

Part III: Living my inquiring life

Chapter Nine: Passion

Chapter Nine

Passion

In this Chapter I want to consider how I am left on completing the YoWiM inquiry and to consider some of the questions I am holding at this stage. Time has passed since the inquiry ended, during which three of the YoWiM members have left P&G to explore more flexible career paths. Two have been married. We are all now in our late twenties, so perhaps not the 'young' women we were when inquiry began.

I begin with asking if YoWiM was indeed an in-powering space, by considering how it matches up to Bradbury and Reason's (2001) five choice points for quality in action research, and then consider if I too have become more visible through the process of inquiry.

Was YoWiM an 'in-powering space'?

Was YoWiM an 'in-powering space'? Did we get a sense of power being shared and literally becoming an internalised energy? (White et al, 2001). Were the group members 'enlightened on their own terms'? (Kemmis, 2001:91).

In writing my thesis I have included the voices of the YoWiM group members as much as I can, and have struggled with what the appropriate balance is. In challenging Heron's (1996) suggestion that sole-authored accounts limit claims to collaboration in co-operative inquiry research, and in knowing that I position my sole-authoredness as honouring my own voice, I do still wonder if the voices of the group have come through. Even when their words are on the page, they are there by my choosing and with my framing.

However, I consider that they have illustrated that our work together evidences the real sense of engagement we all spoke of whilst together. I have attempted to evidence all sides of this – our stuckness and frustration is no less about 'what

worked' than the stories of 'progress' I have shared. Out of the stuckness and the conflict came a determination within the group to 'do this for ourselves'. By paying attention to the joining process – considering location, funding, access to join the group and individuals being responsible for their own decision to work in the group – all of us involved became aware of the politics of participating in the group.

It is undoubtedly so that the politics (or the 'third-person space') in which the inquiry was embedded kept our inquiry group focussed on working the boundary between the group and the organisation. In this sense, appropriate participation and authority within the group was possible – rather than the group become ghetto-ised as a 'girls' coffee group' (as one of the sponsors told the group it was not in the first open session...) awareness of the politics of engagement meant that the women who chose to join could hide, defend or happily advocate their membership of the group in their daily lives and notice how this shifted as time passed. 'Getting visible' in the literal sense brought joy and pain and reminded us of how membership of the YoWiM group was in itself was a political act.

An example of this being brought to our awareness at the very local level occurred during the coffee break of our January meeting. One of the YoWiM group members had nipped back to her desk to gather some papers, wearing a sticker on her top with her name on (we were in the process of meeting each other, so name badges helped!). One of the men in her team saw this and said 'Oh, you're at that 'women's group thing' aren't you – does that name badge make you feel empowered then?' She came back to our group with such anger. But it was the beginning of negotiating the boundary around the group – choices needed to be made over whom to explain the work to and whom to ignore. Other evidence of working the boundary in ways that were choice-full and aware has been detailed, though encouraging appropriate distance between our sponsors' requests and the needs of the group – particularly in the early stages – was key.

It seems that in-powering spaces need for boundaries to be 'worked' on three levels:

1. The organisation needs to be managed to enable the group to have space to breathe into what they want to be. This management is about creating a boundary that gives distance, but not one that separates. There must be easy access to 'do inquiry' with the organisation and within it.
2. Heron (1996) asks the question of whether boundaries in the group are open or closed. I think a boundary that is continually negotiated by the people who are part of the inquiry group works well, if energy and power are to be internalised. Feeling that new faces can come and go, and that the 'organisation' (senior figures or sponsors) might walk in to observe a session at any time (as one of our sponsors told me they would like to do) is unlikely, from my experience, to make people feel safe. In Heron's (1999) terms I would suggest that a hierarchical approach to boundary creation is appropriate in the early days of a group particularly. We might envisage our selves as 'facilitating' the organisation.
3. As the inquiry group has chance to find its feet, this boundary management will need to become the 'job' of the group members, if they are going to become able to sustain ways of being inquiring in the organisation after the facilitator has left the group.

