, however having done line management for a number of years and needing to acquire expertise in an important area of work that involved visits to employers and other members of the public I encountered some blocks. The Inspectors' job was highly valued in that Department, and it was unlikely for Executive Officers to gain promotion without successful completion of that role. When I enquired about a move to that section I was surprised to meet hesitance and comments that Inspectors were representatives of the Department. This surprised me as, even though I was office based I always seen myself as a representative of the Department. For the first time it crossed my mind that I might not be considered suitable for that job! Nevertheless I persisted and after a few months I was moved to that team.

It was a very supportive and mostly hardworking team. The quality of our work was publicly acknowledged on more than one occasion. Therefore it was very surprising

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to a number of us when we got good reports, but we were not recommended as "Fitted for promotion". When we queried this with our boss we were told that he felt strongly that anyone under 35 was not responsible enough for the next grade! Report markings were very critical to progression in the Civil Service. At that time it was necessary to have three "fitted for promotion" markings before you were considered for promotion to the next grade. This information presented us with a dilemma. At that time there was not an open reporting process. Managers were required to inform staff of comments made in the main body of the report, but there was no requirement to disclose promotability markings, so we were unable to formally challenge his assessment. We were dismayed to realise that such important decisions were made on the basis of personal attributes, which we could not change, rather than on our competence.

Becoming a Training Officer - moving to Regional Office

While working at a London Local Office I was asked by my office manager to replace a colleague on a training course. Since I enjoy training courses, I accepted without knowing very much about the course! On being given the course details I realised that it was a course for part-time trainers. I did not hold that role, but since my manager wanted me to go, and I enjoyed training courses, I went anyway.

This marked a significant turning point in my career path. The course trainers identified an aptitude for helping others to learn, and suggested that I considered training as my next career move. Prior to this it was not an area I considered. I knew that in career terms the Department valued people who had experience of the mainstream work. Staff training and development was not seen as mainstream. So for these reasons I had not considered work away from the mainstream. Also my Department, in line with the trend for Government Departments, had regionalised many of its support functions and moved such offices into the emerging "new towns". Our Regional Office was based in Basingstoke. Since arriving in England I had lived with my parents in London, so moving into training would mean a major life change. Nevertheless having thought about it I realised that the training/development aspect of the manager's role gave me great satisfaction, and that having already established competence in the core, and most valued areas of the Department's work, a spell as a Training Officer would enhance my promotion prospects.

I applied for a vacancy in our Regional Training Unit, got it and moved to Basingstoke in 1977. On arriving in Basingstoke the only people I knew in that town were the family of a very good friend, a nurse in London - and I did not know them very well! . New job, new town, first time of living away from home and of living on my own, separated from my support network of friends - it was both a very challenging and exciting experience.

On getting to Basingstoke I realised that my new boss, though a very pleasant man, was under-performing and incompetent in many areas of his work. Despite being a training manager he knew nothing about training and inducting staff! I had been recruited as a novice trainer. The agreement had been that I would be formally trained as a trainer, so it was a great shock to be taken to a training course on my first morning, introduced to a group, and then left. On departing he wished us a good

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course, told me that he would not be in the office for the next few days, and that he would see me at the end of the week!

Before I could recover from the shock and find my voice he had gone and I was left in a room with a number of people who expected me to teach them something! It was at that stage I began to believe that he was serious when he had said that he intended to get me working immediately. I had assumed that he was joking and that was his way of establishing rapport! Even until the end of the day I kept expecting the door to open and for him to appear saying that it was all a practical joke.

Here I was in a new job, in a new town, stranded in an unfamiliar building with a group of people who were expecting me to be their trainer. I had come from London straight to the office anticipating that at the end of the day a colleague would direct me to my digs. I did not know how to get to my digs and who to ask for help. I did then what I have done in many other challenging occasions over the years, I closed down on my feelings, focused firmly on the task in hand, metaphorically rolled my sleeves up and decided to get on with it. I did not anticipate too far ahead but simply took it one step at a time. This is a well-used survival strategy, which has seen me through many challenging situations – I will pick it up later in the thesis.

I set about finding out what they were expected to learn, and what they already knew. At the end of the day, with help from the Local Office in which the training rooms were located I acquired some self-instruction, and set myself the task of getting one day ahead of the group. I burned the midnight oil gathering information and preparing for the each day's session. The course was fortunately about an area of work with which I had had some experience in the past, so I was not completely out of my depth. However there had been radical changes in legislation and procedures since I had worked in that area. The group was sympathetic to my plight, and did what they could to assist me.

From such a start my training career could only get better - and it did! Within a short time I realised that facilitating others in their learning was an extremely satisfying task. I was stimulated by the challenges of adult learning and set about attending every training course I could in that area. After three years in the job I had established my competency in the job, and move from vocational training to interpersonal skills training. This meant working above my grade and doing a job I was not being paid to do - but the opportunity to do this was there and I took it. I loved training, I wanted to learn as much as I could and to stay working in this area as long as possible. However I was aware that it would be difficult to do this in the culture of my Department. Work outside the mainstream was not highly valued so I knew that to maintain my career prospects I needed to return to Local Office work soon.

Fortunately, I was invited to attend a promotion board and I was successful. The new grade opened up other possibilities. I had been a Training Officer for three years, and for the good of my career prospects it was time to move. In the Civil Service culture mobility was a highly valued attribute, and skills not directly relevant to the core work of a Department were not greatly valued. I would be expected to serve some years in the new grade of Higher Executive Officer, before I would be considered for promotion, so I decided that I could take a year or two doing what I wanted to do. Following that period I would have to focus on acquiring the necessary "fitted for

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promotion" markings in highly valued mainstream areas of the Department's work. While exploring the dilemma I happened on what I considered to be an excellent answer to the problem - a secondment at the staff training college of a prestigious Department. Working at the College was high status and well valued by all Government Departments, so it would benefit my career *and* allow me to continue to work and develop as a Trainer. The competition for such jobs was fierce. Nevertheless it was the job I wanted, so I decide to go for it - and got it.

Reflective Sense-making

In the course of my reflection I became aware that I held within me very differing analyses about this period and came to differing conclusions about its benefits to me. I was intrigued by this insight, and as I explored it I became aware that the difference was related to the split between the private self (the Black woman) and the professional self. For Carlis, the professional, this was an extremely important part of my life when the foundation of what was to become a successful career was established. However for the Black woman this was a very difficult and painful period of my life, when I experienced myself as alone, with challenging dilemmas, and when in order to survive I learned to close down many parts of myself. To explore the disjunction in these perceptions I asked the Black woman the following questions, and writing with both left and right hand, I established a dialogue between those differing aspects of self.

- *What was the experience of being a Black woman Executive Officer in that Government Department at that time?*
- *What privately held and hidden stories lie in this episode of your life?*

These questions brought a number of 'forgotten' incidents to mind and produced new insights to old and familiar stories. Some of these were memories held mainly at a feelings level and it took some time to first express the feelings and then to capture the meanings held within them, and identify the themes. Major themes from this period were: -

- Isolation, difference and high visibility;
 - Being stereotyped and consequently constantly struggling to establish my professional competence;
- Not fitting in, trying to fit in, and not fitting in;
- Inadequate and inferior formal support;
- Sexual Harassment
- **Isolation, difference and high visibility**

The most dominant theme from this period is that of isolation. It was the type of loneliness that emerges when you are out of contact with structures and processes familiar to you and with others similar to yourself. It was loneliness similar to that felt many years ago during a holiday, with a few friends, in Greece. During that holiday, there was a day when we became conscious of the strangeness of everything around us and longed for the familiar. We found ourselves searching for a McDonalds' – certain that there must be one! During our search we met a young White English woman engaged in the same activity. We were overjoyed to encounter each other. In our excitement we all talked together eagerly and laughed a lot - like long lost friends. I do not remember very much about her nor do I remember the content of our conversation. I do not think that it's content was important it was the process. The act of making contact with someone (or it might have been something) familiar in a place that felt alien.

