# Chapter Two

## *Getting started*

In 'How I came to do inquiry' (Chapter One), I reflected on where I considered my ideas about learning, and how it was made possible for me, came from. I considered that values around voice, agency, respect, mutuality, power and relationship 'seemed central'. In this Chapter I build on these ideas, discussing how they shaped the early days of my PhD work, in terms of reading and the kinds of questions this led me to develop about how I might actually engage a group of people in the process of inquiry, and the ideas that were important to me in doing so. This writing therefore also plays an important back-grounding role to Chapter Three on methodology, as the ideas I discuss here played a crucial role in shaping my understanding of the type of methodology that would be most helpful in enabling me to live my values in my practice. I evidence in Chapter Five how the tentative explorations around voice and silence that started to bubble up here became a key theme in the YoWiM group's work.

## *Getting angry*

> Finally I am beginning to be released. Finally I can begin to feel the chains falling away as I acknowledge my right to anger; and my fear; and learn to use these powerful forces rather than allowing them to incapacitate me, constructively for the rehumanisaton of myself, my family and my world. (Bravette, 1997:258)

When I enrolled on the PhD programme at Bath, most of the friends from my undergraduate years moved to London to take up jobs in large banks and consultancy practices. Having just completed a business degree from a highly rated university, this is what was 'normal' – even expected. Just as I was starting to explore what I believed about learning and how it was possible for me, (as

discussed in Chapter One) I began to hear stories from these friends about their experience of the organisations in which they were working. Some of my girlfriends were phoning me to say hi, and then bursting into tears because they were exhausted with work and were wondering if 'it will always be like this'. I knew these young women as intelligent, hardworking and full of life, and I started to feel angry that the jobs that they had been so excited about taking up, were making them so unhappy. I felt angry 'at' the corporations who were doing this to them, and I wondered why it was happening. I felt a mismatch between my life, where I was just getting to explore what really mattered to me, and their lives which seemed to be bleeding them dry. Below I include an excerpt from my notes at the time:

> Yesterday, I had coffee with my friend Alayne and her friend, Rachel. I've not seen Alayne since we graduated in the summer, but we've spoken on the phone quite often so I don't feel as if it's been that long. Since then, we've all been away on holiday and started new things – me; a PhD, Alayne; a job with JP Morgan, and Rachel; a temping position with the Ministry of Agriculture. I believe our 'time frames' are important to the discussion we had so I'll note them here – for me, four years in Bath, for Alayne, her position is a permanent one, with the footnote that for CV purposes it makes 'sense' to stay no less than two years but that four would be 'good', for Rachel, she could leave tomorrow if she chose, but plans to stay until she goes to Mexico to teach English in March.

> Speaking with Alayne on the phone had never made me aware of how tired she looked, hadn't prepared me for the fact that her eyes would fill with tears when she spoke about 'work'.

> I would describe Alayne as gregarious. She's good fun. Always smiles and has lots to say. She's excited about life. Or she was. We were all sharing news about our lives – boyfriends, friends, work. Alayne did a lot of listening and spoke last. I had to consciously invite her to share with us – normally I find it hard to get a word in.

She spoke of twelve-hour days; her role requires that she is in the office by 7.45 a.m., in order that the reports she prepares for the traders can be completed by her 12.30 p.m. deadline. No one on her floor 'does lunch', so her hour long break is reduced to a fifteen minute dash to the cafeteria to buy a sandwich in a plastic box, which she eats at her desk. Not only does she not get a break, but she pointed out the fact that this meant she never gets to meet anyone. There's a whole graduate intake who never get to talk with each other. Her normal afternoon is spent 'doing queries' and it's her quietest time of the day. She says she 'runs out of work to do' by about 4.30pm, but can't leave any earlier than 6.00pm – because no one else does. She asked 'Why should I feel like I can't leave?' She arrives an hour before most people in her office and doesn't lunch – I make that two hours the company owes her per day. She should be able to leave by 3pm. She estimates that women account for 10% of the employees in her department, only one of which she can see from where she sits. She told me she's joined a gym near her home, but that she never gets time to go because she arrives home 'starving' – and she can't go to the gym without eating or she'd 'probably faint', and she can't exercise after dinner, because the commute from work means she arrives home around 9pm. So her gym membership goes unused whilst she eats and then falls into bed.