So, in light of Bradbury and Reason's (2001:450) suggestion that quality in action research is in some ways about relational praxis, we did strive for this kind of quality in our work. We all stumbled over our capabilities in enabling each other to participate as fully as we could, as the earlier discussion on 'conflict' illustrates. We engaged each other in making choices about how we worked and renegotiated these many times. We stuck with each other when it was tough - and this for me is about a developed sense of our relationships with each other as a group. No one had any reason to stay - most group members did not have 'YoWiM' on their work plan. (Some had deliberately not requested for it to be. One group member described her desire not to have YoWiM 'work-planned' as due to the possibility that 'it might lock my work here [YoWiM] into a box I'm trying to get out of'). So, for many there were no benefits - except for the value

they found in working together. When workloads and frustration at our process made participation difficult, YoWiM still turned out.

For me to speak of YoWiM as an in-powering space is to suggest that power is internalised. In an action research sense, research is undertaken with the explicit intention to change the lives of those who participate. So, if this power to change is internalised, '[is] the research validated by participants' new ways of acting in light of the work?' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451).

Throughout the inquiry, a development of awareness of voice was a core issue for the group. Ideas about coming more fully into ourselves spawned action with bosses and peers about language and behaviour. Sometimes those actions were inclusive – people were invited to have conversations about the issue of concern, other times attention to the behaviour led to new ways of acting that were exclusive and unexplained. Stories of such localised changes in practices are detailed in my thesis, as are those undertaken in more public spaces ('Third-person inquiry' and 'Meeting with the LDT'). Ways of being 'different' were experimented with in our group space and learnt from. 'The day to day doing of my self is different' is how one YoWiM group member explains the difference this work has made for her (YoWiM, February 2002).

How can we offer this as a valid 'outcome'? Kemmis (2001:91) would perhaps say that this is evidence of the group member 'being enlightened on her own terms'. The very act of being in her daily working life has changed. I do not know the detail of how she experiences this, she describes it as 'being more aware of my self and what is going on, which means I'm more aware of what I can do differently, and I do it.'

Part of this is about what Bradbury and Reason refer to as 'quality as Plurality of Knowing' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451). In developing a practice I later referred to as 'Naming as Knowing', we developed our own 'hypothesis' about 'reality', the 'reasonableness of which we tested out with each other in our inquiry community'. Processes of re-description and Naming as Knowing, enabled new futures to be imagined and enacted – indicating the practical nature

of the 'theories' we developed. The balance of power relations *as conceptualised by individual members of the YoWiM group* are what shifted through this process. Knowing experience *on their own terms* made learning from that experience more possible. As Gaventa and Cornwall (2001) state:

If power is shaped by discourse, then questions of how discourses are formed, and how they shape the fields of action, become critical for changing and affecting power relations. (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001:72)

Furthermore, work of the YoWiM group has enabled me too to see the co-operative inquiry extended epistemology in a new way - a re-description that shifts what I see as possible in future research practice. And finally, one of my intentions in presenting my thesis as I have is to make the process of inquiry accessible to other action researchers. In doing so, I intend to honour the notion of a 'community of inquiry amongst action researchers.' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:451)

In Chapters Two and Three I discussed the importance for me of finding an approach to my research which was 'ecologically sensitive' - what Bradbury and Reason (2001:452) refer to as Quality through Methodological Appropriateness. I firmly believe that the choice of co-operative inquiry as an approach was suitable for this work as it enabled a space for new voices to come to the table, find their silenced stories and take responsibility for how they responded in action. Furthermore, the appropriateness of this choice may be seen in the YoWiM group's recommendation to the P&G LDT that similar structures be put in place for all young women (and possibly men) when they join the organisation, as it provided 'an intimate, caring, rigorous group in which the issues important to graduates as they commence their careers might be aired' (YoWiM, February 2002). YoWiM suggested that the opportunity to become a member of such a group could, over the longer term, impact upon the recruitment and retention issues that P&G have with women managers.

As with many other large companies, the number of women in P&G - though accounting for 50% of the graduate intake - drops off sharply to a point where

women occupy an insignificant proportion of positions at senior management levels and are barely visible at board level. The comment earlier from a YoWiM member of 'looking up [the organisation] and seeing no-one [no women at senior levels who I want to be like]' gives testimony to this. I cannot go past this 'seeing no one' comment a second time without sharing a story, which though a digression, enabled me to know experientially the sadness the members of YoWiM expressed when talking about the lack of female role models in the organisation...

