

**Chapter 7**  
**Relational practice in consulting**

*I chose an extract from Vivaldi's Sacred Music for this chapter. Like the Bulgarian Choirs I experience it as a celebration of the female voice. But 'Nulla in mundo pax sincera' is part of my cultural heritage and it is a song of hope.*

Writing the first draft of the final chapter of this thesis (2003) it dawned on me quite how important relational theory was for my research and my practice. Rather late in the day, you might say. Well, yes. I could start afresh now, write a whole new thesis. But then, perhaps I couldn't. I believe that much of what I have written about in the context of emotion work in consulting is in fact illustrative of relational practice in action. Reflecting on my practice, I saw relational theory in a new light. It appears to be the journey I had to travel in order to discover what had been there for the finding all along. It is an example of the wonderful dance between different ways of knowing: I may come across interesting frameworks and concepts, but sometimes I need to start from my experience in order to really grasp what those concepts have to offer to me.

It is now June 2004. Whilst re-crafting my thesis, I have continued to develop my inquiry into how relational theory might inform my practice as a consultant. Returning to this chapter after ten months, I have reworked it substantially, whilst leaving some of the earlier references to my writing process in place, thus 'showing' you the sustained nature of my inquiry process.

## **Frame**

In section 1 of this chapter I give an overview of relational psychology, focusing on the authors that have informed my inquiry. In section 2, I aim to show you how I have worked with Fletcher's concept of relational practice to inform my role as a member of the ACL community. Section 3 explores the increasing demand in business for a more relational way of working and the forces that hamper those developments. I then show you how I aim to bring a relational approach to my consulting practice.





## 7.1 Relational psychology

Relational psychology offers a feminist poststructuralist critique of prevailing models of psychological development. Poststructuralist critique examines the way knowledge is produced and the relationship between knowledge, power and discourse (Clinchy 1996). It focuses on how some voices in this discourse are heard, and counted as knowledge, whilst others are silenced and discounted and gives voice to those marginalised perspectives, calling attention to the systems of power that marginalise them. Adopting the same principles, *feminist* poststructuralism examines the gendered nature of knowledge creation and the way it maintains and reinforces the power relationships between the sexes (Fletcher 1998).

Relational psychology was first developed by Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center. In her ground breaking book, “Toward a new psychology of women” (1986), Miller claims that

“(..) our understanding of all of life has been underdeveloped and distorted because our past explanations have been created by only one half of the human species” (p XI)

While it is obvious, according to Miller, that all of living and development takes place in relationships - a notion congruent with a participatory and social constructionist paradigm - our theories of development seem to be based on a notion of development as a process of separation from others. Psychologists use terms such as fusion and dependency to characterise a child’s early relationship with its mother and terms such as independence, separation and autonomy to describe the end point of development, maturity. In our Western culture men, but not women, have been encouraged to pursue this ideal of autonomy and separation. The work of tending to relationships, especially relationships that foster development, has been assigned to women. Hence, it is from the study of *women’s* lives, listening to women’s stories and taking them seriously, that relational psychologists aim to develop a new comprehensive psychological theory to better describe all human experience.





Miller further argues that because of women's subordination, relational work has been relegated to the private sphere and consistently devalued by both men and women. The emphasis on 'male qualities' in the public sphere, such as autonomy, domination and competition, has been oppressive to both men and women:

“All social structures that male society has built so far have included within them the suppression of other men. In other ways, too, all of our society's advances are still a very mixed blessing. (...) Technologically advanced society has led to vast improvements for a small group of men and some improvements for a somewhat larger group – at the expense of misery for many and the destruction of whole cultures for others” (o.c., p.77-78).

Since 1974 the work of Miller has been taken forward by a range of scholars and inspired countless others. The following relational psychologists have informed my inquiry:

- The Wellesley Centers for Women (WCW), which unites the Center for Research on Women and the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies in an interdisciplinary community of scholars engaged in research, training, analysis and action (WCW)). The Stone Center papers are a recent inspiration for my inquiry into working with groups (June, 2004).
- Carol Gilligan and colleagues (Gilligan, Ward et al. 1988; 1993) focus on the implications of the difference in identity formation for men and women's moral development. (Discussed in this thesis in chapter 3.)
- Belenky, Goldberger and colleagues (Golberger, Tarule et al. 1996; Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1997) explore women's epistemological positions and issues of voice and power. (See chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis.)
- Joyce Fletcher (1994; 1998; 1999) examines the implications of the mainstream male bias in developmental psychology for organisations, and challenges the prevailing organisational discourse from a relational perspective. Her work features in this chapter's inquiry.
- Judi Marshall (1989; 1992; 1993 b) has researched the situation of women managers and how the prevailing organisational paradigm hampers their careers and their potential impact on organisation cultures. As my supervisor she has continually invited me to pay attention to gender dynamics in my inquiry and my

*Sunday, 7 September 2003*

*I have been working on this section for a while now, ever repeating Gould's beautiful rendition of Bach, appreciating his unique interpretation and his quiet humming in the background. On this beautiful Sunday morning, I find myself suddenly put off by this technically near perfect rendition. I search for something different, not altogether sure what I'm looking for. Eventually I dig out "The Gift", a record by the Medici Quartet – "A scripted conversation in two languages" it says on the cover. On this record the musicians describe the very human process of making music together: "You can't make it as a unified whole, if anyone is subservient to anyone else, you have to play as four equals. We're very different individuals. Paul drives me to despair and I drive him to despair, and yet we're opposing poles of the same whole, we realise that and that's why we're still here working together". Paul says: "At its best... what happens is that you let go of all those kind of issues – how it feels to me is: whilst you're still leading ... while there is still leadership at that level, we're still talking about power play, you see. And whilst you're still talking about power play, you've still got the boundaries up – and once you've got the boundaries up, you're not in a real relationship as far as I'm concerned...". Relational practice in making music. But then the conversations on "The Gift" distract me. I try different pieces of music (Performances by the Huelgas Ensemble initially, and then the Baroque Fest, which has stood me in good stead in the past.) To no avail. What am I looking for? I yearn for a human voice, and for clarity, and for a certain kind of rhythm. I hunt down an extract from Vivaldi's sacred music. The lovely interplay between the female voice and the soothing melodic line settles my unruly heart and I pick up the thread.*

practice.

In summary, relational psychology positions itself as an alternative to the masculine bias that underpins mainstream theories of psychological, intellectual and moral development that underlie many societal structures (Fletcher 1999). Relational psychologists ask questions about voice and relationship, about psychological processes and theory, in particular theories in which men's experience stands for all of human experience, shutting out women's voices. Examining the relationship between psychological theory and women's psychological development, they demonstrate how mainstream psychological theory has taken separation and detachment as the marks of development in adolescence and presented them as facts. It has advocated conceptions of self and morality that linked progress or goodness with disconnection and detachment, and advocated separation in the name of psychological growth and health (Gilligan 1993)

Relational psychology offers an alternative model of psychological development, called growth-in-connection, which is rooted in private sphere characteristics of connection, interdependence and collectivity. Rather than focus on autonomy, separation, individuation and independence as central to personal growth and identity, it emphasises the role of relational interactions in the development process. Whilst both mainstream and relational theories encompass individual and relational processes, it is the pre-eminence of connection and mutuality over individuation that marks relational theory as feminine and gives it the potential to challenge the existing organisational discourse (Fletcher 1998). Growth-fostering interactions are conceptualised as follows:

“Growth-fostering interactions are characterized by mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, where both parties recognize vulnerability as part of the human condition, approach the interaction expecting to grow from it, and feel a responsibility to contribute to the growth of the other. The ability to develop relationally requires certain strengths: empathy, vulnerability, the ability to experience and express emotion, the ability to participate in the development of another, and an expectation that relational interactions can yield mutual growth” (Fletcher 1998 p. 31).



Fletcher starts from the assumption that organisations, in theory, practice and discourse, are gendered. She exposes how the masculine bias in mainstream theories not only disadvantages women, inhibiting their career progression, but is also problematic for men, and for organisational effectiveness, because they have resulted in a narrow understanding of organisational phenomena (1998). Fletcher designed a study of working practices of female engineers, starting from the premise that current, common sense definitions of work

“implicitly valued certain (masculine) aspects of work and the people (mostly men) who tended to work this way, while making invisible other, arguably as important (feminine) aspects of work and devaluing the people (mostly women) who tended to work this way. The goal of the study was to give voice to these excluded aspects of work by detailing a way of working – relational practice – that was rooted in a relational or stereotypical feminine value system” (1999, p.4)

Fletcher’s study helped me to situate my ongoing inquiry into emotion work in my consulting practice and as a member of the ACL community in a wider discourse. Her map of relational practice, which I discuss below, offered a language that helped me to become aware of and articulate different aspects of my practice including what I had thus far called ‘emotion work’. Fletcher asserts that the limits of the language used in the prevalent organisational discourse disappear relational practice. Using her framework I became aware of the extent to which I had been at risk of disappearing some of my own relational work. Although I knew – experientially – that I have a strong preference for working relationally, I did not always manage to articulate and conceptualise the output of my relational activity as an achievement in its own right. At the same time her vocabulary encouraged me to actively inquire into and challenge, if warranted, the interpretations others made of my practice. In doing so I realised the extent to which some of my colleagues and clients indeed framed some of my relational activities as “you need to be liked”, or “you like to be helpful”, as I illustrated in an extract from my diary below.