The loneliness and isolation of which I talk is of that nature. From the first Executive Officers' induction session at Regional Office the factor that was most noticeable to me was my isolation and high visibility. I was the only Black woman in the group. For the rest of my training period, which involved a series of one or two week sessions at a training centre, I

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continued to be the only Black person. The normal practice was for the training centre to find suitable families with whom participants could lodge, if attending the course took them away from home. For the whole of that period I was in a small town with few White people, and lodged with a White family. At the end of my training, based in a London Local Office context I was not so aware of my visibility. There were other Black employees, though they were all at lower grades. So I was like them but not the same. In the four years that I worked in Local Offices I only met one other Black Executive Officer and she left soon after I joined.

Moving out of London, and into a Regional Office brought with it greater isolation. In and out of the office I was conscious of messages of being different. For instance:

- I discovered, by accident, that on the list of landladies providing lodging to participants attending courses there was a code indicating those landladies who were not willing to accept Black people. I realised that most of my colleagues were not outraged by the fact that the Department did not exercise its power and influence to challenge the prejudices of people to whom they provided business. The matter of fact coding of the information protected my colleagues from facing the ugliness of racial prejudice. You did not have to think - you simply followed a code. This was a paradoxical problem as by these actions the training section tried to protect individual Black course participants from facing rejection. Nevertheless the finding of the list signaled my difference to both my colleagues and myself and this created a discomfort that did not allow us to explore this dilemma.
- It was about regularly being mistaken for a course participant rather than trainer despite displaying the cues that would normally indicate the trainer role.
- Other Black people were only encountered when I ran courses for clerical grades, they were rare on courses at Executive level or above. I began to notice that talented White staff fed through the system but that this was not happening to the talented Black staff I met on clerical courses.

Out of the office my difference was communicated in the following ways:

- Being stared at, seeing expressions of surprise at my presence. In chance conversations with strangers I realised that they knew a lot about me. They knew where I had been and what I had done - I was highly visible! This was partly the experience of living in a small town, but being a Black woman in a small town in the seventies accentuated that experience.
- Living for seven years in a small close of six houses and six flats designed to encourage a sense of community and remaining a stranger. I lived in Basingstoke for seven years but the town never became home. Inside of my flat, I had created a warm familiar space in which I felt at home, but as soon as I moved out of its doors I became a stranger - an alien to be stared at. It seemed as if my neighbours never grew used to seeing me around. The design of the close was successful in that it created a community. However it was one from which I was excluded. From my kitchen window I watched my neighbours, gathering in the courtyard chatting around the cars, or at doorsteps and going in and out of each others houses knowing that if I were to go into the courtyard and greet them I would be offered basic courtesy but no overtures of friendliness. I knew, because it had happened on many occasions.
- Observing that the neighbours with whom relationships were established were like me outsiders - on the fringe and marginalised. There was the very old man with whom I shared a landing, whose shopping I sometimes did, and who kept an eye on my flat when I was away. Then there was the professional Asian woman in a relationship with a White man, with whom a budding friendship was started just before they moved. And the Japanese /English couple who bought the old man's flat after he died. They too seem to be excluded from the courtyard community. Reflecting on this experience I asked myself what did I think was the basis of our exclusion. I then realised that the two Asian women and I were all professionals, working outside the home and with no children, whereas most of the other women had children and did not work outside of the home. These seemed important

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differences that might have affected the establishment of a close relationship, but I was not convinced that this was the basis of the unfriendliness I felt.

- My father's upset and anger after two summer days spent painting my flat and greeting neighbours and passers-by and getting no response from them. It was present in the discussion that we had after he expressed his anger to me. It was present, but not named, as I provided him with logical explanations of their behaviour – talking about differences in culture. We talked about the fact that as Caribbean people we were socialised to see as important the acknowledging and greeting of people we encountered as we undertook our everyday duties, and that was not similarly valued in the British culture. What neither of us acknowledged or spoke about was the racism that we both knew we were experiencing.

My isolation was produced by this deep sense of being different, in a context that problemizes, and does not know how to handle difference. It produced a sense of aloneness that was impossible to bear at times when I felt particularly vulnerable. It was this isolated loneliness that forced me at times when I was most ill, to get in my car and drive fifty miles to my parent's home. The two female colleagues with whom I had established a close friendship lived in towns many miles away and other friends with whom I socialised during office hours, and who lived in my town, did not invite me to their homes or into their circle of friends. So when ill I felt very much on my own, without support structures in an unfriendly, and alienating environment.

The fact that my female colleagues lived many miles away from our workbase while my male colleagues lived in the town in close proximity to our workplace is itself a product of covert gender discrimination. In the Civil Service, Executive Officers were expected to be mobile so a job transfer carried with it the offer of an 'expense paid' move to the new place of location. However in practice this opportunity was of most benefit to men and single women. Living in a social context with a convention that the family accommodates the man's need, and locates in relation to the man's job meant that it was often less easy for women to persuade partners and families to move when their place of work changed. Therefore attached women, like my friends, commuted while the men (and single women) moved to the vicinity of the office. It is likely that my experience was further affected by gender differences as it was probably less easy for my male colleagues/friends, to move our friendship in to the personal/social arena without raising other complex issues. It may have been different if I were male.

These feelings of isolation and high visibility created a sense of being constantly watched, and of always being scrutinised. It produced a fear of making mistakes. In my isolation I became the representative for my group. I felt the need to be careful about what I did as I believed that it generalised to all Black women, if it was perceived as negative or different. However this did not seem to work in reverse, positive behaviour and achievements made me the exception to the rule! This increased my sense of responsibility and my commitment to 'getting it right'. The setting of high standards for myself, and a tendency towards perfectionism in my professional life is a recognised survival strategy.

- **Being stereotyped and therefore constantly struggling to establish my professional competence**

Stories in this category range from the comical, that irritated because they were often repeated, though they did not have much power to impact on my life, to those which were tragic because of their potential for inhibiting my ability to thrive. There was the experience of:

- Often being mistaken for a nurse. – The nursing profession is one for which I have great respect, however when you are not a nurse and it is regularly assumed that you are, it becomes problematic. On a number of occasions during that period I was asked by taxi and cab drivers "which hospital do you work at". Then there was a very funny incident when my financial adviser described at length the concern felt by himself and his wife about the fact that she was many days overdue. He told me about the various strategies that they had used to induce the coming of the baby. I

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was bemused. I could not understand why our conversation had taken this route, until he ended by asking me what else might they do. Puzzled, I gave him information about myself that I thought he already knew. I told him that I had no children and so I had no experience of inducing babies. He then said "but you are a nurse". I could not think why he had reached this conclusion, but I knew that it was an assumption commonly made about my sisters and myself – with whom I often discussed and laughed about these strange occurrences. I am noticing that this very rarely happens now. I wonder why? Perhaps there are now more roles in which a professional Black woman might fit?