There was a moment in the middle of all this when I mourned the loss of her energy. Where had it gone? Who had taken it? Had she given them permission? Or had she given it to them as a gift? And why was it necessary? And why wasn't she asking any of these questions? (My notes, November 19th, 1999)

As I mention in the following Chapter, my first-person inquiry rarely takes the form of detailed journaling. But after seeing Alayne I had to 'write out' of my system the anger I felt at the change in her. Her sense of 'acceptance' of what her working life offered her shocked me. Her experience of 'what it is to work' scared me, and I wondered why she wasn't scared, or why she doesn't say she was? I considered that maybe Hopfl (1992) had an answer:

> …corporate seduction frustrates any immediate meaning by "making sense of" behaviour and experience via a promise of future rewards and coherence…the conciliation of work and non-work life is achieved by an act of self deception in which contradictions are ignored or denied. (Hopfl, 1992:15-16)

I wondered if this was what was going on for Alayne?  If it was, I wondered if this 'denial' was a safer place.  Maybe it meant that she could choose to 'live' her experience less.  Maybe it took some pain away?  But the residual bitterness, apathy or whatever it was that was staying with her as a result of the way she was experiencing her working life, was evident.

## *Voice, silence and safety*

I began to consider how I might be able to encourage women in an inquiry group to voice these kinds of issues, but felt concerned that if they were retreating to a 'safer' place, inviting them to talk might mean a shift back into unsafety.  What would voice 'mean' in the context of inquiry?  Voice has been variously described as '[voice as a metaphor] which links thinking and knowing with the capacity to articulate one's thoughts and feel heard' (Stanton 1996:30), 'gaining a voice – enabl(ing) women to make their inner voices public voices with increasing grace and confidence' (Stanton 1996:38), and as 'related to student's capacity to formulate and air their thoughts, believing they have something worthwhile to say and feeling heard' (Stanton 1996:41).  The sentiments of 'going public', 'feeling heard', 'being confident', 'believing what I say to be worthwhile' seemed again to suggest link between voice and small group spaces.  As Stanton further suggests:

> …there seems to be some kind of link between the aim of 'gaining voice' and collaboration of some type and small groups.  (Stanton, 1996)

This suggestion bolstered my confidence in wanting to work with women in a small group setting, but I wondered about the link between silence, voice and safety in groups and how they were perhaps interdependent – was it about keeping power; and the powerlessness paradox this brings about as voices go unheard, could maintaining silence be safe, would enabling voice in one or two members of the inquiry group enable it to be safe for others to voice their experience.  As Maguire suggests:

> Naming the difficulties of organisational life for women might actually provide ammunition for those who want to keep women out of organisations and management (Gatenby and Humphries 1999, Marshall, 1995)… silence might be a consciously chosen survival strategy. Feminist-grounded action research affords participants the power and space to decide for or against action, for or against breaking silence. (Maguire, 2001:64)

I was struck by my desire to develop an approach to inquiry which, whilst enabling ourselves to see that we had a choice in 'deciding for or against breaking silence', also attended to inquiring into why we chose to stay silent about some things, yet be vocal about others.  I was interested to develop an approach that was not just focussed on 'finding out' what was said when silence was 'broken' – though this mattered hugely to me – but I wanted to enable us to give attention the process of choosing (not) to 'break' the silence – to consider how it happened and to acknowledge our role in that process.  Creating the possibility for this meta-level of inquiry was, I felt, equally important.  As above, 'what role am I/you/we playing in enabling 'this' to happen?' seemed like a question that should have central importance, as Marshall suggests:

> A key element of my practice…was sustaining questioning conversation. (Marshall, 1995:258)

Safety seemed important if such conversations were to happen.  I began thinking about how I could help to create a space which would be 'safe' for women to talk

into about their experiences of work, whilst neither knowing how to, nor being able to, make any promises. As Marshall says:

> I am especially aware that whilst I want to create spaces in which people can voice their experiences and perspectives, I cannot guarantee that those spaces are safe, that people will not become vulnerable or that there will be no longer-term consequences for their… group membership. These are testing issues. And I do not want them to deter me from raising difficult topics, or from risking making myself vulnerable in the service of exploration. (Marshall, 1995:260)

Furthermore, considering that silence and safety might somehow be entangled with each other, I began to question how creating a safe space in groups might 'help' at work, where it's not so safe. Would being 'un-silent' spill over? Or would our time together be the only time when the silence would be broken? My concerns mirrored those of Gatenby and Humphries (1999):

> We fear that sometimes the research acts as a safety valve in giving women a place to speak which then allows the silences in other places to continue. And so organisations go on unchanged. (Gatenby and Humphries, 1999:291)

I began to question my intentions for my research. I had a lot of upset friends. I was angry. And I had the worry of my research either making participants feel unsafe, or serving the purpose of helping them to 'let off steam' so that they could just carry on coping in organisations that made them unhappy. The below extract from my notes indicates my impatience and frustration at feeling as though I didn't know what I wanted to do, or why, or how. These questions are in many ways about setting out to do research for the first time and finding myself as a researcher. I feel they are important to include here as they evidence how this part of the process happened for me:

I look at all my questions about voice and silence and safety and how I might consider them in the work that I plan to do. I wonder what they say about me, my practice, what it is that I'm trying to do here. I question the latter especially often - and then the rational part of my brain takes hold, shakes me and tells me 'I should know!' What is my goal as a researcher: empathy? emancipation? advocacy? learning from/working with/standing with? What is the romance of the desire for research as 'political intervention'?