*August 2003*

*I am curious about the fact that I had not made the connection between Fletcher's concept of relational practice and the conversations colleagues and I had about what we valued in our working together as we explored emotion work in our consulting practice, despite having read her article about relational practice in the journal of management inquiry in 2001 (1998). I wonder whether reading Fletcher's work in fact, unconsciously, influenced my thinking about "contributing to a place where people could flourish"? It is impossible to tell, but it reminds me of the importance of 'cycles' in my inquiry. I have noticed – and mentioned in this thesis – a spiral pattern in my learning: returning to a concept on a number of occasions, circling around it as it were, and absorbing different aspects, or re-discovering its significance.*

*When I talk with colleagues about relational practice, I do not frame it in a feminist context. Just as signifiers such as man, woman, worker, executive, derive meaning from the way ideology constructs them, and create a reality which we then act into (Fletcher 1999), feminism is a signifier situated in an ideological context. I have experienced it as a potential barrier to dialogue in ACL, in client organisations, with previous employers. I take a pragmatic stance: the concept of relational practice is very powerful for me. I want to be able to explore it with colleagues, without risking disengagement by putting it in its feminist context and I leave it to interested colleagues to make meaning of the origins of the concept as they explore Fletcher's work for themselves... Thus I collude in a significant way with the current organisational discourse in ACL. I silence myself.*

*September 2003*

*I have started to situate Fletcher's writing in a feminist context, to the unease of some of my colleagues. However it has led to interesting conversations about the prevalent private/public sphere divide, what kind of behaviours are valued in organisations and the discrepancy between espoused and enacted values (Argyris and Schon 1996).*

*June 2004*

*Relational psychology is now on the Ashridge Master's in Organisation Consulting (AMOC) curriculum. Last week I introduced the framework to my colleagues on AMOC faculty, feminist origins included. Colleagues were interested but voiced some scepticism about the feminist connection. I pointed out that, in the past, we had adopted a prescriptive developmental framework, oblivious to the fact that it had its origins in the study of the male half of the population, and that feminist scholars were at least explicit about their research being grounded in women's (continued on page 526)*

12 March 2004

Much food for thought after an interesting conversation with Geoff today. We met for a drink after a period of little contact. After swapping stories about our lives, our families and our work, the large XX client project, talk of the day in ACL, arose in the conversation. Because my colleague and co-director Paul had sent an email to the ACL community inviting expressions of interest, I had been in the difficult position of explaining to many colleagues why they had not been invited onto the team. I spent a considerable amount of energy crafting a carefully worded email. The email had struck Geoff as an example of the extent to which I “need to be liked”.

Overcoming an initial sense of irritation, I explained how I saw that email as an illustration of my relational practice: a purposeful, choiceful action, with the intent of sustaining good relationships with colleagues. I used the opportunity to explore the differences in our (Geoff and mine) ways of working from a relational perspective, and hence my reason for not inviting Geoff on my teams in the last year. It was a difficult conversation, but we agreed it had been enlightening. We parted on good terms.

Thus Fletcher’s framework became a tool for explicitly claiming strategic intent and agency in my relational practice. At the same time, I began to pay increasing attention to the way and extent to which relational activities are disappeared in ACL and in client organisations, and offered a vocabulary and strategies to surface such activities and frame them as contributing to the espoused values of the organisation.

Fletcher’s study also raised a number of questions. Much of it, despite starting from a relational stance, is rather individualistic in its focus, as is illustrated in table 7.1 on page 528. I found myself looking for references about supporting others in claiming credit for *their* relational work, for references to the beliefs and values that underpin relational practice and for ideas about how to appropriately confront the lack of relational behaviour. Some of those questions are in fact addressed in the last chapter of “Disappearing Acts”, where Fletcher incorporates the stories of women about the practical realities of pushing back on the disappearing dynamic. Interestingly, those stories were not part of the original study.



*experience. Conversations will continue, no doubt, as we start to examine the implications for our lives, our practice as consultants, colleagues and members of faculty.*

*I am glad to have crossed this bridge and aware that it is an ongoing challenge.*

*July 2004*

*Tired but delighted. I have just returned from an AMOC workshop on which I introduced relational psychology to the participants, feminist origins included. I made connections with social constructionism and complexity theory, frameworks which underpin the programme. The participants responded with interest and excitement. One consultant (a man), working for a global pharmaceutical company commented: "This is so helpful for making sense of patterns in my organisation. How senior women operate and how they are constructed. The tension between the need for team work and collaboration on the one hand and the pull towards autonomy and individual achievement on the other". We talked at length about the difficulty of introducing relational practice in organisations with masculine cultures. We had more questions than answers, and I did admit that I despair sometimes.*

*We engaged at a deep level with the group' process and the three days appeared to me an enactment of relational practice.*

In the next section I explore Fletcher's work in the context of the ACL community, and share some of the questions and critical reflections it has raised. I have already mentioned how artificial it feels to separate my membership of the ACL community from my actual engagements with clients. The design, preparation and review of client work usually happen with a team of colleagues, and as such the nature and quality of team relationships have a direct impact on the quality of our client work. There is a less direct link too: belonging to a community of practice in which I can thrive is a key aspect of my personal growth and influences the quality of the presence I bring to my client work, hence elaboration in this chapter about relational practice in the ACL community.

In section 3 I examine the potential of relational theory for my practice as a consultant to clients. Section 4 brings this thesis to a close.

## **7.2 Aspiring to relational practice in ACL**

In this thesis I have written extensively about joining ACL and developing a sense of belonging to that community. As my inquiry progressed, I have felt increasingly at home in ACL and have registered with joy, and some surprise, quite *how* important and nurturing that sense of belonging is, for me and for my practice as a consultant. Wenger (1998) discusses the sense of fulfilment that can be generated by belonging to a community of practice, and the source of social energy those communities can provide. I have come to associate that energy and fulfilment with 'relational practice', which Fletcher describes as follows:

“Relational practice is a way of working that reflects a relational logic of effectiveness and requires a number of relational skills such as empathy, mutuality, reciprocity, and a sensitivity to emotional contexts” (1999 p 84).

True to a feminist research tradition, Fletcher starts her account of her study by telling the story behind the story. She gives a moving account of how she discovered Miller's “Toward a New Psychology of Women” (1976) as a stay-at-home mother of three, and of the profound impact it had on her understanding of how relational traits

Table 7.1 Fletcher's conceptualisation of relational practice

Relational Practice	Mutual Empowering	Self-Achieving	Creating Team
<b>Preserving</b>			
<b>Focus on Task:</b> <i>Shouldering responsibility for the whole in order to preserve the life and well-being of the project by:</i>	<b>Focus on Other:</b> <i>Enacting an expanded definition of "outcome" to include outcomes embedded in others such as increased knowledge or competence by:</i>	<b>Focus on Self:</b> <i>Using relational skills to enhance one's ability to achieve goals by:</i>	<b>Focus on Team:</b> <i>Creating background conditions in which group life can flourish and the feeling of team can be experienced by:</i>
Resolving conflict and disconnection to keep project connected to essential resources	Teaching with an awareness of the learner's needs and barriers.	Recognising and accepting responsibility for breaks in relationships that could impede achievement.	Affirming individual uniqueness through listening, respecting, and responding.
Anticipating and taking action to prevent problems	Sharing information	Re-connecting after disconnection.	Facilitating connections among individuals by absorbing stress, reducing conflict, and creating structural practices that encourage interdependence
Extending job beyond defined boundaries and "doing whatever it takes"	Facilitating connections	Reflecting on one's behaviour.	
Extending responsibility beyond the technical definition of the job (up, down, lateral)	Supplying relational skills	Using feelings as a source of data to understand and anticipate reactions and consequences.	
Placing project needs ahead of individual career concerns	Protecting others from consequences of their relational ineptitude	Responding to emotional data (emotional context, others' emotional realities) to understand situations and strategise appropriate responses.	
	Giving help without making receiver feel guilty or inadequate	Asking for help in a way that takes the helper's needs and likely responses into account (relational asking).	
	Eliminating barriers and cutting slack		

could be conceptualised as strengths, rather than weaknesses or emotional dependencies. It is a lovely reminder that research can be deeply personal and drew myself and colleagues into her work, raising our anticipation and curiosity.

In her study Fletcher was looking for evidence of relational practice in her chosen organisation, a major high-tech company in the United States. She charted relational practice in more detail, explored its underlying beliefs, assumptions and values and examined the mechanism through which relational practice and its underlying belief systems were brought into the dominant organisational discourse.

Table 7.1, taken from her work (1999 p. 85), gives an overview of the core aspects of relational practice as she found them. I will explore the various categories in Fletcher's framework in turn, trying them on for size as it were (playing the believing game (Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1997) and discussing questions they raise for me in the process.

***Preserving: Focus on the task***

This category covers a range of activities in order to preserve “the life and well-being” of the project, including activities outside one's direct responsibility, with an attitude of “doing whatever it takes”, even if it means putting aside one's personal agenda or sacrificing some symbols of status (Fletcher 1999).

Client projects in ACL include a range of activities. In the initial stage it involves pro-actively exploring opportunities for new work, responding to invitations to tender or dealing with client calls. If the work is won, the relationship with the client is developed and detailed, collaborative, conversations about the approach follow. As the work unfolds there are meetings with clients and colleagues, written communications to be taken care of, administrative tasks to be attended to and evaluations to be conducted, until eventually the work comes to a (sometimes temporary) close. When the work is lost, there is the task of seeking feedback from the client – an important but not always well attended to aspect of our work.

Doing “whatever it takes” in this context includes working evenings and weekends to



race proposals to deadlines, being flexible in re-arranging meetings to accommodate colleagues and clients, standing in for colleagues at short notice, sharing notes and presentation materials, dealing with issues that arise in the contact with the client, looking after oneself and the team... the list is endless. I have noticed differences between colleagues' willingness to "go the extra mile", and in interpretations of what that entails. Writing proposals in response to an 'invitation to tender' is a good illustration since few of us enjoy the work and deadlines are often tight (see "Crime" in "The Rough Guide to ACL", Appendix 2). An incident comes to mind in which one of my colleagues, Geoff, left Sandra and I to write a proposal late on a Friday night, and, after the work was won, expected to be co-director of the project. (Being client director on a number of projects is one of ACL's performance criteria for senior consultants). To me, this amounts to the opposite of 'preserving'. Not prepared to go the extra mile at crunch-time, my colleague put his career before the team effort once the work was won. As the client director of the team I offered co-directorship to Sandra instead. I see that response as a relational activity. One could think of it as an aspect of

- 'preserving': taking action to prevent problems at a later stage
- 'mutual empowering': protecting others from consequences of their relational ineptitude
- 'self achieving': using feelings as a source of data to understand and anticipate reactions and consequences
- 'creating team': facilitating connections among individuals by absorbing conflict) – in this case I was trying to prevent conflict from occurring at a later stage, whilst being aware that Geoff's co-directorship may not have generated conflict in the team, as I mentioned above.