- Being asked by clients if I spoke English or having my judgement questioned because "as a foreigner you do not understand our legislation".
- Being abused on the telephone for not taking a client seriously when he asked to speak to a manager. On that occasion the problem was my gender.
- In an open plan office, having visitors to my section, walk past my desk and take queries to male members of my staff.
- Being told that a colleague had said that I looked so beautiful on the day of my promotion board interview that he was not surprised when he heard that I had been promoted. What a double edged comment! How do I begin to challenge this? What is the basis of a discussion with a colleague who sees my appearance as the only reason for my promotion?
- A job appraisal interview with my boss with whom I had a good relationship. He gave me my report to read even though at that time it was not the organisation's policy to do that. It was an excellent report, except for the fact that he had described me as temperamental. I knew that in the context of the Civil Service this one comment would undermine many of the positive things said about me and about my work. I challenged the statement. His response was " Carlis you must admit that West Indians are temperamental." He also went on to give me an example of the only occasion when I had cried in his office. This incident had occurred on a day when I had received news of my uncle's death. I had thought that I was well composed, but suddenly the tears had come. I was amazed firstly by the fact that he had labeled that incident as temperamental, and secondly, that he thought it rational to explain his comment on my annual appraisal report by a stereotypical statement that "West Indians are temperamental".

This was an experience that left me feeling very powerless and trapped. He was a good boss, a friend, and a sponsor. He had expressed his trust in me by giving me the report and seemed to assume that it was a commonly accepted fact that West Indians were temperamental. This assertion of accepted fact did not leave room for dialogue or exploration. I also felt protective of him. I did not want to embarrass him or hurt him by declaring his statement to be racist. I was trapped and withdrew into hurt silence. Also, I was hurt and disappointed, because I had believed that he knew me – instead it seemed that he primarily saw the caricature Black woman.

- **Not fitting in, trying to fit in, and not fitting in**

Many of the incidents above that illustrate my difference in the settings in which I worked and lived are also illustrations of my struggles to fit in. The fact that I was in those places, doing the jobs that I did, and enjoying a certain degree of trust, rapport and friendliness with most of my colleagues and bosses was an indication of my ability to adapt and fit in. Nevertheless from time to time there were messages sent and received that indicated to me that I was different and that my acceptance was highly conditional. It was clear that my acceptance was based on my not being "too Black" and on being able to accommodate to a male culture. Examples that spring to mind are:

- Casual conversation with a group of colleagues in which I expressed admiration for the hairstyle of a Black woman who had her hair in plaits. The head of our Unit (one of my mentors and sponsors) came into the room overheard my comment and said very seriously " I certainly hope that you have no intention of coming here with you hair like that."

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- The challenge of establishing and maintaining good social relationships with my colleagues unless I was willing to spend lunch breaks in the pub. Most of my colleagues were White and male and made the assumption that the pub was the appropriate venue for relaxing and socialising together. To reject an invitation to join them there was to be perceived to be unfriendly. There were three women in our group and two of us did not smoke and drank little alcohol yet most lunch times we complied.

The issue of fitting in is one that filled me with ambivalence. I had spent the greater part of my life in Britain and I knew how to be British. Yet I also wanted to be me, and that was sometimes very 'unBritish'. I wanted room to be multi dimensional. Yet I was a pragmatist, and therefore very conscious of the potential cost of not fitting in. I valued the rewards of the systems and also I wanted to be liked, so fitting in attracted me greatly.

- **Inadequate and inferior formal support**

From early on in my career I took responsibility for identifying my training needs and for seeking out development opportunities. So largely speaking my development needs were met. Also over the years I had been fortunate in gaining mentors and one or two sponsors. Nevertheless there were occasions when it became apparent that I was not being given the same level and quality of support that would be given to a White man of the same age and in the same position as I was. Two examples of this are:

- Most of the group with whom I socialised were very career orientated and discussions of what was needed to succeed in the organisation often took place. However it was apparent that the men did not see the two other female colleagues, and myself, as true competitors. They were supportive of us in our jobs and assumed that we wanted to be promoted, and from time to time they would give us advice about managing our careers. However, during conversations in which they talked about the finding and using of mentors and sponsors, about identifying and building of useful relationships with the power brokers in the organisation I often felt as an eavesdropper or a fly on the wall. There was a curious sense of being invisible or not present, as if most of what they talked about was irrelevant to us. We were not the subjects at whom the information shared was aimed.

From their conversations it was apparent that golf was an important skill for the career conscious to acquire and that the golf club was a place in which useful business transactions were conducted. We (the women) witnessed the older men coaching those younger male colleagues favoured by them. Many of our peers bought golf clubs and got themselves lessons in preparation for joining the favoured golf club. It was never suggested to us females that we should lean to play golf and join the club, and in turn we did not try. It was shared but implicit knowledge that those were opportunities closed to us. As recently as five years ago a White woman told me about her fury at being the only female member of another Department's 'A' team and not being allowed into the clubhouse at the end of the game! Within the Civil Service culture golfing is not perceived as a female sport. Yet it was (perhaps still is) the milieu in which useful career opportunities are established. What a double bind!

- There was a formal practice in our Department that invitees to a promotion Board were coached by the manager of the office or unit in preparation for the interview. There were three of us from the Training Unit invited to attend that year. I knew that my colleagues had help from our manager, but I had not. Our jobs involved a lot of travelling away from the office so it did not seem particularly significant that he had not yet made an appointment to prepare me for the impending interview. Unlike many previous bosses we had only a formal relationship so it was unlikely that this would be done in the context of an informal chat. I took the initiative and requested an interview. I was stunned when he started the interview by saying "I want to be honest

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and say that you are unlikely to get through the Board." I do not remember much more about our discussion. From that moment I decided to forget about him and I became determined to succeed in spite of him. I sat the board and was promoted. On the day that the results were received we met on the stairs. He knew the results as we would both have been notified at the same time. He patted me on the head (I still cannot believe that he did that, but that is my memory) and said "so who's a lucky girl then." I am still furious about being patronised in that way.

This story drew my attention to one of my survival strategies – the negating of people I perceive to be racist. I did that with my Deputy Head Teacher at school (chapter 2). It occurs to me that although this strategy allow me to move beyond the negative statements it also encourages me to overlook the power of those individuals in the wider social structure, that may be used to my disadvantage.

- **Sexual Harassment**

This is a story that has very rarely been told outside of the group in which it took place. It is interesting to me to observe that though I have run courses on sexual harassment, I have often thought that fortunately I had no first-hand experience. Yet in undertaking this inquiry I realise that there were many experiences of it. How was it that this memory has been suppressed?

While at the Training Unit I shared an office with two other female trainers. All three of us were based at the Regional Headquarters, but we were part of a much bigger team of regional trainers many of whom were based in smaller training units across the region. We operated a system where at regular intervals individual 'outbased' trainers would spend a few days at Regional Office – preparing materials, or meeting with colleagues to whom they would not normally have access. It was a pleasure to re-establish with colleagues we had not seen for weeks, except for a man whom I will call Fred.

Fred, from the moment of his arrival in our office spent his time giving us graphic and detailed accounts of his sex life. We tried different ways of shutting him up but he seemed to enjoy evidence of our discomfort. Often we tried to arrange our absence from the office to coincide with his visits, but doing this triggered guilt, as we knew that it was worst if just one person was left behind. There was also a feeling of being forced to leave one's home, and a refusal to allow this to happen. We spoke with our boss about him, but despite his chats with him the behaviour persisted until he was transferred to another job.

There was also for a period of a few weeks when I was pestered by obscene phone calls to my home. The caller seemed to know my movements, and until that experience I had not appreciated how intimidating and invasive such calls could be. The problem was finally dealt with through collaborative actions between the telephone exchange and the Police.

Moving to a Staff Training College: continuing up the ladder

At the Staff Training College I worked in a Unit which provided training and development to all Central Government trainers and management development programmes to junior and middle managers from small Government Departments. My period at the college was an extremely important and formative experience. It provided opportunities for me to pursue my interest in the areas of adult learning and in organisational change. It developed me as a trainer, facilitator, organisational consultant and extended my understanding of the nature and process of institutional discrimination. On one hand, it gave me access to people, ideas and concepts that opened new horizons and gave me new conceptual frameworks for thinking about and making sense of the world. I gained knowledge of and exposure to other organisations

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and received encouragement and support for actively planning my career. On the other hand it was a job in which I often experienced myself being treated more as a Black person than as a human being!