Shortly after the YoWiM inquiry group ended, I was invited back to P&G on a consultancy basis, to explore issues around 'diversity' in the organisation with people occupying the two most senior management levels. I carried out this work through conducting two-hour one-on-one conversations with each manager. Most of these managers at senior level, as I have indicated, were men. But the conversation I had with one woman - let's call her Jane - has stayed with me. In what follows I draw from the notes I took during our conversation.

Jane was in her mid-forties, and due to both her and her husband wanting to focus on their careers, they had side-lined any plans for a family when they were in their early twenties. Both were hugely 'successful' (Jane was one of the few women in P&G to have managed on a European level and was planning her way 'into' the hierarchy of P&G in the USA). Upon turning forty, they decided it was now or never - if they wanted a child they 'had to get on with it'. The baby was delivered by pre-booked c-section, so that Jane could get herself together to fly to Europe for a week-long board meeting seven days later. The baby was left in the arms of a very well-qualified, live-in nanny - who was still there three years later when I heard the story from Jane. I sat in her office and my heart sank. Here was the woman who members of the YoWiM group said they had no desire to be like 'though P&G think she's a role model for us'. And I knew what they meant. If this is what it meant to be successful at P&G, at the highest level, I would not have wanted to be like her either.

As I said... a digression. But perhaps indicative of the struggle the YoWiM group members experienced in trying to conceptualise their ideas of career

within P&G alongside images of women incommensurate with their images of themselves. I return now to the discussion of quality criteria...

My decision to invite young women to 'inquire into their experiences of work', rather than set a structured focus for inquiry, led the YoWiM group to feed back to the organisation that an approach of encouraging people to 'tell P&G what their questions are' would be much more effective than the organisational norm of assuming the questions are known and delivering workshops intended to provide the answer. Members of the YoWiM group, soon after the third-person inquiry they ran, told stories of two of their bosses considering how they could build this practice into their work as they had found it such a 'refreshing approach' at the third-person workshop. Testimony like this reaffirmed our belief that not only was the group actively involved in changing things that mattered to them, but they were doing it in such a way that made sense to others. Whilst the practice they were engaged in was counter-cultural, they found it well received.

The fact, as above, that there was no rigid research question meant that the women in the YoWiM group were able to set their own inquiry agendas. The lack of rigidity did cause some frustration during our process, but it forced the women to attend to what mattered to them in their practice. Not only did they have to choose where to put their efforts; for this to sustain their energy they had ultimately to tackle things that mattered, to decide 'what is worthy of attention?' Bradbury and Reason (2001:453) use this phrase when they consider that 'whether work is significant' is another marker of quality in action research.

Choosing what to attend to does not always mean that we will by default be doing 'significant work' - indeed we might opt for much easier options. However, the practice of engaging in inquiry over time means that awareness of issues deepen along with inquiry skill, so that the 'significant' work gets to feel less scary and more open to the possibility of being inquired into. Sarah's story of 'bullying' as we re-described it (Chapter Five) is testimony to this.

Furthermore, when engaging in work that is worthwhile, we have to attend to our 'inner project' (Wadsworth, 2001:425). Part of my idea of the 'educative edge' of action research is about how, when seeking to engage in the system (third-person inquiry) we need to attend to skill development at first- and second-person levels, in order that our work is significant, for ourselves and others we involve. The examples in my thesis of YoWiM group members confronting attitudes and behaviours of others also meant that they confronted their own attitudes and behaviours and asked 'what role am I playing in making this situation possible?' This is significant work.

I discussed the notion of the YoWiM group experiencing inquiry as an emergent process. Inquiry practice such as ours, that seeks to build skills in the first-, second- and third-person arenas, can be nothing other than emergent and this is what can make researchers like me nervous about how we might ever get access for the research to be conducted in host organisations. The nature of emergence in action research does however mean that there is time for skills to be built, political allies to be on-boarded, and incremental shifts to take place. The notion of the tempered radical (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) chipping away at the internal structures which are inhibiting or debilitating, through new modes of acting, mirrors the emergent nature of action research.