It is an example of where Fletcher's categories seem to overlap and at the same time not quite capture my experience. It is, for me, about my values of fairness and integrity. I could have avoided confronting Geoff. But it was important to me that Sandra got recognition for her efforts – not an activity that is mentioned in Fletcher's table. Thus to me relational practice does not only mean I take on tasks that may not advance my status or recognition, it also encompasses helping to build the status and recognition of others. Also, I wanted Geoff to be clear from the start about how I





intended to work with my team and the value I placed on people sharing the load. In the role of client director I have the opportunity to choose my team members and to make decisions about sharing the director role. In doing so, and by being explicit about the importance of relational working for me, I can promote relational practice at ACL. I see my tendency to select relationally oriented colleagues on my teams (see diary note) as an expression of agency: I assertively create an environment for myself in which I can thrive and work effectively, and protect myself and my team from what I experience on occasions as detrimental effects of colleagues' more independent – rather than interdependent – and self-centred style.

4 July 2004

Met with D. today, not for business, just to catch up and spend some time together. We talked about relational practice and its various aspects. D. said: “You do that really well, I don't, not really”. Which reminded me that I wanted to insert a comment in this thesis about ‘relationally oriented colleagues’. D. is a colleague I thoroughly enjoy working with and who I experience as caring and relational. Perhaps I do pay more attention to different relational activities than D. does. I don't have an issue with that. I have no intention to turn Fletcher's framework into another tick-list, a normative set of rules. It is a useful tool to start surfacing relational activities as ‘work’ and, since I aspire to working relationally, to review my practice against my values. I agree with Miller (1986) that feminine strengths should be fully valued in society and encouraged in the development of all human beings. I prefer to work with colleagues who appreciate the importance of relational values and skills, and I'm happy to accept that others may or may not share my aspiration and may be in different stages of developing relational skills.

I do work with colleagues who take a more ‘masculine’ view (men and women), either because I am invited onto someone else's team, or because they bring a particular expertise. On those occasions I pay attention to safeguarding myself assertively from the risk of being constructed as the ‘gopher’, as the participants in Fletcher's study called being taken advantage off, and to name my relational activities as work. I try to do that with humour as the following extract from my diary illustrates:



February 2004

Paul and I discussed our work with XX. When he relapsed into his old habit of delegating the administrative tasks to me I said: “Yes, dad. Anything else?” He laughed. “Would you like me to take care of it?” he asked. “Yes, that would be lovely”, I said. And that was that.

Whilst expecting colleagues to put in the extra effort and time, and doing so myself, I want to remain respectful of our private lives (Fletcher and Bailyn 1996). In my experience, the extent to which we are offered flexibility in ACL to manage the boundaries between our work and our private life increases our motivation and willingness to ‘pull out the stops’ when required.

An important aspect of ‘preserving’ in our role as consultants is not project related, but consists of nurturing and sustaining the ACL community. This aspect of our work is not as visible as client work as it doesn’t appear on our timesheets (which measure fee earning work). Mentoring colleagues, marketing activities, interviewing prospective employees are all an intrinsic part of looking after the ACL community. Although we are all expected to make a contribution, increasing with increasing seniority, it is tempting to give priority to client work, which brings more kudos (and potentially a higher salary). I have noticed, to my discomfort, that my contribution has decreased as I try to carve out time for PhD work and avoid long commutes. Colleagues have given support by arranging meetings on days or at venues convenient for me, taking on aspects of client management work, even reading chapters of this thesis. I look forward to reconnecting with the community with renewed energy.

### ***Mutual Empowering: Focus on other***

Mutual empowering refers to behaviours intended to enable others’ achievement and contribution. What differentiates these activities from other types of relational practice is the focus on empowering another person. Fletcher explains that she chose the term ‘empowering’, rather than more commonly used terms such as nurturing or helping, to highlight the fact that behaviours in this category are intended to enhance



others' powers and abilities, and differentiates it from the more common use of this term which relates to authority and decision making and treats power as something that is given to the employee, internalised by the employee and given back to the organisation in the form of increased performance (Walsh, Bartunek et al. 1998). The qualifier 'mutual' is the respectful commitment by all to work on the self-development of all individuals in the relationship (Jordan, Kaplan et al. 1991) and indicates the underlying belief that to contribute to another's growth is to allow that person to contribute to your own emotional, relational or intellectual growth.

One aspect of mutual empowering emerging from Fletcher's study was 'empathic teaching', in which the perceived needs of the learners, emotional and/or intellectual are paramount. It is an approach I aspire to in my consulting practice (about which more below) and in my role as a mentor, colleague and client director in ACL, but which I had hitherto associated with a personal preference. Engaging with mentees in a relational way, is rewarding for me since I learn and grow from the experience too (Kram 1996). When I named it as a relational activity it generated a strong push-back from some of my colleagues, who prefer to emphasise the higher level of expertise they bring to teaching and mentoring:

“(...) characterized by a relationship in which the mentor, operating from a position of security and superiority, is motivated to empower in order to experience feelings of generativity (Levinson 1977, cited in (Fletcher 1994)).

In July 2003 (see appendix 3) we organised a review of ACL's approach to mentoring. As a result we have developed new guidelines for mentoring which takes a mutually empowering approach.

Fletcher's engineers describe verbal (using collaborative language) and non-verbal (e.g. sitting next to the learner) characteristics of their mutually empowering approach. I found Keith Johnstone's concept of 'high versus low status behaviour' (1981) helpful when exploring the non-verbal aspects. Working at the Royal Court Theatre Studio, Johnstone developed the notion that every movement, gesture, inflection of the voice imply a status, and that human beings read, often unconsciously, the status the other person is adopting. When I asked a group of clients to coach me into playing high or low status, they knew exactly what to say:



lower your voice, steady your eye-contact etc. versus speak faster, drop your shoulders, shift your eyes quickly. Johnstone further states that teachers with high status flexibility establish a good rapport with learners by adjusting their status to difference circumstances. Reflecting on my own mentoring practice I found that I tend to lower my status non-verbally by seeking out an informal environment, sitting or walking alongside my mentee, paying attention to my posture and the quality of my voice, and verbally by inviting success stories from my mentee, explaining the steps in my thinking, sharing personal stories of failure or struggle where appropriate, and empathising with their expressed difficulties, to name but a few behaviours. I have already described my mentoring relationship with Edgar, which I believe illustrates my ‘mutual empowering’ approach, in the previous chapter. Recently (March 2004), one of my mentees, older and more experienced than me, commented how much she enjoys our meetings and how she experiences them as shared opportunities for reflection and learning.

One of the reasons I enjoy working in ACL as much as I do, is the extent to which I experience many colleagues engaging in mutually empowering behaviour by:

- readily sharing information
- eliminating practical barriers to achieving success by pointing each other in the direction of available resources and providing support for projects they are not directly involved in (proof-reading draft documents and giving feedback – including my dissertation writing – is one example)
- eliminating emotional barriers by ‘cutting slack’ (Fletcher, o.c.) because colleagues are dealing with a stressful situation, even if that situation is outside the work context (e.g. a sick child at home, a bereavement, the arrival of a baby, the redundancy of a partner)
- facilitating new connections between colleagues and with clients
- protective connecting with the purpose of enabling the other’s success, which Fletcher distinguishes from connecting related to success of projects. In her study protective connection often included stepping in and handling difficult or explosive situations. In ACL, with its informal culture, it often entails explaining “the way we do things around here” to new colleagues. Since we have a multi-cultural team (more than ten nationalities are represented) it also often involves





explaining the intricacies of English language and etiquette.

Our action learning groups, available to all ACL staff, work in the spirit of mutual learning and empowering, and are an ongoing source of connection, especially valuable for new colleagues.

As I have explored in depth in this thesis, it can be rather difficult for new staff to become part of this mutually empowering network. The ACL community days we have established as a result of our ongoing inquiry into joining ACL, (the first of which took place on 25 September, 2003) are intended to enable that process. They have as sole purpose sharing stories of our work with clients, introducing new people to other members of the community, establishing and nurturing connections and sharing resources.

Our somewhat un-orthodox structure is another enabler of mutual empowering. We have a six member strong leadership team, including the managing director, which shares responsibility for the various tasks involved in running a business. Members of the leadership team are of the same grade and pay scale as many colleagues and only benefit from a reduced client load in order to compensate for their increased responsibility to the community. Our performance reviews happen in teams, where we share the responsibility for ensuring the success of all team members.

ACL is not the perfect mutually empowering community, as I have illustrated in my conversation with Geoff above. Some of my colleagues do not necessarily agree that empowering others enables their own growth and development, others remain somewhat at the periphery of the community and like to 'fly solo'. I value the way we accommodate that difference in style. At the same time I appreciate the extent to which we continually examine our practices and work towards becoming ever more congruent with our espoused values of relational working, of which the review of our mentoring practice is but one example.



***Self-achieving: Focus on self***

Self-achieving refers to using relational skills to enhance one's own professional growth and effectiveness. It is based on the belief that relationships are important to personal efficacy and that the long-term benefits of maintaining and nurturing affiliations with others are worth the effort.

Fletcher distinguishes three types of self-achieving activities: making an effort to repair potential or perceived break in connections, reflecting and relational asking.