It was around this stage in my career that I became aware that outside of my family setting I interacted only with white people. I was always being treated as an exception, and as an object of wonder. Colleagues and acquaintances were always at pains to suggest that I was special. I did not believe myself to be exceptional, though at that time I knew only of two Black men and one woman operating at the more senior level of organisations. I had spent the first 14 years of my life in the Caribbean and seen Black men and women perform the whole spectrum of professional roles. Therefore I took a different perspective on the problem. I saw myself as special only in the fact that I may have had opportunities that many others had not had. For me, the fact that there were so few of us at any level of seniority was an indicator of serious organisational problems. I was not special, I was simply visibly different.

This fact was underlined for me when in one week, about two years after joining the College, colleagues from different parts of the College approached me to ask if they had upset me in any way. On inquiring why they asked that question each person claimed to have waved or called to me and got no response. As I listened it began to dawn on me, we had just had the second Black woman on the campus!

With my heightened awareness of discrimination, and with the degree of racism and sexism experienced at the college I longed to break my isolation and to be in a context where I was able to relate to other Black professionals on a day to day basis. I also wanted to more actively contribute to the tackling of institutional discrimination and to the creation of environments where Black men and women would be able to make their contributions to their organisations, communities, societies, and world without the constant battling, fighting, defending that I had become used to. Many white men and women had told me that I had made a difference in their lives and I wanted the opportunity to do the same for Black people. The Civil Service was not ready to do that work but I believed that some of the London Boroughs were.

Another factor influencing my move was a desire to integrate and apply the range of knowledge and skills gained in the years at the Civil Service. In the early 80's with many organisation publishing policies of Equal Opportunities I believed that they were expressing intentions to engage in transformational change, and that they wanted help in both changing the organisation and as well as changing individuals. I felt that working with an organisation to implement such policies would allow me to draw on my knowledge of organisational change, institutional discrimination and adult learning. So although I had enjoyed the time spent working at the College I was now ready to move out of the rather rarefied atmosphere, and to return to the real world - though not back to my old Department. I decided to move to the London Borough of Lewisham to assist in the implementation of their Race Equality Policy. Leaving the Civil Service was harder than I anticipated. In order to finish an important project with which I was engaged a delayed dated of starting was negotiated. I was pleased that I had three months to do the physical, emotional and psychological work needed to effectively close my relationship with the Civil Service and to start in Local Government. Leaving the Civil Service, my first and only employer since school, after ten years was scary. It was the world I knew. I understood how it operated and I

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was frightened to move into another world. The job security and my career investments made such a move extremely difficult.

Reflective sense-making

This was the period in my life characterised by my political awakening and learning. In this phase of my life my learning about racism and sexism increased by leaps and bounds. It provided me with an opportunity to gain the theoretical framework that Essed (1991) says is so critical to the identifying of racism and other discriminations. I acquired concepts of direct and indirect discrimination and with these I was now able to move from a sensing of discrimination to the articulation of the experience. It was therefore a very important stage of my personal and political development. This theoretical learning took place in a context that provide ample illustrations of the racism and sexism in everyday practice. Below are samples of those experiences clustered and presented under themes.

Process reflection

However, before continuing I want to give voice to and acknowledge the feelings of resistance I am currently experiencing as I attempt to articulate the stories from that period. Returning to them I find myself recognising which ones have been fairly well ventilated and so are no longer very painful. Then there are others in which I unexpectedly tumble into the frustrated pain, anger and despair that are still held in some stories. At these times I question my actions in this thesis. Can the nature of these lived experiences be conveyed? On the page they seem trivial and sanitized.

Growing up, we were taught to view discrimination (usually the overt type) as the actions of ignorant people and to move on from them. This question recurs - "why don't you just forget about those things and do something more worthwhile with your life? Is it worthwhile spending so much of my life engaged with behaviours and ideas that often seem so silly and narrow? It sometimes feels like a waste of my time spending time reflecting on and writing about racist and sexist incidents. It is summer, the sun shines, my dear children are on holiday, and I would rather be with them on a beach, or in the park. I am also aware of the great financial sacrifices that have been made so that I could have a quality space to attend to this work and complete this thesis, so questions about worth are not trivial ones that I can easily brush aside.

At the start of this research I felt that the reviewing of these experiences was likely to be cathartic. It seems that the very fact that some of these stories are no longer full of feelings is an indication that the expression of these experiences has been valuable. Conversely the recognition that some stories are still full of the passion that they generated at the time of happening is an indication that the suggestion that such experiences should be put behind you as you move on was not very helpful. It is clear that you were not able to leave them behind, and that they are still being carried – a sort of toxic baggage! This is a space for ventilating and detoxifying this 'stuff'

However I also see this making visible of the covert as an act of resistance. So in more than one way, this is a contribution to my own liberation.

So to continue, themes from this period are:

- **Isolation and high visibility.**

To be a Black woman working at the Staff Training College, in the early 80's was to be extremely isolated and highly visible. As a senior staff college, the majority of participants were White men. At that time it was not at all unusual for all participants of a course to be male. The college was set in the heart of a very wealthy and very White area. There was a marked absence of Black people not only in the College but also in the surrounding area, so I

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was highly visible wherever I went. However by now I was used to being so visible that I no longer noticed if people stared.

This is another survival strategy - the screening of the eyes, the closing of the ears to certain statements and the numbing of the feelings. Day by day in a very subtle and not easily detected process, through my interaction and the contexts in which I lived and worked, I made myself, and I was made, a little less human.

- **Lack of openness to learning about discrimination**

Another pattern of experience from this period was the refusal of colleagues to acknowledge discrimination. There was tremendous resistance to any attempts to talk about discrimination and to undertake equalities work. In the formal system a number of pieces of research had been commissioned to investigate the presence of racial discrimination, there was a small Equal Opportunities Unit, and a programme of Women in Management Programmes had been started. However, in the informal context there was great resistance to these issues. Examples of these were:

- Working in a team where the review of experience and of our working process was a part of the culture and practice, I was asked to lead a team development day on issues of racial discrimination and equality. I agreed and then was completely surprised at the resistance I encountered. I had assumed that the personal friendships that existed between many team members, and myself would mean that they were comfortable talking about issues of racism. I was unprepared for the anger and hurt that was released that day. The anger became focussed on me for daring to act as if racism was present in our organisation and for facing them with a reality different to theirs. I was hurt by their expression of betrayal and hurt. I was disillusioned, and questioned the basis of our friendships. How could they have known me without having any sense of my reality?

I had discussed experiences of sexism with many of my female colleagues and assumed that there was a general knowledge of these issues across the team. One of my colleagues and friends was at that time married to a Black woman and yet he was one of the most ardent in the denial of the presence of racism at the college. As I returned home that evening I experienced a rage that needed expression. In the loneliness of my flat, feeling unable to talk to anyone about the distress of that day's work I turned to my journal, and from that came this poem.

Give yourself a chance

Be human - allow yourself to care

Come view a world

Outside your prison

Become aware

Allow yourself to listen.

Break free !

There are no locks inside

No key

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The only barrier

Our unwillingness to see.

Its hard

You've become institutionalised.

Dehumanised.

Isolated in your ignorance,

Fear, tradition, myths and education.

Unquestioning, insulated, and protected,

Privileged, pampered and reassured.

Debilitated

By self-interest, the status quo.

And your determined belief no problem exists.

It will not disappear thru' lack of recognition

The tumour feeds on fear

Remove the thin veil of your society,

See the putrid cancer of 'isms'

Do you really care?

Will you face up to inhumanity?

See the faces pressed against the fence?

Excluded by your sustained pretence?