I question if 'my goal' for my research may be known, cast in concrete, before I begin – and for that matter even after I'm a long way down the line, and even then if it should remain static. Does an inquirer set their own goal? Or do goals fall out from the needs of the people with whom we work? Is that a goal in itself?

'Goal' jarrs with me. It seems indicative of there being only one answer, one 'right' outcome. As I become more self and gender aware (are the two different?), I become more clear on how much work there is to do with young women. So, I suppose deep down, my dream would be that my inquiry has a transformative nature – that my world and the worlds of the people with whom I work change a little, or are seen with a more 'gender aware gaze' to use Marshall's term (1995:254). Not only gender aware in relation to 'others', but also to the self – honouring an embodiment of woman, developing critical consciousness – being empowered by what we do. For the organisations in which they work – perhaps they may hear more and adapt their practice to encompass this. I'm not sure that I may ever be fully aware of how, when and why the work we do together may impact on our lives and the way we experience the world. (My notes, January 2000)

Considering these questions, Torbert's (2001) questions about how research might be approached seemed key:

> …how may we intentionally enhance the effectiveness of our actions and the destructiveness of our inquiry? …How may we do so in the very midst of our real time actions of our everyday lives – here and now? (Torbert, 2001:250-251)

This query was important for me – destructiveness seemed like something that would be possible when inviting young women to discuss their working lives.

### *Where did my questions and concerns lead me?*

In attending to my questions, I developed a strong sense of wanting to create spaces where that which 'shouldn't be articulated' could be articulated. I realised that enabling voice would be central in how I approached my research and that if women I worked with could talk about what mattered to them, then they could generate knowledge about their experience, rather than silence it, and perhaps their organisations could learn from it too. As Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) state:

> Knowledge, as much as any resource, determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom. (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001:73)

Fletcher's work 'Disappearing Acts' (1999) helped me to think about 'encouraging relational interactions as a source of new knowledge, where the outcome was unpredictable because it was the product of the interaction…' (Fletcher, 1999:13) Her suggestion that…

> …if a model of growth and influence were adopted, organisations might really be challenged because this model would empower people. New

voices would be heard, new perspectives would influence decisions, and new ways of doing business might surface. (Fletcher, 1999:13)

…seemed to match my desires of the research participants and their organisations being changed for the better, in their own terms, through the process of the research. There seemed a way of organisationally validating my desire to bring voice to the centre; if new and better ways of working could develop then this was a 'way in' for the type of voicing space I wanted to create. Fletcher's ideas helped me to begin to plan how I might get access to organisations in which to conduct my research. Moreover, she helped me to think about the attention I should give to how the young women involved in my research might be 'doing themselves' into silence through being 'disappeared'. I digress slightly below to explore Fletcher's ideas on disappearing, as they were important to me in thinking about how the voices of the young women I planned to work with might being heard as silence. Was Alayne trapped in a disappearing dynamic, I wondered? Was that why she was so exhausted?

## *Disappearing*

Fletcher articulated a perspective that defined the feminine not as a set of attributes, but 'as a belief system about how growth and effectiveness occur', and in doing so, offered an alternative view to the 'masculine theories of effectiveness that assume growth occurs through a process of separation and individuation' (Fletcher, 1999:14). I enjoyed her ideas about relational practice and how such practice was often 'disappeared' from the organisational field of vision when it came to assessing 'what counted as skill', and I recognised her stories when she suggested that such practices were attributed to 'being things that women just do', that they didn't count as an exhibited management skill. As she states:

> That time spent enabling another is time well spent is not noted as a competency or an ideal way of working, but rather as evidence that the worker simply 'likes' to do this sort of thing. Skills such as these are

> dismissed as personal attributes rather than counted as competencies. (Fletcher, 1999:115)

Her work helped me to consider what other aspects of behaviour were getting disappeared, by whom and why? But perhaps most importantly, she helped me to think about something that she didn't write about in much detail: what role were those who were 'getting disappeared' playing in this process? This became and remains one of the key focuses in my research, my lecturing - my life. At the forefront of my mind I carry the question of 'what role am I/you/we playing in enabling 'this' to happen?' This was an important learning for me. I wondered how I could take this question into inquiry. I wondered how we could enable voice around it, rather than silence.