The conversation with Geoff, described in the diary extract above, is one example of self-efficacy in which I make an effort to repair my floundering relationship with Geoff, using the opportunity to situate my email to colleagues as a relational activity. In doing so I aim to assert myself as strategizing, taking a long term view of relationships with colleagues, and avoid being constructed as needy and dependent. The email itself can be constructed as an effort to avoid a break in connections with disappointed colleagues. When challenged in my action learning group (April 2004) about the time and energy I invest in relationships with colleagues to the detriment of making progress with my thesis, the subject I had brought to the meeting, I re-framed it as a relational activity, thus contributing to a discourse in which relational practice is surfaced, rather than disappeared as 'being nice'.

A large part of this thesis has been dedicated to describing my reflective practice both as a member of the ACL community and in my client work. I believe it offers numerous examples of the way I use feelings, my own and others', as sources of data as well as of the attention I pay to maintaining healthy relationships with colleagues and clients. I will therefore not elaborate further on them here.

One aspect of self-achieving distinguished in Fletcher's study, and less prevalent in this thesis is 'sacrificing voice to preserve connection', in other words, not speaking up in an interaction in order not to sever ties completely. In fact I do little of that in ACL. Sometimes I will stay silent in meetings (as Paul commented in July 2004, following an AMOC faculty meeting) not as much to avoid severing ties, as to create space for others to contribute. In situations of conflict I aim to carefully and



respectfully articulate my view, paying attention to my status play (Johnstone 1981) and offering the possibility that we may have to 'agree to disagree'. In the long run I think relationships are better served by developing an ability to hold conflicting views (Miller 1986; Walsh, Bartunek et al. 1998).

Another aspect or self-achieving worthy of further exploration is 'relational asking'. If needing help is seen not as an individual deficiency, but as a universal human condition, then asking for help is not something to be avoided. In this context it can be seen as an opportunity to practice calling forth 'enabling' behaviour in others (Fletcher, o.c.). The help sought is intended to enable the seeker, not as a means to avoid responsibility. Thus relational asking is closely linked, in my view, to 'mutual empowering'. I will often seek out my mentees when asking for help, thus further establishing a relationship of mutuality, outside the context of mentoring conversations. I find it rather easy to ask for help in ACL. The risk that I will be constructed as ineffectual is small, unlike in organisations where the emphasis is strongly on autonomy and independence. Seeking out relationally oriented colleagues, I find a readiness to offer help, without concern about being 'taken advantage of', a willingness to do 'whatever it takes' (preserving) for the benefit of the whole, and a 'mutual empowering' as those colleagues will offer help in a way that enables me to develop my own knowledge and skill, whilst articulating what they learnt or found interesting in our conversation. As I already mentioned, colleagues have volunteered or responded positively to requests for help in order to allow me to complete this thesis. It remains my responsibility to seek help choicefully, without shirking my personal responsibility.

### ***Creating Team: Focus on team***

'Creating team' covers a range of activities intended to foster group life. Fletcher sees it as different from what is generally thought of as team building. It is concerned with creating the background conditions in which group life can flourish, rather than with the task of creating a team identity. She distinguishes two types of activities: those focussed on individuals within the collective and those focused on the collective itself.





She associates ‘attending to the individual’ with practices that acknowledge others’ unique preferences, problems, feelings and circumstances. I see a potential overlap here with mutual empowering (e.g. taking the situation of the learner into account, cutting slack when others are experiencing stress, whether it is related to work or not) and self-efficacy (e.g. using feelings to inform one’s response to others). The examples in Fletcher’s study include sending verbal and non-verbal affirming messages, listening and responding with empathy to non-work related information and listening to feelings. The engineers comment how their male colleagues will seek out female colleagues when they want to discuss personal issues. They experience it as a “big responsibility, because even if you are not really in the mood, you have to do it” (o.c., p. 75) and construct it as ‘work’. It does, in my view, not equate with emotional labour, in which feelings are treated instrumentally and as commodities (Hochschild 1983), but is the result of a conscious strategy to enhance team spirit. Constructing it as ‘work’ helps to open a space for a relational discourse and avoid the underlying intention being mis-interpreted as an expression of personal attributes. Relational theory suggests that being aware of feelings is important to team effectiveness and that individuals who feel understood and accepted are more likely to be accepting of others, leading to what Miller and Stiver (1997) call ‘a zest for interaction and connection’.

Attending to the collective also entails creating conditions *among* people in order to create an environment that fosters collaboration and co-operation, including using one’s interpersonal skills to absorb stress or reduce conflict, and creating structural practices that encourage relational ways of working.

I believe I have provided numerous examples in my accounts of relational activities focussed on individuals’ needs and on the conditions among team members: creating moments for the team to reconnect in the midst of a client engagement, absorbing stress by supporting colleagues in difficult assignment, reducing conflict by working it through or diffusing it.

Broadening ‘the team’ to ACL as a community of practice, many of the already

*As I write this I am aware of the extent to which colleagues, not members of a client team, can support the team. Especially when we work with clients at Ashridge, a quick retreat to our offices is often wonderfully stress-reducing and nurturing. Our administrators – who have been largely absent from my account so far I realise - play an important part in this, some by their un-failing attention to task and detail, others by offering emotional support and encouragement.*

mentioned practices also illustrate our attention to individual colleagues and to the dynamics in the community: our increasing attention to welcoming new staff, supportive performance review structures, action learning sets available to all staff, our mentoring system are some examples.

### **7.2.1 Some further thoughts about Fletcher's framework.**

Fletcher's framework appears quite exhaustive at first glance and yet the dimension of the organisation as a community of practice seems disappeared, instead the emphasis appears to be on networks of people involved in shared projects.

Establishing connections beyond projects, work groups, departments, I believe to be an important aspect of relational work. In my own practice that entails staying connected also with colleagues I have, after four years in ACL, not yet worked with, and recently, extending those connections across other parts of Ashridge. Sometimes colleagues whose expertise is most different from mine challenge my assumptions most profoundly and offer the richest learning. Also, by reaching out beyond task boundaries, I can begin to influence the wider community, drawing ever widening circles of attention to relational activities and the value of relational practice.

Secondly, from my personal experience and from oft told stories about 'boys' networks, I am conscious of the importance of networking outside the task remit. Personally I like to go home after a days' work, I don't like crowded bars, I don't play many sports – and certainly not golf – and I am aware of the extent to which this outside-work socialising often disadvantages parents, and still especially women. But I do think paying attention to those more informal activities is valuable, nor does it have to be time and energy consuming. Sharing lunch, a cup of tea, a walk, can all be integrated in a day's work, and provide an opportunity to nurture body and soul, in the current hectic organisational pace.

Further, Fletcher's study seems somehow caught in an organisational discourse of task focus and achievement, be it in a relational context. I see relationships as intrinsically valuable. I like work to be fun too, to establish an atmosphere of connection that is beyond task, achievement, recognition. Sharing stories, using

Calas and Smirchic (2003) warn against incorporating female, relational qualities, for instrumental corporate purposes in the context of globalization. The danger, as they see it, is that it leaves managerial ideologies intact and may even strengthen them. They suggest that promoting the 'female advantage' co-opts women and encourages them to use their skills to advance managerial goals, while diverting energy from challenging those very goals and the discourse that created and maintains them as unassailable. They illustrate how the dominant managerial discourse, while appearing gender neutral, subtly disadvantages women and suggest some alternative (and provocative) female images that would disrupt that discourse and encourage new ways of thinking about consumption and production, encouraging organisations to think beyond the bottom line and to acknowledge their responsibility to create a better society for both men and women.

humour, small gestures of affection: a handshake, a hug; can all contribute to creating an environment in which people can thrive. I am aware that the ACL culture is more conducive to those gestures than many other organisations. On the other hand, I have found it easy to introduce them to my most business focussed clients, to good effect when done with care.

Finally, I aspire to working relationally as do many of my colleagues. I have noticed that my inquiring conversations have mainly been with relationally oriented colleagues, because I work more closely with them, because they are reflective and curious to explore working practices and because they are willing to contribute to others' learning and growth (as illustrated by their readiness to reading draft chapters of this thesis). My growing confidence and success in my practice is greatly due to the connectivity I experience as a result of our relational working. ACL is an unusually relational workplace in my experience. Taking a relational approach in a corporation with a traditional, hierarchical and instrumental culture is not without its pitfalls (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000). In a witty and sharp address "Wives – of the organization" to the 'Women & Organisation' conference, Anne Huff (1990) warns us that, as women rise in the professional ranks, they appear to be taking over, and even generating, a disproportionate share of relational activities, and that, almost without exception, their careers suffer. Women, according to Huff, are uniquely vulnerable to 'relational claims', while men are much less responsive to them because of the following forces:

1. the desire to live in ways that connects them to others
2. a 'radar' that continually alerts them to the needs of others and the tasks that need to be done
3. the tendency of both men and women to adopt familiar social roles when they are uncomfortable with women in professional roles
4. the growing need for relational skills in organisations
5. the tendency of groups to institutionalise useful supportive behaviours and treat them as assumed routines.

Huff's personal strategy for resisting the role of organisation wife, which she recommends to her audience, consists of learning to say no to secondary activities,



relinquish the standard setting that leads to over-responding to things she notices (such as rickety furniture that needs replacing), sharing the relational tasks, expecting more from male colleagues and less from female colleagues, and learning to focus: “to sacrifice a dozen worthy causes for that one monumental task that can be accomplished”.

The examples from her personal experience and the specific advice are both helpful and compelling, and have been useful reminders for putting boundaries around my own relational work, so that, for one thing, I have managed to create time and energy to complete the ‘monumental task’ of writing this thesis. They are also good pointers in my work with relationally oriented clients.

Judi Marshall (1989) offers a similar note of caution: just as agency can degenerate in over-control, destruction of the environment, and repression of uncertainty and all but manageable emotions; communion can lead to over-adaptation, lack of boundaries and can be moved by external forces, with no voice or direction of its own. Maturity means integrating the two tendencies in a way that maintains the distinctiveness of each. Or, as Gilligan (1993) puts it: balancing the ‘felt duty to care’ with ‘the right to care’, “to act responsively toward self and others and thus to sustain connection”.