Listen to the cries

See the pain and agony?

Or will you be duped?

Find more reasons to avoid reality?

Do you really care?

That day a layer of the superficiality of our relationships was unwittingly peeled away.

It is interesting to observe that much of my anger was about their refusal to see, to hear and to feel. Yet that was one of the defences used to survive the system.

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- This resistance to acknowledging discrimination was a part of the wider culture in the College at that time. The introduction of positive action courses for women in management at the Civil Service created a surprising degree of disturbance in the service. The course was the topic of many heated discussions. Men who I had thought were supportive of women's development became threatened by it, perceiving it as reverse discrimination. Resistance took surprising forms - graffiti appeared across the women in management course programmes; they were ripped off the walls, and at the time that one of those courses was being run, there was overt harassment of women in the bars and recreation areas, with references to lesbians and dykes. There seemed to be an assumption that any women present in these areas must be participating in this particular course. This is itself an indication of the mind set that produced the marginalisation of women.
- **The Black woman professional – a contradiction in terms**

In the previous section I have indicated that it was not generally assumed that women may have legitimate roles at the college (outside of the care-taking and administrative roles). The cleaning and catering service was almost completely staffed by women and most administrators at the lower levels were female. There **were** female lecturers and tutors in most Directorates, but their presence continued to be experienced as surprising. The presence of a Black woman tutor was therefore problematic for many people. Examples of this are:

- A White woman colleague and I had responsibility for the development of the Training Managers Development Programme. We were experienced trainers, but it was clear to us by the middle of the first day that the programme was not going well. We were puzzled. We reviewed our design, but could not identify why we should be encountering the level of resistance that we did. Over the lunch break, the Head of our Unit provided us with the clue to the problem. We had an almost completely White male course, and they felt insulted by the fact that they had been allocated two women trainers, one of whom was Black. They did not feel that their seniority had been respected. Our manager had acquired this information while in the men's toilet.
- One day during a tea break on a senior managers' course, I happened to notice Mr. Smith, the father of one of my friends. I was surprised, as I had not realised that he was a Civil Servant. As I approached him, I could see his surprise. He greeted me and then went on to say that initially he had been very puzzled by my presence, until he remembered that they **must** have secretaries and other administrative staff at the College!
- On another occasion, I visited the stationery clerk/messenger. I needed some stationery urgently and did not want to wait for the normal delivery. I knew him well; he often stopped for a chat when he delivered the post. He was friendly, but gently reprimanded me for not using the normal system. Then he told me that unfortunately, I was not senior enough for one of those notebooks: "When you are promoted to secretary, you can have one." I was stunned that he had not realised my grade despite the social cues. When he stopped to talk to me in my office, who did he think I was? I did not want to embarrass him so I left without the notebook, deciding to put in the normal stationery order.

From some of these stories I am noticing that I often protect people who I feel did not intend to make racist comments. I absorb it and take the problem with me, but also in doing this others are not helped to learn.

- **Honorary White**

A particularly confusing and double binding experience was that of recognising that in some instances my acceptance was based on a sort of bleaching process. It was a process that offered me acceptance on the basis that I colluded in the denial of my colour and proved that by my disassociation from other Black people. In the course of my teaching I experienced a

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particularly challenging incident which initially confused me but in the process of dealing with this I was able to gain a clearer picture of the nature of the relationship being offered to me.

- I was running an advanced trainer development course, and many of the participants were known to me from earlier courses. The agenda for such programmes was largely created from the pre-course questionnaires from participants, and a recurring issue for this group was that of establishing trainer credibility. My co-trainer and I decided that this as an issue of great concern and that it would be dealt with in the first day. I led that session and decided to ground it in my own experience. I explained to the group that in the planning of any course I considered the attributions that may be placed on me on the basis of my gender, colour, grade, youth etc. Having completed that session we moved on to other issues. So it was with great surprise that I found that this simple statement became a key issue in the group. It culminated on day four of the programme, with a counselling session with an older White who confessed that he had been so disturbed by my mention of my colour that he had been unable to sleep properly! I asked him to explain the source of his distress and I was told that he had always seen me as "one of us." He said that he had encountered Black people in other areas of his life, but I was not like them and he did not see why I should refer to myself in this way!

I find this a particularly interesting incident as it involves not only the initial double binding messages but it also illustrates how we are subtly invited to agree to the situations that bind us. Therefore I will return to this experience in chapter 6, when I more fully explore the nature of the Black woman's context that is created as a weave through these individualised and seemingly separate incidents.

- **Uneasy relationship with first Black woman course participant**

My experience with the first and only Black woman whom I will call Hazel, and who attended one of our courses in the first two and half years of my work in that Unit, was surprising and disappointing to me. She was a woman from Local Government who had been targeted for positive action training, and as part of her development had been sent on one of our courses. She was unfamiliar with Central Government culture and clearly found the College unfriendly, and disorientating. She identified with me, and tried to spend as much as time as possible with me. I found this uncomfortable. I was embarrassed by her naivety and by the difficulty she was having with the cultural norms and practices. Intellectually, I understood why she was trying to establish this close bond, but emotionally I resisted her attempts to get close.

I was left disturbed and surprised by this incident for a long time after it occurred. I was ashamed of the difficulties I had had in establishing a mutually rewarding relationship with Hazel. I had an expectation that having been so isolated from other Black people for so long, it would have be great to have the opportunity to work with them. As I worked with groups of Black women I began to realise that this difficulty was not simply about Hazel and myself, but that in our connection we enacted patterns of behaving and relating that are reproduced again and again between Black women. These expectations and patterns of relating that resulted from the internalisation of oppression and from the strategies used to survive the various oppressive context in which we have lived and worked. I am conscious that I am being a little illusive, but I do not want to explore it any further in this chapter, but will return to it in chapter 8.

- **No presence**

Attending a self-development course, run along T-group lines, I was faced with the fact that my colleagues had difficulty in seeing me as a person, and particularly as a woman. There was an activity where individuals talked about how they experienced others in the group. I found that my colleagues were able to gain a 'sense' of everyone except me. I was hurt and puzzled. Why did they have such difficulty in perceiving me? As the only black woman on the

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course, I wondered if it was to do with my colour. Were they unable to get beyond my Blackness to sense the unique person inside?

As I consider what was it that stopped my colleagues from being able to gain a sense of me I must also confront my part in this. As I inquired more deeply into my protective strategies I realised that I had learnt that it was dangerous to reveal the self in the hostile and unfriendly environments in which I often operated. Therefore the ability to mask the self was a valuable survival skill, see Chapters 8.

Local Authority Experience: integrating, consolidating and applying knowledge and expertise.

Moving from Central Government to a Local Authority in London was exciting. It seemed that there was a real commitment to creating change in the organisation. This impetus for change came from both the Councillors and the Chief Executive. They had decided to use training as a key strategy for change so they had extended their training section from two to ten trainers and placed those posts at levels of the organisation where they were likely to be able to influence change. The posts were new, the initiative was new, and the new group of trainers and advisers were innovative, energetic, self-motivating and full of creative ideas and a determination to make changes. It was good to be among such people. My particular role was Race Equality Training Adviser. I had responsibility for the development and implementation of the Race Equality Training Strategy. I had access to people at all levels of the organisation and a brief that enabled me to work directly with Chief Officers in promoting change.

Within a few weeks of starting I began to realise that there were immense challenges. There were indeed some very committed individuals at senior levels with a vision of a new organisation created through the introduction of new staff at key and strategic points in the organisation. However there were serious flaws in the implementation plan and small but critically important factors were overlooked in the change process, and many of the new people found themselves being blocked and unable to act. Before long the positive energy and high hopes of the new people began to evaporate and disillusionment, disappointment and despair set in. To the organisation the small changes made felt very big. It seemed as if they were being asked to shift old and familiar positions, behaviours and patterns of relating on many different fronts. As the various change agents started to work and the challenges and dilemmas of change started to emerge, the expectancy and openness to the new, that had been there when we first arrived, started to disappear rapidly. There was now a lot of defensiveness, as people felt threatened, they exerted their power and influence to maintain things as they were.

