Red Thread 4

The Ethics of Breaking Silence

In my third case study inquiry became a means for women to break the silence about their experience of male power in ABC. This carried risks for them of increased vulnerability. What were the ethics of my use of power as external consultant to encourage this process? What were my responsibilities to attend to their safety?

Safety issues arose within the project on several levels:

Choice of sexual harassment as an issue to work with was driven by project participants. Although this was an area that exposed participants to danger, they chose it for strong reasons. My client contact had authority to act within this territory; the timing following the launch of a new policy was appropriate; it was an issue about which Steering Group members felt passionately. On this basis they developed a strategy and action plan for intervention.

More problematic for the ethics of feminist consultancy was the struggle between Aileen and myself about the scope and design of the ABC consultancy. My determination to reposition the project arose from individual political and professional interests; a wish to develop an intervention situated within organisation development, rather than equal opportunities for women. This led to a series of clashes between us, in which I tried to override her misgivings, in order to protect my vision of the project. This required her to work in collaboration with women with position power in the organisation, and for me to build sufficient trust between key players to make this working alliance possible.

The issues that arose were similar in pattern to those that arose in my first case study. In both situations my client felt my approach in some way threatened their safety. In both cases conflicts arose when I challenged limitations set by the organisational context in which they worked. In both situations I tried to hold in tension my client's safety needs, and the need to protect the overall project, and extend the territory of our intervention. In

both cases my consultancy work did enable women to break silence, and on this basis expose the negative positioning of women through apparently gender neutral management practices.

In writing my three case studies I have broken 'silence' between women with whom I worked on each project, as well as between client contacts and myself. In doing so I have explored the multiple frames through which I worked, associated with tensions between individual and organisational perspectives, and goals associated with personal, business, professional, and political concerns. In my case studies I described the vulnerability which I experienced in bringing aspects of my subjectivity into the public arena. In doing so I am breaking silences in feminist research about the more painful challenges of collaboration. I do so in the interest of sustaining my feminist consultancy and in order to use it to sustain feminist collaboration.

On re-reading this case study I noticed that I had drifted into using a developmental frame for describing changes I made in my relationship to the project leader. In my final draft I pulled back from this. At this moment I had a strong sense of myself as repeatedly drawn towards women who seem to offer my preferred form of nurturing: shared political values, collaboration and opportunities for self-development. This pattern has had generative and degenerative effects, acting as a powerful motivator which can sustain me through challenge, as in case study 2, but sometimes leading to expectations which are not based on a realistic assessment of constraints or different needs. My feminist political stance has legitimated these desires; but has sometimes slipped over into assumptions about how women are or should be. Recognition of this pattern, and development of the skills to work with it creatively, is part of the journey that is at the core of my inquiry.

This page is a space for silence, for reflection, for note taking ....