### **7.2.2 So what?**

I have already explained how Fletcher’s concept and framework helped me to recognise and value my own relational activities, and those of colleagues, to name and seek recognition for relational work by connecting it to the espoused values in ACL, and establish relational norms in my client teams. Bringing relational practice into the organisational discourse has opened up a space for an increased awareness of the gendered nature of relational behaviour (although many colleagues remain sceptical of the ‘feminist’ angle).

Some tangible outcomes of my inquiry and our shared conversations are:

- We are preparing to offer Action Learning for internal OD consultants and individual practitioners. Considering my advocacy for ‘belonging to a





community' of practice, this may seem a meagre alternative. Nevertheless, creating a space where consultants can find emotional support and explore and develop relational ways of working, is invaluable in my view. I am mindful how much I valued my action learning set, and my CARPP group as an internal OD consultant in HPA.

- We have reviewed our approach to mentoring, as mentioned earlier.
- We now have regular ACL days with the purpose of creating an opportunity for ACL members to connect, as mentioned earlier.
- We are increasingly working relationally in ACL. Relational practice is congruent with our complexity and social constructionism informed perspective on organisations. It is nurtured by our MD, who models relational behaviour wonderfully.
- Having conversations with colleagues about relational practice and framing my relational work as a result of strategic intent rather than of personal attributes, has helped me to avoid colluding with disappearing dynamics.
- Exploring relational practice as 'our aspired way of working' has begun to generate conversations about how we are rewarded and what for. Contributing to nurturing the community is a key aspect of our work, as I argued earlier. We are currently exploring whether our reward systems, with a recently increased emphasis on fee earning work, may risk devaluing other aspects of our role, geared towards sustaining the community.
- We offer a number of development programmes for consultants, including a Master's programme (AMOC), mentioned in this chapter. The concept of relational practice has now been introduced on the AMOC curriculum.

### **7.3 Relational Consulting, an exploration**

Many scholars argue that today's businesses need to be increasingly responsive, flexible, adaptive and creative in order to compete successfully in a global environment (Miller 1986; Hammer and Champy 1993; Fletcher 1994; Walsh, Bartunek et al. 1998), and that many of the time honoured assumptions and business models are no longer adequate (Lewin and Birute 1999). In order to cope with the

### **Agency and Communion**

Bakan (1966) distinguishes two fundamental modalities in the existence of living beings, which he calls 'agency' and 'communion'. Agency is an expression of independence, and manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, self-expansion and in the formation of separations. Communion is the sense of 'being at one' with other organisms, and manifests itself in contact, openness, lack of separation and fusion.

Bakan considers agency and communion as strategies for coping with anxiety and uncertainty in life. Agency seeks to reduce anxiety by controlling the world around the individual, by 'doing', activity, entering into 'contracts', achieving; whilst communion seeks union and non-contractual co-operation, is based on tolerance and trust, showing forgiveness rather than retribution, by 'being', rather than 'doing'. He associates agency with maleness and communion with femaleness, and maturity with an integration of the two modalities. This concept of maturity bears close resemblance to Gilligan's (1993) imperative to 'balance the duty to care with the right to care'.

Bakan develops the argument that the agency feature has been dominant in prevailing life strategies, with mixed blessings: "Our so-called affluent society is evidence of the success of the agentic strategy. But (...) there is a rising sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and absurdity", and that "The villain is unmitigated agency" (o.c., p. 14), an argument echoed by Miller (1986). The moral imperative, according to Bakan, is to mitigate agency with communion. Marshall (1984; 1989) takes up this argument in her development of career theory, suggesting a path of "communion enhanced by agency", whereby communion can draw on agency to supplement, protect, support, focus and arm it.

pace, order and unpredictability of change, they argue, organisations are increasingly moving to team-based work, dismantling hierarchical and functional boundaries. This drive for cross-boundary collaboration extends to competing organisations pooling research and production resources (Fletcher and Bailyn 1996).

These new organisational forms require a new kind of worker, one who is a continuous learner as well as a continuous teacher, who is willing to enable and empower others, to take responsibility for problems and work collaboratively with others to solve them, is self-reflective and understands the emotional contexts in which work gets done (Fletcher 1999). Authors such as Goleman (1996; 1999) and Covey (1990; 1992) highlight the need for relational skills and the cost to organizations of not having them. Those scholarly claims are borne out in my consulting practice. Many of our clients seek our help to transform their organisation: change its culture, establish new ways of working that foster collaboration, empowerment and creativity; and to support their employees in developing the necessary skills.

Helping clients to effect those changes in sustainable and profound way is far from easy. I will first explore why that might be so, and subsequently how I attempt to rise to the challenge in my consulting approach.

### **7.3.1 Stuck in a masculine paradigm?**

Marshall, drawing on the work of Bakan, (see textbox) points out that most organisational cultures are male dominated:

“Values and characteristics associated with masculine role stereotypes such as independence, control, competition, thrusting out, rationality, objectivity, and focused perception predominate” (1993 b p 314).

Her view is supported in the literature I cited above, and by my own experience. Indeed clients often cite those very characteristics as problematic and in need of change in order for the organisation to stay competitive in the current business climate. Whatever the request: management development, culture change workshops, strategic work or team development, the underlying aim is to develop a culture and



ways of working more congruent with stereotypical feminine style: interdependent, co-operative, receptive, intuitive, emotionally intelligent, and context aware (Miller 1986; Marshall 1993 (b); Fletcher 1999).

If the need for change is experienced so acutely, if organisations are willing to invest (sometimes large sums of) money hiring consultants to support them in that change process, if the change effort is often initiated and supported from the top of the organisation, why then does it prove so difficult to achieve? It is a question I have often pondered. There is a wealth of change literature addressing managers and organisation consultants, hundreds of recipes on how to obtain lasting change, and yet very few organisations appear to achieve it.

Feminist literature sheds an interesting light on the matter. I elaborate. Judi Marshall uses a model developed by Hall (cited in Marshall 1993 b) to explore the dynamics by which cultural patterns are sustained. Hall distinguishes between high-context cultures and low-context cultures. In high context cultures basic assumptions are less accessible to social awareness and negotiation than in low context cultures.

Communication in high-context cultures happens through simple messages with deep meaning and interpretation relies on deeply ingrained, largely unconscious, shared frameworks of understanding. Hall sees Western cultures as predominantly low-context, thus allowing for more overt negotiation of meaning. Marshall however points out that gender-related basic assumptions underpin Western cultures and represent high-context features. Since there is a broad alignment between men's, but not women's, gender identity socialisation, and dominant organisational culture (Miller 1986; Fletcher 1998; Fletcher 1999), men are more likely than women to share this contexting. Men tend to reinforce gendered basic assumptions, unless they are aware of those subtle cultural dynamics and seek to avoid them. Women are discouraged from introducing the personal and emotional into the professional, role-segregated, rational organisational environment. Marshall points at research data that show women's predominant coping strategy as adapting to prevailing norms.

Fletcher (1999) argues that relational skills are not commonly associated with everyday effectiveness in the way one works in organisations:

*I notice that the word instrumentality appears in the Microsoft word dictionary, but that 'relationality' does not, so that it keeps appearing with a niggling red underscore on my screen.*

“Skills such as paying attention to emotional data, sensitivity to others’ emotional realities, self-reflection, and “fluid expertise” are not typically included in developmental programs or training sessions. The issue is that these practices depend on skills –and, even more significant, a whole way of seeing and interacting with others- that are an integration of values commonly associated with the private, family sphere” (page 114).

She asserts that, in order to change the prevailing organisational discourse, we need to add women’s voice and offer new models and alternative ways of organizing, but that the transformational power of this voice is lost because it is incorporated into management literature according to the rules of the old discourse, which privilege *instrumentality* over *relationality* to such an extent that the only way relational skills ‘make sense’ is to conceptualize them as instrumentally useful. In order to recapture a feminine challenge to the privileging of instrumentality over relationality, we need to release and make visible the power of relational activity.

The potentially transformative quality of relational activity, according to Fletcher, lies in what Miller and others have called “mutual growth in connection” (Jordan, Kaplan et al. 1991). The notion that relational activity can be an occasion for growth for both partners is precisely what is disappeared when relational attributes of vulnerability, empathy and emotionality are conceptualised as useful in addressing currently defined organisational issues.

“The essence of mutual vulnerability, mutual openness, and mutual influence is reciprocity – an expectation that the other will be motivated to minimize status differences, to foster growth-in-connection interactions, to respond to and recognize the inevitability of vulnerability and mutual dependence. This mutuality is antithetical to achieving pre-ordained goals. By its very nature, the outcomes of mutual interaction are fluid, unknowable – the essence of creativity rather than management by objectives” (Fletcher 1994 p 79).

Thus Fletcher makes a fundamental distinction between using relational skills to achieve instrumental goals and using relational skills to *relate* and then making instrumental decisions based on that interaction. Using relational skills to engage in

In “The paradox of control in organisations” Phil Streatfield (2001) argues convincingly that management is about participation in real time, emergent processes of discovery and meaning making in relationship. Using examples from his own experience he follows the ‘real’ as opposed to ‘rationalised’ path to product development, companies merging, measurement of performance and supply chain management. The examples show organisations as complex responsive processes, in an emerging situation, with multiple views and perspectives, where learning, participating and transforming are the key elements.



growth in connection not only alters the process, it offers the possibility of outcomes that were previously unknowable. If both partners exit an interaction influenced by it in some way, the context in which future decisions are made is also changed, new factors may be considered and new framings of old questions may be suggested. That, according to Fletcher, is the truly transformational potential of feminine, relational skills, which is invisible in the current representation of the female advantage.

The possibility of change not in a preordained, shared vision approach, but change that is emergent and unpredictable, and may require the manager or change agent to respond in new ways, is eminently congruent with Stacey's perspective on organisations as complex responsive processes of relating, and with social constructionism, both of which I described in Chapter 2 of this thesis. It is, in my experience, a powerful challenge to the prevailing organisational discourse and exceedingly difficult to embrace, for clients and, on still on many occasions, for myself. An instrumental approach allows us to operate within a familiar discourse, and leaves us with at least an illusion of being in control.