Despite the problems most of us were still committed to work positively with the organisation to assist it in bringing about the stated desired changes. I developed a number of strategies to enable myself remain positive in the job. I identified allies in the organisation. These allies were either people new to the organisation - other specialists in policy or developmental roles who had also been brought in as part of this change strategy - or marginalised staff experiencing the pain of institutional discrimination and longing for change. These alliances provided us with mutual support emotionally and with opportunities for problem solving. However they did not provide access to influence and power.

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Another strategy was to define the challenge of creating greater equality of opportunity as wider than the organisation and to look for opportunities for tackling the wider problem. This led me to engage in the development of the trigger video "Thru 100 Pairs of Eyes" for use in the training of people around the issues of racial discrimination. I also had an opportunity to work with an international training team developing women managers and executives from seven West African Countries. These types of initiatives broadened my understanding of the problem, kept me stimulated and helped me to see that ours was not the only organisation struggling around these issues.

Nevertheless after about two years it became apparent to me that the personal cost of remaining in that job was greater than I was prepared to pay. It was taking a great deal of effort to get even small changes. I was also very disillusioned and disappointed at the length of the delay in advertising and filling the post of Head of Training and Development. It was a post in which I had been acting informally and which the organisation showed no wish to formalise. I decided to job hunt. A vacancy arose at the Staff Development Centre, of a University, I applied and got it.

At the Staff Development Centre

I had been attracted to this job because of the espoused values of the Centre and the goals and objectives of the main project for which I had been recruited. The Centre had been set up to bridge Higher Education, Industry and Public Sector and to facilitate communication and learning between those areas. In this employment I was involved in researching the needs of staff working with overseas students, and the marketing of the *Through 100 pairs of eyes* training package.

The work was demanding. As a self-financing unit, the Centre had high targets to achieve and in turn each member of staff also had to attain high targets. After about two years at the Centre, the University reviewed the Centre and decided to radically change it. They changed its structure, goals and purpose. It now became a much more traditional University Department, and I decided that this was now a good opportunity for me to leave.

Becoming Self-employed and searching for balance between the professional and the personal

In choosing to use the re-framing of the Centre as an opportunity to start my own consultancy I was signalling a deepening of my commitment to my own human development. The starting and managing of my own business demanded the development of new managerial skills and taught me a lot about myself – it challenged my ability to handle change, risks and to be an independent learner. Just prior to this venture I had started a Post-graduate diploma in management which was run on action learning principles. So this became the locus of my attempt to undertake the personal development needed to give balance to the tremendous professional development that had been undertaken in the previous ten years, when as a protective measure the personal self was shut down.

My commitment to my personal development was both stimulated by, and produced, developments and changes in my personal life. In this period my father became

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terminally ill and eventually died. I committed myself to a long-term relationship and got married and from that relationship two beautiful children were produced.

Reflective Sense- making

Themes arising from the stories of this period are:

- **Being a token**

Kanter (1977) argues that when women comprise a very small minority of the workforce they are often viewed as tokens i.e. as symbols of their group rather than as individuals. It seems ironical but it was in the role of Race equality training officer that I felt most a token. In that position I often felt that people were more interested in what I symbolised than in my skills or in what I may achieve in the organisation. It seemed important for the organisation to have a few Black women at managerial levels who could represent it in certain strategic situations and speak on its behalf. However this perception became confused when I wanted to apply for the Training and Development Manager's position. Suddenly I got clear messages that the organisation was not ready for a Black woman in that position. A number of delaying tactics were used to avoid reaching the point of appointment, until, in frustration, I withdrew and left the organisation. Some time later the Director of Personnel and the Deputy Chief Executive told me that I had been badly treated, and that they regretted losing my skills. It seemed to me that a more pertinent issue was that they were never ready and able to recognise and use my skills. Nor were they prepared to have Black women in positions that had any real authority and power.

- **Becoming a mentor / role model**

Moving from Basingstoke back to London I was once again in a setting where there were other Black people around me. In this setting, I became a role model and mentor for other Black peoples. This was a role that I was invited to take and willingly took. I felt a strong sense of commitment to the development of the Black community, and felt that in assisting others in negotiating their way through White organisations, I was making a valuable contribution. However, in doing this, I substantially increased my workload and pushed myself into what was becoming a familiar pattern of overload.

- **Being used by organisations to 'deal' with other Black people**

There were a number of times in this period in my life when I became conscious that I was the tool of the organisation. I was the Black face that would hopefully protect it from accusations of racism. Here as in the token role my function was to give credence to the organisation.

In one position, I found myself polarised with the most Senior Black man in the organisation. It was interesting to observe at meetings the different ploys used to avoid dealing with the fierce rivalry and threat that was evident between the Black man and our White male colleagues and senior officers. They were determined to 'deal' with him. They perceived him as arrogant and disrespectful of their positions, and they colluded, consciously or unconsciously, to negate him. At meetings, I noticed that there would often be moments of silence after his interventions. Then the conversation would continue as if he had not intervened. Conversely, my comments were given great attention and treated as words of great wisdom. Papers written by him were either missed from the agenda or treated as unintelligible, though they seemed quite clear to me. On a number of occasions, senior managers told me that they found it much easier to understand and relate to me, and that it was a pity that I was not in his role. Yet when the opportunity arose for the organisation to appoint me to a position commensurate with his, they avoided it. Other examples of this that spring to mind are of:

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- Being invited into an organisation, in my consultancy role to advise them on a case that was about to go to an Industrial Tribunal. They said that they wanted me to consider it, and to help them understand if there really were any instances of racial discrimination. In negotiating the contract, I underlined the fact that I would only be willing to work with them if the purpose of the review was to provide an opportunity for the organisation to learn, rather than to gain a 'badge of clean health'. However, early on in the process, it became clear to me that the member of staff in question had been treated as an exception on many occasions, and that the 'normal' rules had not been applied to him. As I showed more interest in understanding what constituted normal practice, and in identifying the institutional structures that would ensure fairness and justice, so the initial openness to my intervention decreased. It became clear that I was *not* offering what was hoped for.
- On a number of occasions I was asked to provide supervision to Black managers. Some White managers identified that they were not able to provide an adequate level of supervisory support to their Black managers, so supervision of these managers was out-sourced. This dealt with the immediate presenting challenge, but it was not a solution that increased the organisation's competence in providing such support, or that helped individual White managers to learn about the needs of Black staff. I was a buffer to the challenges that Black managers presented to the organisation, and circumvented the need for it to search for better solutions.
- **Stereotyped - impeded by negative images of the Black woman**

This is a persistent theme that has repeatedly recurred since my arrival in Britain as a teenager. It appears many times in my story, but in recognition of the insidious nature of these stereotypical images of the Black girl and Black woman, and their power to produce in others behaviours that negatively impact on our lives I will pick it up again. In the selected scenarios we see the disregard and disrespect that is automatically attributed to the Black woman, even when there are the social cues that would normally trigger the attribution of high status and the giving of respect. They illustrate the degree of personal, social and professional skills demanded from the Black woman if she is to competently perform her role.

Examples range from the comic to the tragic, but in each instance my status and authority was questioned, my self-confidence undermined and greater energy was demanded from me in establishing my credibility. For example:

- Co-facilitating a long course for Senior women Civil Servants from Africa and South Asia I was involved in accompanying these senior managers on visits to various Governmental establishments. On a pre-arranged visit to a DSS Office, we were incorrectly directed by the doorman to the public entrance. The receptionist, recognising the error, apologised and telephoned the manager to advise our arrival. As we waited to be collected, the clients hurled racial abuse at us. The receptionist heard their comments but clearly did not know how to deal with it.