I was enriched by Fletcher's ideas and excited by what they could offer my practice. But I was disappointed ultimately by her approach to defining what relational practice is. Fletcher gives 'specific examples of activities that define [the four types of] relational practice, the underlying belief system that motivates it, and the skills it requires' (Fletcher, 1999:47). However, Fletcher classified behaviours as evidencing one of the four types of relational practice - preserving, mutual empowering, self-achieving, or creating team – based on 'the stated or perceived primary intent of the actor, not the effect of the action' (Fletcher, 1999:48). It is important to remember that Fletcher does not put her work forward as action research, but she does articulate a position of relatedness, as opposed to separateness, and making sense in such an un-relational way seemed to jar with her initially articulated position.

A position of relatedness would, I felt, surely be about checking out whether our outcomes are congruent with our intentions. I began to question what value there was in understanding our ways of being and doing in the world as relational, if they were not experienced by others in this way. I began to consider that the definition of 'what counted' as relational should lie with the people who

experienced our actions – that our 'intent' was not enough[7]. Fletcher however suggested the only shortcoming of this approach to behaviour categorisation was that it did not reflect the fact that 'in practice, the actions were less clearly differentiated from each other' (Fletcher, 1999:48). Voice as a central theme of practice seemed to begin to slip away for me here. Yes, there was an element of voicing in stating the intended outcome of behaviour, but there was only silence in stating what the actual outcome of the behaviour was, silence in exploring the gap between the two, silencing in learning from any reflection on practice at all. So again, I was learning from the silences about what needed to be spoken.

## *Seeing parallels between a feminist approach to research and action research*

So, as I approached inquiry I was carrying questions about how I could create 'voicing spaces' where experiential knowledges would be understood as valid positions, where silence could be recognised and interrogated, where 'talking back' (hooks, 1989) was seen as a process through which valuable information could be shared, where ways of being would be (in)validated through rigorous self and peer inquiry practice.

My own ideas around voice and silence in my own life were being informed by the types of literature I have referred to in this Chapter, and this in turn was informing my ideas on how I might 'do' my research. Finding ways to enable voice, to hear women's stories mirrored the intent of what might be described as 'feminist research' (Callaway, 1981).

The parallels between a 'feminist approach' to research and action research seemed multiple, though some uncareful framings on silence and the intention of

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[7] I consider the idea of intent and outcome in Chapter Four particularly, checking my intentions for the beginning phase against what the experience of these intentions was for the YoWiM group members.

research raised more questions.   Greenwood and Levin (1998) give such a framing when they say:

> …the coincidence between feminist analysis…and AR is self evident. Both seek to end the silencing of so many… (Greenwood and Levin, 1998:183)

This raised the question for me about how an agenda seeking to 'end silence' could become an agenda as damaging as any other.  I wanted to distance my self from this type of framing, and to develop my practice as one which helped me, and those I would work with, to notice what we were doing – over and above any intention or encouragement to do things differently, or to stop doing things. I wanted to create spaces, and to invite others to create spaces with me, that would enable us to realise how we were being in the world, to come to know this lived experience (more fully), and to begin to acknowledge and understand our responsibility in the shaping of this experience.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) above, do not make it clear whether they believe that some people silence others, that we silence ourselves, or whether both play a part – and this inadvertently meant to me that they gave no explicit indication as to whom should do the 'ending of the silence'.  The responsibility for ending silence seemed, implicitly, to be very firmly held by the initiating researcher – that the very fact that they had chosen a feminist or action research approach seemed to suggest that they might legitimately have to right to 'end silence' and this seemed to me to be as potentially damaging as the agenda to silence, particularly when we consider the point made by Maguire (2001) that silence might be a consciously chosen survival strategy.  It might be an act of power. Stripping this away, naming it as an invalid way of being, felt like an act that would only further silence, that would only encourage the literal act of speaking because doing so would meet the desires of others…that would enable us only to create silent talk…

I wanted to work in a way that would categorise silence as neither good nor bad, but as one of many modes of acting, that *could be chosen*, and that had purpose. If I framed silence this way I felt I was validating it as an act. It became something I might inquire into with others.