ACL prides itself on taking a consulting approach that is informed by complexity thinking and social constructionism (as discussed in Chapter 2). I believe relational theory is not only congruent with those frameworks, it adds a new dimension – growth-in-connection – and sheds a compelling light on the persistence of stability, rather than the emergence of sustained change, in organisations. As such it is a valuable framework for my continued inquiry into my practice and an aspiration for its further development.

### **7.3.2 Towards relational consulting**

Many of the relational skills described by Fletcher (1994) are similar to qualities required of a good consultant in much of the consulting literature (Casey, Roberts et al. 1992; Neumann, Kellner et al. 1997; Block 1999): authenticity, empathic competence, emotional competence, holistic thinking (the ability to synthesise thinking, feeling and acting), embedding outcomes (ability to empower and contribute to the development of others) and even vulnerability (ability to admit 'not



knowing' without loss of self-esteem).

The difference, I believe, lies in the instrumental, as opposed to a relational, use of those skills and in the absence of mutuality, of 'growth-in-connection'. I have intuitively – or as Miller (1986) would say, as a result of my psychological development process and socialisation – aspired to work relationally, as I have documented in this thesis. My current inquiry focus is on the extent to which I can sustain a relational approach with clients and challenge the organisational discourse. As I have explained, many of our clients are seeking to change their practices in the direction of relational working (although they would not frame it in that way). Taking a consulting approach that models what they aspire to at least at an espoused level, is important to me, not in the least because it is also congruent with my own values.

Many clients often resist a 'process consultation' (Schein 1987) approach, let alone a relational one. They are 'buying our expertise' and often expect a familiar process of diagnosis, advice and implementation. Relationships inside the organisation and with consultants are often formal and instrumental and clients can be suspicious of any attempts to establish connections beyond the boundaries of formal meetings and power-point presentations.

Taking a relational approach in this context is not without its risks, as I explained earlier in this thesis (the Orpheus account is a good example), and specifically again in this chapter. Encounters with such clients sometimes happen at a cost: remaining composed and friendly, deep or surface acting, whilst feeling disappeared as a person (Hochschild 1983), they can leave me feeling drained.

I have developed a number of coping strategies, some of which have been informed by Fletcher's suggested strategies for 'getting beyond disappearing' (1999). I describe them in turn with examples from my consulting work:

- Assertively negotiating boundaries in my engagement with clients.

The way clients relate to me is usually indicative of patterns in the organisation.



Power play, overly hierarchical behaviour (pulling rank), blaming others for failure, abdicating responsibility are some examples. This is often borne out in patterns such as repeated last minute cancellations without apparent good reason, clients having exaggerated expectations – often in the form of expecting me to do the relational work in their place – and inappropriate high status behaviour – e.g. put downs, derogatory remarks and inappropriate challenge of my expertise. Asserting boundaries, whilst naming the pattern I observe, and contrasting it with the espoused values of the client or the organisation, can help clients to become more aware of the extent to which they contribute to precisely the organisational pattern they claim to want to change.

The account of my work with a ‘Charitable trust’ offers an example of my challenge to the chair of the board, in a way that surfaced his pattern whilst allowing us to work well together during the extra-ordinary board meeting.

- Adopting a different, more mutual stance, than the client expects.

An instrumental orientation from my client often shows itself in the call for expertise: “I pay you, you tell me what to do and how to do it”. The temptation to demonstrate my expertise is often strong, and not always appropriate. Reflecting on my behaviour from a relational stance, I seek alternative, more mutual, ways to engage the client in thinking about his (more often than hers, I have more male clients) future or that of the organisation.

My intervention with SSP (See (King, 2004) in Appendix 1) is one example.

Recently (May 2004) I was running a workshop, part of a large, ongoing programme, for a group of about forty clients on ‘Organisational metaphors’. The workshop was designed by a colleague, in collaboration with the client organisation, and I was given a power-point presentation and handouts. Instead of running an interactive workshop, I decided to start from the experience of the clients in the room, gradually building up various metaphors with them. In my opening lines I explained that all the expertise and knowledge was already in the room, and that it was my intention to work with the group to conceptualize what they knew experientially and to learn from their expertise. I closed the workshop sharing what I had learned from the experience. We had a great time together. Many clients came to see me at the end to express their surprise and joy at discovering their own expertise or their (hitherto underestimated) ability to engage



with concepts and models.

That is not to say that it can be wholly appropriate to explain, make suggestions or give advice. On those occasions I try to do so in a mutually empowering way: explaining the steps in my thinking, adjusting my status play, sometimes explaining how I had come to learn what I know about the matter at hand.

- Questioning organisational concepts from a relational perspective, such as leadership, decision making and organisational learning.

In the summer of 2003 we were invited to design a leadership development programme by a large retailer. Although the organisation aspires to reducing hierarchical and functional boundaries, increased self awareness and responsibility from employees, and improved connectivity, the expectation was of a tiered programme, with proscribed learning content, focussing mainly on the most senior people in the organisation. Colleagues and I negotiated a programme that brought people together from across functional specialities and levels, initially in a large group event and subsequently in workshops and action learning groups – all mixed across functions and levels. Part of the design involved people making decisions about what they believed they needed to learn (informed by a conversation based 360° feedback exercise) and taking responsibility for designing their own learning journey following the large group event. It was a rather unsettling experience for some of the participants, but many found it truly invigorating and congruent with the intention of the programme and values of the organisation.

- Looking after myself through meditation, playing music, and connecting with family, friends and colleagues, as described in depth in this thesis.

Clients don't often enter in a relationship with a consultant from a place of mutuality, and most might well express surprise at the thought that they could. However, with encouragement and a sustained relational approach, it is possible to develop a more mutual relationship. In my experience clients can actually come to cherish a sense of growth in connection, and the feeling that they offer me learning and growth too.

One example comes to mind of a coaching client. I first met Clive when his organisation was going through turbulent times, following the appointment of a new chairman, who was determined to make significant changes, including an overhaul of the board. The re-organisation would clearly mean Clive was to be demoted, an





indirect invitation to leave the company. Our first meetings took place in an office in London, but as the pressure increased and Clive became more stressed, I insisted we meet in Ashridge and start with lunch. During lunch we talked about our families, lives and interests outside work. We continued our meandering conversation during a walk in the beautiful gardens. We spent the rest of the afternoon cooped up in a coaching room, doing some difficult work in preparation for Clive's exit from the organisation. Our coaching relationship is ongoing, and we now meet regularly at Ashridge, despite the tremendous pressure of Clive's new job. An Ashridge meeting always starts with lunch, and weather permitting, a walk. But even when we meet in the formal London office we make time for re-connecting ("How's the PhD coming along?" being one of the recurring questions). We have discussed the impact of the quality of our relationship on the quality of our coaching meetings and agree it has made a difference that cannot be over-estimated. We also continue to share what we learn from our meetings, it is a small but important acknowledgement of their reciprocal quality.

The action learning groups I am facilitating for one of our clients are another example of mutuality in relating to clients. Although I facilitate the meetings, I pay considerable attention to 'mutual empowering', taking care to facilitate connections, support and challenge without making participants feel inadequate, and supporting participants to develop relational skills in the process. I share some of the feedback I received

5 April 2004

Please give feedback about your Action Learning facilitator's style:

*Very good. She keeps us on the topic, to time and makes sure we 'abide by the rules'. Also peppers the sessions with helpful theory or models when pertinent, which we've all agreed we like. Very personable. Sometimes shares personal examples too, which has helped us to trust her.*

However, mutuality does remain a challenging concept in the context of relationships with clients. I cannot demand that clients engage in an "other than instrumental"



relationship with me. But I can, and aim to, enter into a relationship with a client from a relational perspective. I expect to be changed in some way by our interaction. Sometimes mutuality can only develop after addressing conflict and/or some difficult surfacing of differences between what my client espouses and his actions. Such encounters can be taxing. I continue to try, and to reflect in my diary on the potential cost and the outcome. When appropriate I will share some of my reflections with my client(s) when we next meet.

In conclusion, relational psychology has offered me a framework to articulate my values. Fletcher's framework has helped me to relate those values to my practice. 'Relational consulting' is my current articulation of my consulting practice as a contribution to human flourishing.

#### November 2003

Last week I experienced an example of the difference 'using relational skills to relate, rather than instrumentally' (Fletcher 1994)– not easy to articulate but powerful to experience. Jean, a colleague, and I were meeting with Lydia, an HR manager of a large retail organisation, with other colleagues joining us in the course of the day. We had met with various configurations of consultants and employees on previous occasions. The meetings had been pleasant, productive and relatively formal. I had experienced Lydia as competent, highly organised and task focussed, and expected a semiformal agenda meeting. On that day Lydia had organised an informal room, with bacon sandwiches and coffee to welcome us. We found ourselves relaxing in each other's company, sharing freely our concerns and hopes for the project. We talked (including Jean and myself) about our hope to learn and grow from our shared engagement. As other people arrived they seemed to join the conversation seamlessly. The spirit of mutuality, shared learning and care for each other led us to work well, and accomplish what we had set out to do, whilst leaving energised at the end of what had been a long day. Following the meeting a series of emails circulated, in which people expressed their amazement and joy about the way we had managed to work together, and the hope it may last long.



## 7.4 “Consulting today as if tomorrow mattered”

I have come to the end of the beginning of my learning journey. It started many years ago, when I studied ‘Adult Education’, because I believed that learning could be a process of liberation and transformation, rather than the force for conformity and oppression I had experienced. I did not achieve my objective of changing the world of education single-handedly, but I did find a community of people who had not given up trying. With the support of that community I have learned that liberation and transformation are uncomfortable and painful as well as exhilarating. It is a bumpy ride on which I have not discovered any short-cuts. In this thesis I have described the different first person inquiry processes I have undertaken over the last seven years. As well as being most at odds with the mainstream education curriculum, they were also the most fundamental source of personal learning and change. Since I aspire to encourage learning and change in others, they remain a crucial discipline in my own life.