On meeting the manager we told her about our experience and asked what actions she would expect of her staff in dealing with racist abuse from users of their services. She kept apologising for our experience, and seemed to find it difficult to realise that we were concerned about the general organisational issue.

- In discussion with the Director of Personnel of an organisation to which I was providing consultancy advice on the implementation of their Equal Opportunities policy he shared with me a rather puzzling. We explored it together and I was able to help him re-frame it and identify some possible solutions. At the end of our conversation, he thanked me for my help and asked if I knew of anyone who would be able to do that work for him. It was clear that as the problem was perceived as a general management problem (not Equal Opportunities) he had not seen me as a potential candidate for this job.

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Despite the demonstration of my skills and knowledge of management issues, as we explored and formulated the problem, he saw me as skilled only in the area of Equal opportunities. Again, I anticipated his embarrassment, or maybe I projected mine on to him – I am not sure. However, I offered him names of other consultants and did not include mine.

- On one occasion I was at lunch with a group of senior managers in an organisation's restaurant. Suddenly there was a voice over my shoulder asking me to open the kitchens. I was stunned. A workman had walked across the restaurant, past all the other people sitting at similar tables to ask me to open the kitchens. I could not think of what to say except 'no'. He, in return, looked surprised by my response and left.

As he went I fantasised that he may have gone to report me to his boss. I wondered what clues he had used in determining that I was the person (maybe the cook) who would hold the keys to the kitchen. Was it simply because I was the only Black woman in the room?

- **Being a working mother**

A friend of mine has a saying that, "Children are God's plot to make the parents grow up." I am not sure that it always achieves that end, as I can think of examples where the children seem maturer than the adults. However, I guess that in learning, the teacher's job is to provide the opportunities for learning, and it is then up to the individual to decide whether to take those opportunities or not.

The arrival of children into my life certainly multiplied the challenges faced and made the challenges that were already there much more complex. I am often amused as I look back to those days soon after Jaja was born and observe my naivete. I was genuinely unprepared for the fact that becoming a mother meant undertaking change of a transformatory nature. I recall a conversation with a friend, in which I assured her that I had put certain plans into place, and that motherhood would not make too much difference to my life. I guess that I had managed my marriage and wedding in a way that had created minimum disturbance to my life, and I now thought that the having of a child could be managed as easily. With the coming of that small baby, came complex change. My husband changed, I changed, our relationship changed, my mother changed, my relationship with her changed, the relationship between herself and Tukur changed. All the relationships between us changed and even the house was different. I experienced myself as totally unprepared for the scale of change that was taking place and that had taken place in my life. So, becoming a mother produced disturbance and disorientation in my interior life.

Externally, life was also much more complex. Key issues were:

- **Survival demanded a high level of strategic planning and organisation.**

Planning for a short course in that first year of Jaja's life became similar to the planning of a military operation. My journals, and my memory, record my amazement at the levels of planning that needed to take place if I was to work effectively and simultaneously be a 'good mother'. Examples of this are:

- *The need to consider issues such as the expressing and discharge of milk in planning work schedules!*

Many members of my family, including myself, suffer from allergies so the likelihood of my children also suffering was high. Research has shown that incidents of allergies in children who were breast-fed are lower than in those who were not breast-fed. Also, the longer the child is breast fed, the less prone to allergies they appear to be. Having discovered this, it was

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important to me to continue breast-feeding for the first year of life. However I returned to work after four months maternity break so to achieve that I had to be extremely organised. I needed to start planning for my absence days in advance. I needed to stimulate my breasts to produce more milk than normal, so that extra milk could be carefully collected and stored. I needed to discover what was the equivalent amount to a normal feed. This was difficult, as breasts, unlike bottles, do not come with neat gauges. Collected milk had to be made sterile, carefully frozen, and then the 'carer' had to be taught a process for defrosting and heating the milk so that it remained sterile and safe for the baby to drink. Finding out about these processes proved to be difficult research. It involved talking to other working mothers, health visitors and reading many books.

Nearer to the event, I had to consider where and how I would be able to express the milk during the course of my work, as I would want to store it for my next period away from Jaja. The ladies' toilet was clearly unsuitable for this job. In situations where the relationship between the organisation and myself was that of client and consultant, negotiating suitable space to accommodate such personal needs was tricky. I began to realise that even making inquiries about such things had to be delicately handled. Images of mother and consultant are not easily compatible to a western mind!

I found that in many instances where the client was female, and particularly if she was a mother herself, it was easier for me to have such discussions. Having gained suitable space I then had to ensure that the milk expressed remained sterile. Then came the problem of storing it and transporting it back home. The provision of adequate supplies of food for my baby, particularly before he was able to eat solid foods was a major concern, so the thought of expressing many ounces of milk and throwing it down the drain was painful. It was something I tried to avoid doing if at all possible.

The timing of breaks for expressing milk was also an issue. My breasts were programmed by my baby, and by his requirement for food. His demands did not always fit neatly into the schedule of a training day or a meeting with a client, or for that matter, with a train timetable on a long journey home. To get it too wrong was to have hard and painful breasts and to have embarrassing wet stains, gradually spreading across the front of your expensive business suit! I did not want either of these things so I planned avidly.

On one occasion, feeling that I did not have the quality of relationship with my client to facilitate such delicate negotiations, I had to race from my meeting to Tukur's place of work (about fifteen minutes walk away). There, in the privacy of his office I expressed the milk, before making the journey home. On another occasion, after a very long journey home, looking constantly at the time, knowing that a feed was due soon, as I emerged from the tube entrance, small geysers of warm milk gushed out through breast pads and across my jacket. Trains, tube and taxis had not supported me in attaining my tight time schedule.

- *Paying attention to the schedules, needs and demands of Tukur, the 'carer' and myself*

Sometimes childcare had to be arranged prior to the arrival of the nanny, and cover provided for gaps between the nanny's departure and Tukur's or my own arrival home. Attention had to be given to any changes in need by any of us. Sickness of a child, or of any of the key 'carers' posed great problems. One consequence of this constant planning and organisation was the stress of always having to get it right,, and of never being able to relax and be spontaneous. A prime example was summer 1997 when I planned a writing week away with some colleagues. I was due to leave early Sunday morning and I woke up with a start in the middle of the prior Saturday night realising that I had seriously messed up. I had forgotten that my au pair's school holidays were different to those of P.L. and Jaja. This meant that for the first three days of their holidays they would be at home on their own! My mother rescued us, yet again. I would never have been able to operate a successful business and engage in research without the assistance of a mother avidly committed to my growth and development.

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- **Additional staff management functions**

In practice, I was my nanny's manager and supervisor. When she was a competent person, well motivated and emotionally and physically healthy, the payoffs experienced in terms of the lightening of the parenting workload over compensated for the extra tasks attached to these roles. However, when any of those things was not present, the pressure of those added roles was keenly felt. In addition to this there were extra administrative tasks relating to PAYE, National Insurance etc..

- **Acquisition of child care appropriate to the healthy, physical and emotional development of the Black child**

The finding of appropriate childcare was, and still is, a perennial problem. With both parents working in jobs that often did not finish at 5 or 6 p.m., some sources of care such as nurseries had to be excluded. We decided that the type of care most suited to our needs was either a live-in or live-out nanny. It was an expensive option, but we felt that that option would give us the level of support I needed in order for me to combine motherhood with management consultancy and training, and research.

