Red Thread 1

The Politics of My Inquiry

This is the first of four Red Threads through which I weave a political metaframe for my thesis. In it I turn to feminist debate about the politics of research claims concerning women's specific qualities as managers and leaders in organisations.

The purpose of my inquiry is to support feminist action towards greater equality in organisational contexts, by investigating the naming and addressing difficulties experienced between women. In the current political environment this involves risk. Findings on difficulties between women might be used to further undermine feminist initiatives or individual women in organisations.

In my approach to the interviews I attempted to steer a difficult path. In my framing of my questions and approach to analysis, I invited contributors to take part in dialogue on their experiences of women's interactions in organisational settings without assuming that these were gender specific. However my approach was primarily informed by research which identifies women specific attributes and asserts their positive value for managers and leaders in organisations.

In the closing stages of my inquiry it has become clearer to me that feminist collaboration between women has its own distinct character; research on attributes which women bring to business based leadership and management roles must therefore be read critically for its relevance to my inquiry.

My contributors were speaking from experience situated in a variety of different environments. All spoke of a range of strategies adopted by individual women in response to gendered power dynamics, and explored with me how these shaped their interactions with other women. All of them did without difficulty identify specific patterns in their interactions with women in work contexts and these had both generative and degenerative qualities. However they all resisted drawing general conclusions and asserted the specificity of their experience in relation to context and location.

All shared a commitment to asserting women's equality, and the equal value of women's contribution to organisations. All except B located their experience in a political environment in which women's collective action to achieve equality had made a significant impact, but in which resources and commitment to support further gender equalities initiatives were reduced. In this environment benefits to individual women were uneven. Many, but not all, of the dynamics they described concerned relationships between women who had experienced some form of reward or individual success, and those who were identified with equalities initiatives but who had not been individually rewarded. In this sense my contributors spoke from experience of a specific history of political initiative and commitment to women's equality, and could not be interpreted as speaking for 'women in general'.

Calas and Smircich develop a political critique of research associated with what they refer to as the 'feminine in management'. They ask 'what is the historical significance of recent discussions about 'women's ways of leading'? Do they really create new opportunities for women?' (Calas and Smircich 1993, p 71), and argue that these approaches simply re-state existing management practices under a different name. They assert that critical examination of the theoretical assumptions sustaining the notions of 'management' and 'leadership' (p. 72). They claim that one of the dangers of the 'feminine-in-management' position is to obscure the need for fundamental change that would alter the established balance of power, with a surface change that creates the illusion of a radical rethinking of what is. They assert that this is part of a pattern, the latest in a history of economic reasoning that values women out of instrumental necessity (p. 73).

> The feminine in management would help in converting 'diversity' into
> homogeneous team players under a caring motherly gaze.
> Calas and Smircich 1993: 75

Re-reading this article acted as a wake up call to me in the closing stages of my inquiry. In asking what *political* purpose the 'feminine-in-management' research may serve, I was reminded that the patterns I had identified were based on the experience and analysis of women in specific in their political, historical and organisational contexts. These women recognised the institutional structures of gender inequality, and had experience of strategies for addressing them through policy and practice in organisations. I recognised that I had been drawn into a more universalising frame through my own identification with attributes described in the management literature on gender difference and my interest in

psychoanalytic research and practice. This research spoke to my need for affirmation of these qualities in my professional practice.

Calas and Smircich do not reject claims for gender specific attributes, but rather assert the need to examine the political basis on which they are made. They refer to concerns about the cultural specificity and empirical basis of the research claims (p. 73). They then offer a different way of thinking 'feminine' which would bring a different set of images of 'women' into the global economy (p. 78). These images are firmly rooted in a global vision of social justice, equality and feminist values, countering consumerism with images of the 'frugal housewife' and 'female ingenuity'. Their vision includes an extended network of information through 'women's gossiping', and of the 'hysterical woman' who releases emotion to 'cry and scream in moral indignation for the crimes against humanity committed in the name of economic rationality' (p. 79).

The women who contributed to my inquiry, like myself, experience a double devaluation, as individual women and as women identified with work that is not longer considered necessary or priority. In this context the feminine-in-management research can serve a purpose in affirming qualities which are devalued in many organisational environments. As some feminist researchers have suggested, this might offer a basis for challenging narrowly definitions of 'leadership' and reframing them in order to affirm a range of different approaches and leadership qualities (Alvesson and Billing 1992). However this does not address the devaluing of gender equality interventions, and its undermining effects on the self-esteem of women and men who are their primary initiators.

Calas and Smircich's alternative images of 'the feminine' lead me to ask what alternative images of 'the feminine' my *feminist* inquiry generates. What images of how women enact *feminist* collaboration in *business* settings? What values did I and the women with whom I 'did' feminist consultancy enact as we tried to act on our political values, while attending to our respective needs to sustain ourselves within the organisational environments we had set out to change? How can, if at all, the universalising claims of the feminine-in-management and of psychodynamic research contribute to my inquiry?

Within my practice as a feminist consultant, business goals had to be held in uneasy tension with my feminist politics. While my inquiry was designed to support feminist collaboration, significant parts of it were enacted within the business relationships constructed by my consultancy contracts. Moving between political and business frames posed particular challenges, as I sought to develop an appropriate conceptual frame.

In the latter stages of my inquiry I became more aware of the politics of my inquiry subject, and of the choices open to me in developing my analysis. How could I refer to similarity of pattern which contributors had identified across differences of context and sector, without falling into universalising claims which I wished to avoid? How could I avoid implying such claims, as an unintended result of my intention to document the challenges of feminist collaboration and to develop successful ways of working with them?

At this point in my inquiry I resolved this dilemmas in two ways.

❑ I reaffirmed my initial motivation for embarking on this inquiry, to bring an under-researched area of women's experience of organisational life into the public arena, in order to sustain and promote feminist collaboration.

❑ I moved away from reading research on gender difference and into research on how women (and men) actively construct gender through interaction with each other (Gherardi 1996; van Bruinem). I took this concept of enacting gender into my inquiry about relationships between women and asked: 'how do women 'do' gender roles in relation to each other?' In chapter 8 I illustrate how I engaged with the literature to develop this approach.

In subsequent 'Red Threads ' I will continue to reflect on how I work with the tensions between business and political frames within my inquiry.