I have learned to *value* my need for connection in my process of personal growth and in my work, rather than to see it as dependency and neediness. In that process I have come to understand the importance of language. I have learned to listen for voices, including my own, that have been suppressed, and to search for appreciative language to name what has been devalued or discounted.

In the language of business there is still little room for voices that speak of a wider ecology, of sustainability and genuine democracy. Many of ACL’s clients are firmly locked in the battle for exponential growth in an increasingly globalised business environment; with the resulting ecological, economic and human challenges which have been widely documented (Adams 1996; Bauman 1998; Calas and Smirchic 2003; Hochschild 2003; Senge, Scharmer et al. 2004).

Working for Ashridge Consulting I have some degree of choice: I can concentrate on working with not-for-profit organisations, or with organisations whose practices and purpose I can subscribe to. There is enough work in those organisations to last me a life-time. But I know that I would be avoiding a bigger challenge: can my consulting



practice be a force for radical reflexivity? Can I begin to ask small questions about larger issues of ecology and sustainability in organisations where those questions tend not to be asked? Can I contribute to little changes, cause small ripples in the organisational discourse and practices? In July 2004 I was asked those difficult questions by participants on an Ashridge Master's in Organisation Consulting workshop. My honest answer was: "Sometimes I despair". After a long conversation we agreed with John Adams (1996). We have much to offer. We can bring our inquiry and relational skills, our integrity and purposefulness. If we don't take a system's view of organisations whereby we, consultants, stand on the outside looking in, there is no reason why we couldn't think of ourselves as 'tempered radicals' (Meyerson and Scully 1995) in our client organisations and adopt some of Meyerson and Scully's strategies.

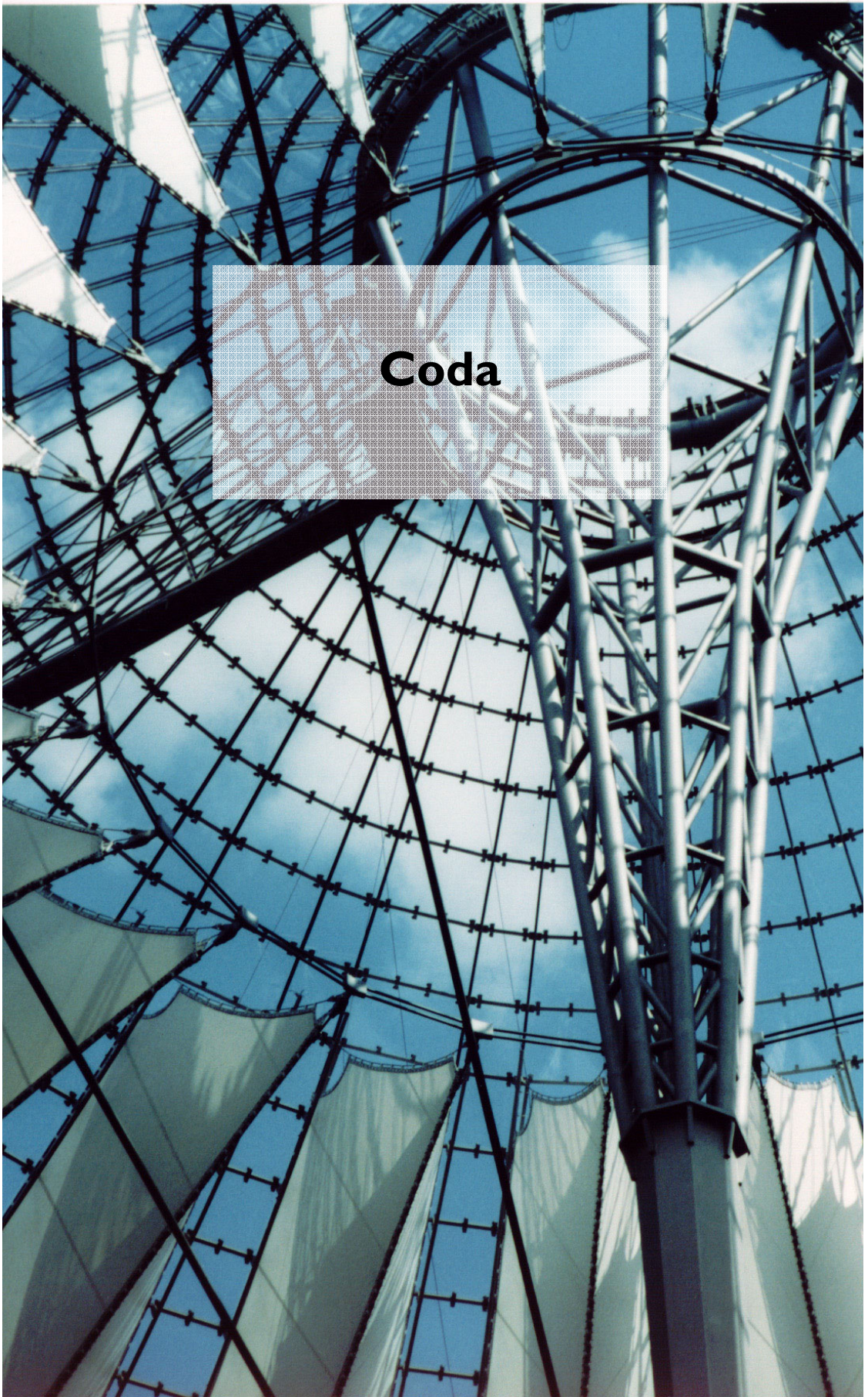
We agreed it is a hazardous undertaking, a major challenge. An important aspect of that challenge is to remain hopeful. The heading of this section is paraphrased from the title of Adam's article: "Working today as if tomorrow mattered", which he starts with a story of two young frogs. It is a story of loss, despair and hope. I would like to end this thesis with it:

"Two frisky young frogs liked to have jumping contests to see who could jump the highest and farthest. One day they were engaging in their favourite pastime of competing with each other, and suddenly found that they had landed in a pail half full of milk. They looked at each other and asked, "Now what are we going to do? Here we are in this pail of milk and we can't get out!"

One of the frogs was a bit of a pessimist, and soon gave up, sinking sadly and slowly to the bottom. The other frog thought "Maybe what I have to do is keep doing what I'm doing, and see what comes of it." So he kept paddling away. He paddled all night long, paddled all the next day, and the next night, and eventually found himself standing on a lump of butter" (p.18).









Susan Weil and Peter Reason, my examiners, offered a number of questions about my work which we explored in the viva meeting. I felt enchanted and challenged by our conversation, the essence of which Susan and Peter invited me to include in this thesis. I liked Susan's suggestion to think of the addition as a 'Coda', which in musical terms indicates an independent passage introduced at the end of a movement (Sykes 1982).

In this coda then, I aim firstly to bring to foreground the core theme, the red thread that weaves its way through the thesis, and how it figures in the fabric of chapters six (on emotion work) and seven (on relational practice) and how those chapters really form core pieces that bring the pattern of the quilt together, and secondly to discuss my choice of presenting others' voices in those chapters.

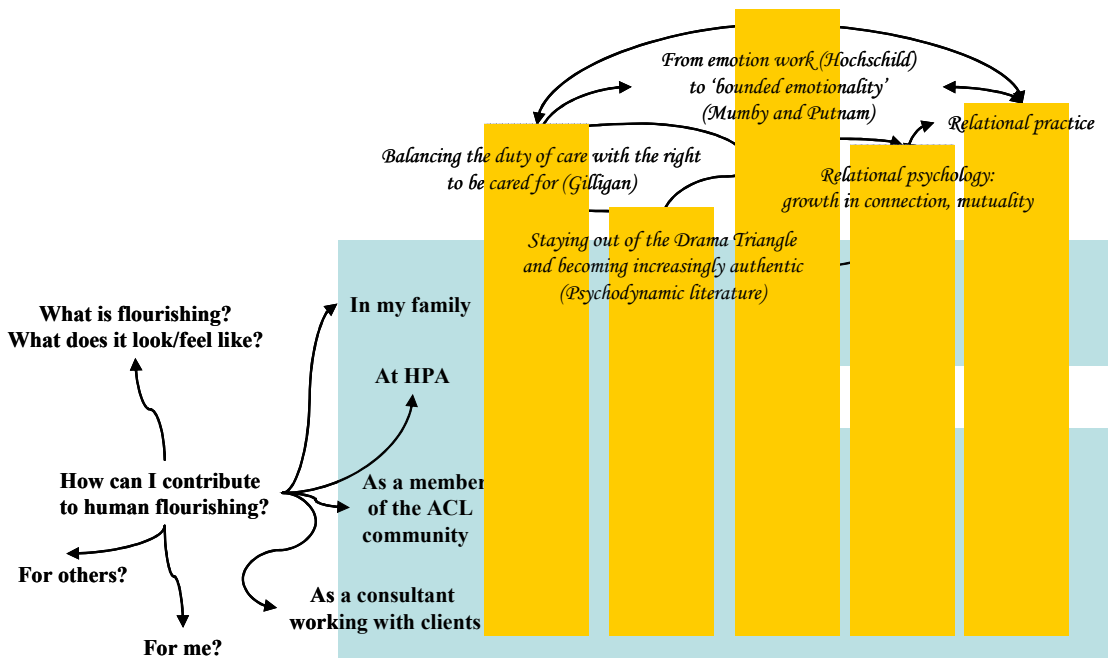
I had tried to outline some of my thoughts diagrammatically for the viva. You will find the relevant diagrams on the adjacent pages.