The task of finding nannies with appropriate skills proved extremely challenging. As usual, I prepared before I started the process. I spoke to other women in my network who used or had used nannies. I read about selecting and recruiting such people and I spoke with Agencies. In my discussions with agencies, it began to be apparent to me that they assumed that I was White, so it became necessary for me to explicitly state that we were a Black or African-Caribbean family. Some people found such statements uncomfortable, but it was very important to us that candidates for the job arrived adequately briefed.

I was then surprised to discover that the knowledge that they would be caring for a Black child did not indicate to the candidates sent to us the need for a particular type of care. Soon after we started the process of interviewing, I began to realise that these 'carers' had not been trained to identify the specified and different needs of a Black child. At interviews, we routinely asked a question about differences identified in the provision of good child-care to a Black child, from what they would offer to a White child. We were amazed at the levels of ignorance displayed by both White and Black candidates. It was clear that most people had not thought about it and that their training had not addressed such issues. It soon became apparent that as Black professionals the finding of adequate care for our child (later children) had greater complexities than we had envisaged.

Many were unaware of even the difference in physical needs such as appropriate hair and skincare. On one occasion, a White woman, who told us that she was the mother of a mixed-race child, responded to that question by saying, "Well, I guess now that they have taken the golliwog off the market it is a bit difficult to find good toys!" Another talked about recognising that we would be concerned about the other children with whom they may mix. We asked her to say more about this, and she said that so many of them will have parents who are "mixed up in drugs and other things", that she understood that we would have to be careful. We did not think that she assumed that the children with whom our children would mix would be White. We therefore had to assume that the comment about drug taking was an expression of the prevalent stereotypical view of the Black family.

The use of nannies proved to be an unreliable source of care. There were many occasions when at very short notice we found ourselves without childcare. Possibly the worst was in December 1991 when four days before Christmas, our nanny informed us that she had been head-hunted by a former employer who was opening a nursery and wanted her to be the Deputy Manager! She wanted to be able to start the new job in the New Year. We learnt that there are no career prospects for nannies, so many use it as a 'stop-gap', a way of earning money while waiting for other opportunities to arise. In the first four years of Jaja's life he had at least 10 nannies!! How do we as Black parents maintain consistency for our children, in situations such as this?

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As the children grew older, we have experimented with the au-pair solution, and discovered that this too has many hidden challenges. One of the greatest is the fine balance between increased role pressure and role conflict in the first few months of the relationship, and the prospect of a tremendous easing of workload and time pressures in the longer term. Managing the roles of both employee and family member and employer and host /mother is very challenging particularly in the early stages of the engagement.

Over the years it has become apparent that it is much more difficult for Black parents to offer to their children care that promotes physical health, and intellectual stimulation, and that promote self-love and an appropriate sense of self-worth, than it would be for their White counterparts.

- **Challenged by a social system where provision is geared to the needs of the White man**

Soon after Jaja's birth, I started to experience the world differently. An early experience was a stroll to the shops with the pram. To my surprise I found that there were many shops I could not enter. At one shop, I waited anxiously with my eyes on Jaja and the pram through the glass. The shopkeeper was engaged in conversation with a regular customer. The shopkeeper expressed an interest in seeing the customer's baby and was told, "She is outside, you must come and see her". At this comment, a man who had been waiting alongside me intervened to ask why, with all the abductions, she left her child outside. Both women turned to him and said, "because prams cannot come through the door." He was outraged. He said that he could not believe that women would put up with such a situation. He moved to the door and felt the sides as if he wanted to widen them with his own hands. As I observed this I noticed the reactions of the other two women and myself. I realised that perhaps, we are too accepting of inadequate services. The other female customer and I had adapted ourselves to the constraints encountered. We were not trying to tear the door apart with our own hands.

A few weeks later, insight into this new world was enhanced when I tried to use the Tube. Being safety conscious, I read the notices, and realised that customers were strongly advised not to take prams on the escalators – but there were no lifts. The choice was the stairs or the escalator! I then became conscious of the numbers of times I had seen women struggling to get up or down to a platform on the tube, and of the numbers of instances on which other customers had had to come to their rescue. On that occasion, I was with Tukur, so together we negotiated the stairs. However, at the other end of the journey in a busy Central London station, I was left stranded for what seemed like a very long time, as Tukur went in search of a guard to let me, and the pram, through the barriers.

Another experience was that of taking Jaja with me to a training course in Wales. My client did not want to wait until I was officially back from my maternity break and suggested that they would pay for me to bring a 'carer' and baby with me. I took my mother with me. However, I had not bargained for the challenges of taking a baby by train on a long journey. The journey to Wales was difficult but it went according to plan. However, on the way back, our train was badly delayed, Jaja became hungry while waiting, but the crowded awaiting room was not a place conducive to stress-free breast feeding! He then needed to be changed and this became a major dilemma. At that time, British rail did not have baby changing facilities on their platforms. I am not sure that they now exist, but hopefully things have moved on. While considering what to do, the train came, we found our seats, but of course my dilemma still remained. No amount of creative thinking could provide me with a solution that satisfied my baby's needs **and** gave consideration to the needs of other passengers.

As I fretted over this problem, I realised that yet again I had been left to deal with a problem that should have been dealt with by someone else. I began to wonder how many other women had found themselves in the same predicament. The lack of provisions for mothers and children infuriated me, but again I did not do anything that challenged the situation to change.

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These are, but a few of the challenges that I encountered as I tried to negotiate the world with a baby and sometimes a pram in tow. By the end of the first year of Jaja's life, I had gathered quite a number of infuriating experiences. Incidents that left me saying, "I really must write and complain to someone about this" but of course I did not do that. At that time, I was already seriously over stretched and the writing of complaining letters demands time and energy - two resources that were in extremely short supply. It was much easier simply to moan and next time to adapt myself to the particular constraint.

As I write this, I am noticing that I do not have many stories of this type from P.L.'s babyhood. It would be nice to say that by then, there had been radical changes in the services provided. However, on the contrary, I realised that it is simply that I was becoming better adapted. I no longer expected to have an adequate service. I find this sad, but in double binding situations, strategies that allow you to remain sane are worthwhile ones.

- **Dogged by fatigue and tiredness**

Countless entries in my journals record the fact that tiredness and fatigue were my constant companions for many years. The last ten years have been filled with challenges of many types, many of which were associated with my various caring roles. This issue is picked up again and explored more fully in chapters 7 and 8, so I will simply flag it as an issue of great importance in the lives of working mothers – Black or White.

- **Being a school governor**

Despite the many roles and pressure I was already carrying I still felt that it was important to actively participate in the school which my children attend. Many studies indicate the fact that the school systems does not adequately respond to the specific needs of Black children and that as a result many do not do very well (Troyna and Williams 1986; Mullard 1982; Sarup 1986 and Governmental reports Rampton 1981, Swann1985.) Therefore I did not feel that I had the option of leaving the education of my children totally to the school.

Closing Remarks

As I close this chapter I am aware of how emotionally tiring it has been to review and inquire into my life. I am also recognising the psychological blocks and the internalised messages that have played in my head attempting to stop me from going in to these issues and finding out. Estes (1992) talks about the "psychic force that twists and tangles us up as though by magic, keeping us from knowing what we know." She says:

"Women strengthen this barrier or door when they engage in a form of negative self encouragement which warns them not to think to dive too deeply, for "you may get more than you bargained for.""

The process of inquiring into one's life is not easy. As I allow the curtains to fall on this part of the inquiry I recognise that on another exploration, a different set of stories may emerge.

In this Chapter I have attempted to make evident some of the mechanisms and processes, conscious and unconscious and overt and covert through which opportunities to find or realise my potential were restricted or assisted. The themes depicted here reappear in the stories of other women, and in chapters 8 and 9 I consider the nature of the social fabric that is created as these separate incidents, like threads, are woven together.

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