It is worth noting here that the 'women's voice' or 'women's experience' perspective, whilst useful in analysing contemporary descriptions of managerial work, it is not the only theory which may be seen to be of use. Calas and Smircich (1996) have highlighted that 'despite the phrase 'feminist theory' there is no single feminist theory'. An alternative theoretical approach may be found, for example, in poststructuralist feminism (Lather 1991, 2000), where the privileging of any voice - including women's voices - experience, or perspective is questioned.

Whilst taking such considerations on board I felt, through my experience of my own life, that there were times when single gendered spaces were needed to enable access (by ourselves and others) to lived experience (of our own, and that of others) to even become a possibility. I did not want to mirror Alayne's suffocating experience of working life in my research, and considered a single gendered space might enable me to better achieve this aim. I attended to Harding's (1987) warning that:

> …only partial and distorted understandings of ourselves and the world
> around us can be produced in a culture which systematically silences and
> devalues the voices of women. (Harding, 1987:7)

I didn't want to replicate that culture in my research. A 'women only space' felt more appropriate. As Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) state:

> In our study we chose to listen only to women. The male experience has
> been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the
> patterns in women's voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful

templates men have etched in the literature and in our minds. (Belenky et al, 1986:9)

Furthermore, by including only women, it makes clear who the research is to provide insight for, as Harding discusses;

> If one begins inquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women's experiences, one is led to design research *for* women...that is, the goal of this inquiry is to provide for women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need, rather than providing for welfare departments...advertisers...the judicial system answers to questions they have. (Harding, 1987:8)

This 'providing of explanations' gives further weight to the argument that research for women by women is not only something that is needed, but that if conducted in a participative manner, may find the 'questions' women want to ask, as opposed to a methodological undertaking which presumes that we know what it is we want to find out. Further to being open to 'finding the questions', it then becomes important to frame these in a methodologically sound way – this encompasses the notion of 'the response' which is not mentioned above;

> (Kelly, Moch and Tandon, chapter 34) suggest the naivety of survey methods in the field which presume to know what is important to ask, or which presume… truthfulness in response. Kelly (et al) suggest that our choice of method be "ecologically" sensitive to the context in which it is used. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001:452)

Such 'ecological sensitivity' suggested that my ideas about working in a small group made sense – that it would be an appropriate choice when carrying concerns, as I did, about voice and silence and how silenced stories might safely be accessed, as Shotter (1999) states:

> Thus for Zeldin, the hero of the new age is not the individual but the pair (or the communal group)... physical contact is the basis of intimacy, but

conversation extends this intimacy. Only in conversation do we reveal our own distinct and unique 'inner worlds' to each other. Only in conversation can we make each other 'gifts' from our own unique 'noticings' of previously unnoticed but important details in our humanly shared surrounding. (Shotter, 1999:226)

## *Summary*

The above concerns, intentions, questions and explorations represent how scattered my attention was as I set out to engage in inquiry with young women. Through them though I felt as though I was developing an approach that was 'ecologically sensitive'. Whilst feeling grounded in this, I considered the impact of 'forgetting to see' people who were outside of my 'target' inquiry group – senior managers for example – as also potentially silenced. I feel that I was, arguably, encouraged to do this through the literature I was engaging with, for example:

Participatory research fundamentally is about the right to speak…participatory research argues for the articulation of points of view by the *dominated* or *subordinated*. (Hall, 1993:xvii, italics mine)

Senior managers would arguably not fall into such categories as dominated or subordinated. But I wondered, if when operating from positions of not listening to those at 'the bottom of their organisations', or only hearing them when they were 'talking a talk that was in itself a silence' (hooks, 1989), they too would be in a position of silence when talking about the experience of those at the bottom of their organisations. I began to wonder if we could conceive of organisations as echo chambers, reverberating silence. I considered how important it could be for the inquiry group to remain linked into the wider organisation and attend to the possibility of this reverberation.

Lastly, I considered suggestions that the voice(s?) of the middle class, educated, white woman was already a privileged one. That by seeking to work with women in a multinational company in the UK, I was choosing to privilege the already privileged, and in doing so choosing not to make space for the 'really silenced'. I felt my self bump up against this notion both in my reading and in conversations with others. By way of honouring my own voice, I need to tell you that my first and enduring reaction was that the idea of the voice(s?) of young professional women as 'privileged' did not resonate in the slightest with my understanding of the world. Yes, in comparison to other groups, they were privileged. But no, this did not mean that their stories had been told and learned from. I felt that if I didn't notice (or if I stopped noticing) that the voices white educated women often speak with are silent voices, then I would only add to the domination of women, and serve further to literally write them out of history, serve further to silence them.

The above explorations lead me on to search out an appropriate method to use for my research. I detail the chosen method - co-operative inquiry (Heron 1996) - in the following Chapter.