### **The question of the red thread**

I have explained in the thesis how, after some initial explorations (and diversions), my research question crystallized into "How can I contribute to human flourishing - my own and that of others?" I continue to hold that question in all areas of my life, but for the purpose of this thesis have concentrated on a few areas. In the diploma phase I focussed mainly on how I could look after myself in the context of my family, framing my inquiry around Gilligan's (1993) concept of balancing a felt duty of care with the right to be cared for. I subsequently took that question into my work context.

The inquiry in the context of my family triggered questions around unresolved distress, which led me to explore Transactional Analysis and psychodynamic concepts. I appreciated the way in which psychodynamic literature invites us to pay attention to how the past informs the present and how we continue to be influenced by past experiences in the way we make meaning in the here and now. It helped me to make sense of some of my experiences in my family and in my work with clients

Figure 8.1 Strands of inquiry and informing frameworks



and as a member of the ACL community. However, I became increasingly concerned about the extent to which a psychodynamic approach can lead to an emphasis on emotions as disrupting, interfering with a *rational* approach to situations, rather than viewing emotions as fundamental to human experience and meaning making. Around the same time Judi Marshall introduced me to the work of Arlie Hochschild (1983), which opened up a whole new set of questions around emotion management, feeling rules and emotional labour in my work with clients and as a member of the ACL community. In chapter six I have described how colleagues and I engaged with Hochschild's work, and how it raised questions for us about the emotion work involved in consulting – a topic largely absent from the consulting literature – and about the meaning of 'authenticity' (Block 1999; Schein 1999) in our consulting practice. We began to explore the difference between emotional labour and emotion work, and how we experienced managing our emotions in our consulting practice. Those questions opened up a rich vein of inquiry into the role of emotions in organisations (Fineman 2000; Fineman 2003), and into the feminist perspective on emotions as valid, valuable and deeply human (Mumby and Putnam 1992; Meyerson 2000).

In the course of that inquiry we also started to pay attention to how we wanted to work together, whether and how we were looking after each other, what we needed to flourish as members of a client team and of the wider ACL community.

Colleagues and I began to articulate the kind of relationships we valued at work, and the qualities of those relationships. I continued to explore them in my client accounts. I was delighted when I re-discovered Fletcher's (1999) work on relational practice, which seemed to capture so well what we had struggled to articulate. Her work re-invigorated the inquiry with colleagues and inspired further explorations into the writing of relational psychologists and feminist writers such as Miller (1986), Belenky, Goldberger and colleagues (Golberger, Tarule et al. 1996; Belenky, Clinchy et al. 1997), Calas and Smirchic (2003) and Marshall (1989; 1992; 1993 b) (see Fig. 8.1 for an overview).



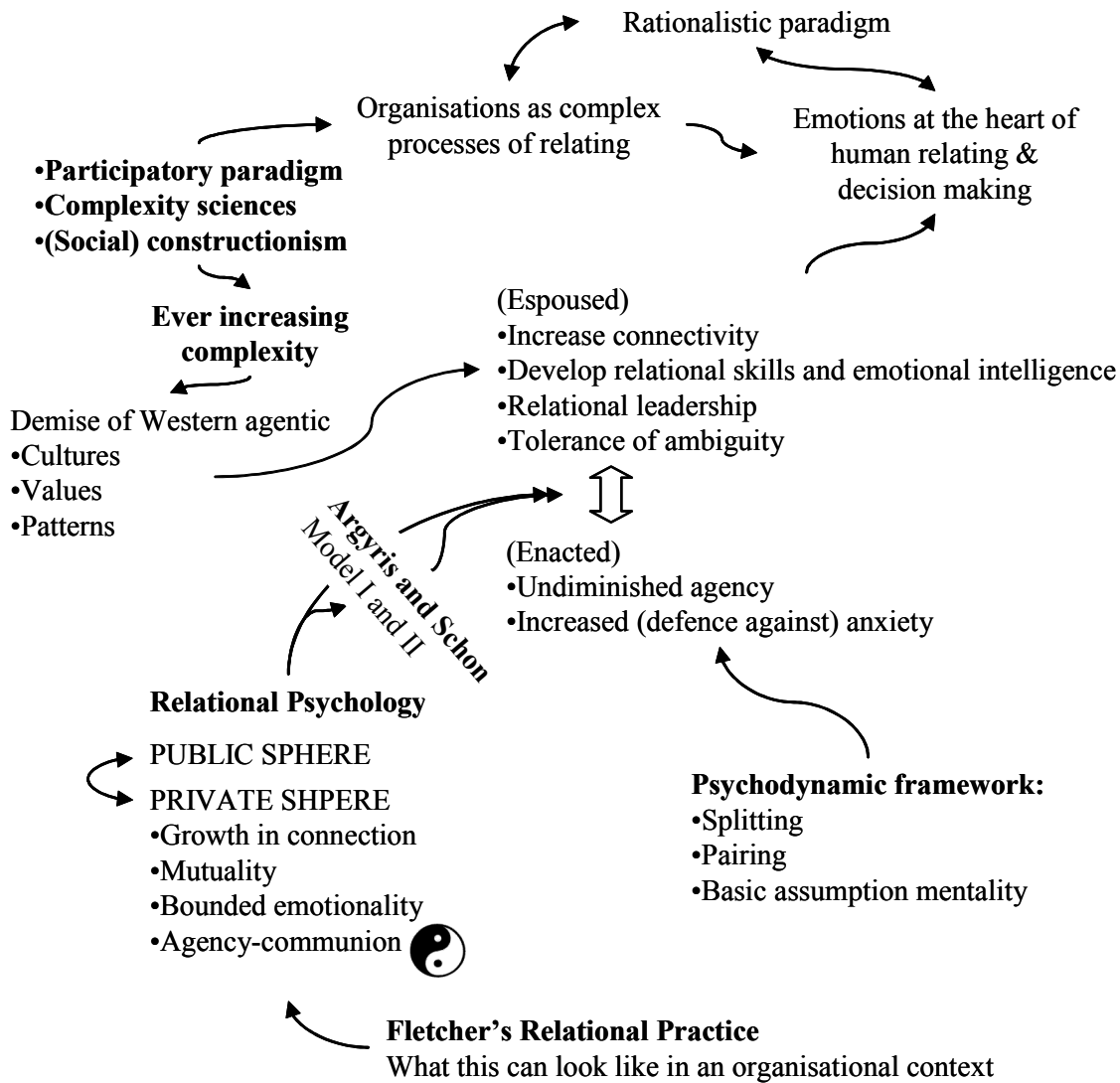


Fig. 8.2 Conceptual perspectives on the tension between espoused and enacted organisational practices

I had long been intrigued by the apparent paradox between the espoused desire by many of our clients to work more relationally, to improve connectivity in their organisations and to improve the balance between agency and communion (Bakan 1966) on the one hand, and the persistent inability to change rampant individualism, competition and exceedingly agentic behaviour on the other hand. Clients, despite espousing the importance of relationships and emotional intelligence, are still deeply rooted in a dualistic and rationalist paradigm. Thus far I had made some sense of this apparent difficulty to achieve lasting change by framing it psychodynamically as ‘defence against anxiety’ and at the hand of Argyris and Schon’s (1996) concept of ‘organisational defences’. The literature on emotions in organisations helped me to make sense of the suspect reputation of emotions in organisations. The assertion by relational psychologists that growth-in-connection, mutuality and relationality are seen as women’s work belonging in the private sphere and thus continually undervalued in the public arena, shed a new light on this paradox (See Fig. 8.2). The insight gave me hope that I might find ways to help my clients instil lasting changes (I am, perhaps foolishly, still excited by new insights, and continue to hope they will inspire practical application) and despair at the same time, as I faced up to how deeply held prejudices I am trying to overcome really are, hence the, for Peter Reason somewhat bizarre and disappointing – “for Christ’s sake” - story of the frogs for closure.

### **The mystery of the disappearing voice?**

Susan and Peter challenged, respectfully but persistently, the shape of chapters six and seven. “Was chapter six just more of the same?” they wanted to know, and “are you at risk of disappearing your own voice in chapter seven, by elaborately discussing and relying on Joyce Fletcher’s work?”

I begged to differ. In chapter six I aimed to do justice to the importance of emotions in our consulting practice, and especially to the way in which I could begin to articulate that more clearly for myself through the ongoing dialogue I had developed with colleagues. In that dialogue thoughts started to emerge about the importance of belonging to a community of practice and the kinds of relationships we establish in those communities. We had difficulty articulating what the qualities of those

*Writing this, I notice how difficult it has become to write in first person singular. What started out as my (very) first person inquiry, has acquired a genuine second person nature. Conversations with colleagues, with clients, with students on AMOC, are ever expanding strands, which seem to have acquired a life all of their own.*



relationships were that really made a difference. Sharing Fletcher's framework with colleagues felt like a quantum leap. Here was a person who had invested considerable thought and energy in exploring what we were beginning to make sense of, and as a result of her research had managed to articulate what we struggled to define. Her framework became an exciting basis for developing our own thinking. Comparing, contrasting, agreeing and differing, we gradually began to crystallize our own thinking. The connection she made with the gendered nature of the kind of practice we aspire to, and its status as belonging in the private sphere, encouraged us to further explore relational psychology and Bakan's work (1996).

I wanted to honour the role her work played in our current understanding of and inquiry into the feasibility and potential of a relational approach to consulting. I wanted to "tell it how it was". I know in connection, in conversation, in relationship. To disappear the impetus generated by Fletcher's work would have been incongruent with the insight that for me knowing develops in connection, in relationships of mutuality. Honouring another's work, whilst showing how I can build on it, and take it further, giving it its rightful place in my quilt, appears to me an important aspect of the relational practice I aspire to.

I fear the academy still invites an individualistic, separate, agentic presentation of one's contribution to knowledge. I have, in contrast, attempted to show and honour the connected nature in which I have developed that contribution. Therein lies my agency.

As I mention in chapter seven, I continue to explore the potential of relational psychology and the concept of relational practice for my work. This thesis then does not "end with a flourish", as Peter Reason pointed out. Rather than to bring closure, the last chapter opens up a wide arena for continued inquiry.