Further, I considered the idea of 'enduring consequence' (Bradbury and Reason, 2001:449) earlier in my thesis. I note my bias is for enduring consequence for individuals - if those engaged in the research are not 'changed instruments' (Heron, 1996:101) as a result of their engagement then something has gone awry. I've evidenced that enduring consequence at the individual level is apparent for participants through the YoWiM group's work and that they have managed to shift the view of practice some senior managers consider taking. When it comes to 'enduring consequences' in the form of 're-patterned institutional infrastructures', this is not a mark of quality that is applicable to the YoWiM group's work. Though, we might suggest that the third-person workshop left in its wake a whole new network of women who 'discovered a P&G they didn't know' that day and experience the enduring consequence of that on a day to day basis.

In suggesting how the processes the YoWiM group engaged in relate to Bradbury and Reardon's quality criteria (2001:450-454), I evidence not only that I do believe that the group engaged in inquiry work that was of 'good quality' in these terms, but also that good quality work is about muddling through - not necessarily getting it right or creating a satisfying experience for everyone all of the time - and noticing the muddle. Many of our moments of learning emerged from times of being 'stuck', as discussed. Developing a critical inquiring attention - which in real terms in YoWiM meant 'actively trying to notice what I'm doing, what effect I'm having and what role I'm taking in making my experience what it is' - meant that we could explore being stuck and learn from it. All of life in this sense became 'data'.

Becoming visible

In terms of the above 'quality' questions, the underpinning theme that I see, and that I experienced in practice with the YoWiM group, is that of voice. Becoming visible to ourselves and to each other, and if we choose to a wider third-person space, is at the heart of voicing practice it would seem. Torbert's (1991) assertion of the interdependent nature of first-, second- and third- person inquiry that I have referred to throughout my thesis is a way into voicing and therefore into quality in action research work, from my experience. I do not offer this account of inquiry as one in which there was deep engagement in all three practices - I think YoWiM group members did less rigorous first-person work than I might have imagined they would in the action phases - but I also explored why this might have been. The re-visioning (Callaway, 1991:457) of self as knower has taken some time in the group, and engaging in first-person inquiry is an activity that demands that we see ourselves as sites of valid knowledge.

Considering my own practice in light of the above and in light of my early discussions about my own experiences of silence, have I become visible? I believe I have grown through the experience of inquiry practice. I have become

more visible to my self as I attend to how I am doing in the relationships that have filled my life as a working woman for the past two years. I am learning more and more about the links between my own first-, second- and third- person inquiry as I now too face up to the organisational realities that were facing members of the YoWiM group when we worked together. Their age strikes me as I consider that I have come to be 'an organisational member', in a full-time sense, three years later than they had, and we are all of similar ages. They were dealing with everything I am now faced with, all that time ago. In this respect I can see the benefit of being an external facilitator (a position that I have questioned). Had we all been in the turmoil that is 'becoming an organisational member' during our inquiry, perhaps we would not have had the distance from which to facilitate the process of coming to voice, of re-visioning. Such 'development' as Stanton puts it, may not have been possible:

Development goes beyond acquiring new information or new behaviours in specific situations; it involves acquiring more powerful ways of thinking. (Stanton, 1996:39)

Working with the extended epistemology in co-operative inquiry methodology as the background to our inquiry process has undoubtedly enabled members of the YoWiM group and me to access more 'powerful ways' of thinking – not least 'about ourselves' but also about the organisations in which we work. Re-visioning ourselves, to different degrees, as knowers through this process, and re-visioning different ways of knowing as valid, means that we are left more fully open to inquiry and its possibilities. Living this can be exhausting, especially when trying to find a legitimate way of working this in the system, as discussed in 'Chapter Five – when not enough is too much'. Sometimes inquiry is a way of living life (Marshall, 1999), at other times it is way of planning for a meeting. And through the experience of the YoWiM inquiry, I would say that we come to be visible to ourselves when we know we have this choice, and we use it. This is the kind of inquiry borne of in-powering spaces.