Chapter 3

My Inquiry Journey 1

Margins or Mainstream?

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with a theme that runs throughout this inquiry: a quest for belonging and of recognition. It appears in different guises in my inquiry. Sometimes it is voiced by myself, as a yearning to belong (chapter 7), or as a deep desire for recognition (chapter 10). Sometimes it is voiced by other women, as reported in my analysis of interview based discussions (chapter 6), and in my research with women refugee managers (chapter 9).

In this chapter I explore its roots in my own biography. In it and in the following chapter I show how I develop inquiry practices to shift my personal sense of being marginal, and to take up positions within more 'mainstream' settings. I show how this led to a changing sense of self, related to a strengthened capacity to take up positions in mainstream spaces, without losing core elements of my political identity 'on the margins'.

This developmental theme is woven throughout the territories of my inquiry. In chapter 12 I conceptualise this emergent self as a feminist consultant who is travels between different worlds, crossing epistemological and political borders in order to take up positions in mainstream and marginal locations.

This chapter drew from material selected from my 'life process' inquiry track. These were journal notes, writing presented at twice termly visits to my CARPP inquiry group[1], and tape recordings of discussion at these meetings. My selection of quotes and summarised material aims to convey the depth and range of my inquiry processes.

Changing meaning, multiple levels

Looking back at my early writing on the CARPP programme I was struck by its urgency and vitality and surprised at how consistent the theme of finding or making a place of belonging was throughout my inquiry, despite my having had no conscious intention to make it a focus. It is as if the theme asserted itself through consistent use of inquiry practice and was expressed in different ways as my inquiry unfolded.

I developed this inquiry track reluctantly, gradually coming to accept that this was not a diversion from the inquiry I had planned to conduct, but part of my inquiry process. My inquiry activities - reflective practices, journal writing, short pieces shared with my inquiry group, inviting and working from verbal and written feedback - served as a way of focussing my attention and sharpening my awareness of a process of change that I was enacting. They contributed, added depth and awareness, and in this sense sustained a process that was already rolling.

Through this process of challenge and in writing my autobiography, I came to recognise links between the inquiry project I had initially planned to conduct with women in organisations and the inner process in which I was engaged. In revisiting this autobiographical material now I am making these links at a deeper level.

The theme of finding or making a place was expressed in a variety of ways throughout my inquiry. My initial approach began from a position that felt marginal on a number of counts: feminist politics, lesbian identity, and equalities consultant. From this starting position I considered how to represent and be my self in professional and personal spheres. This preoccupation with positioning and identity is reflected in my case studies.

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[1] The function of this group is explained further in 'Methodology', Chapter 6

I adopted the 'mainstream/ margins' terminology initially as a way of expressing a sense of being marginalised and wishing for mainstream acceptance and status. This sense of being an outsider who could not have insider status without giving up an aspect of identity was reflected in my sense of being in personal and professional spheres.

In the course of my inquiry I developed an approach which broke down this opposition, opening up a more dynamic approach to my positioning in key relationships.

From where I am now I can identify four areas of inquiry through within which I enacted this re-positioning:

My place within the CARPP community

Shortly after I joined CARPP I plunged into conflict concerning the political ground of my participation. I experienced myself as 'on the margins' of a community in which I had expected to be 'in the mainstream'. The issues were painful and concerned the interface between my feminist politics, and my sense of self as a member of the community. This experience drew me into my first cycle of inquiry and shifted my expectations from seeking to *find* a community that reflected my politics and practice, into an exploration of how to *make* one. This first cycle of inquiry became the subject of the paper I submitted for my diploma (Page 1998). Through it, I developed a methodology that enabled me to work from passion, and enabling me to discover the ontological roots of my chosen inquiry subject (Reason and Marshall 2000).

In later stages of my inquiry I develop this theme of 'belonging/not belonging', and conceptualise further this shift from 'seeking' to 'making' connection (chapter 7).

My positioning as a consultant

I brought questions to my inquiry around how to market myself as a feminist consultant in an environment in which gender equality work was no longer a political or business priority. I thought about this as a choice between being positioned 'on the margins' of

equalities or 'in the mainstream' of organisation or management consultancy. This reflected the low status of women's equality work in organisations, and the widely shared experience of equal opportunities consultants.

My inquiry sustained me as I embarked on exploratory activities to extend my client base through new business and political collaborations. I describe these inquiry activities in chapter 4.

In my case studies I show how I developed strategies for asserting that the inquiry-based methods which I had developed were transferable to organisation development and change consultancy. While did not position me in the 'mainstream' it did provide me with a strong base from which to 'take up my place' (chapters 10 and 11).

My positioning within my family

In my overall inquiry the terms 'mainstream' and 'margins' took on an ontological significance. They referred to a sense of being an 'outsider' or an 'insider' within dominant social as well as organisational cultures.

In autobiographical writing I made the link between this ontological sense of not belonging and family scripts. Through my inquiry I enacted and tracked a process of re-writing this script for myself in relation to family and intimate friendships.

As my inquiry developed my understanding of the issues became more complex. In relation to family, friends and professional relationships a strengthening desire to 'take my place' within the mainstream accompanied an equally strong sense of drawing my sense of identity from the margins.

In later stages of my inquiry the need to choose between 'margin / mainstream' as a location for my feminist consultancy receded, and I developed a stronger sense of moving across borders. In chapter 12 I identified and conceptualised a set of associated skills and methodologies.

Inquiry process

In this section I give a flavour of the quality and level of inquiry work which contributed towards this ontological shift, and which is not directly reported elsewhere in my thesis.

> *There is a pattern in my CARPP writing of a feeling self coming into being, taking voice whether I like it or not: uncomfortable emotionality bursting forth; rage at feeling excluded; a sudden falling in love making me feel exhilarated, special and alive; and now this agony of separation. Through all of this I am learning and practising new skills, allowing emotions into consciousness, processing and theorising them, and trying out different constructs in order to do so. I am managing self and feelings in relation to others in the process, engaging in dialogue with my feeling self and, with encouragement from my CARPP inquiry group, observing myself in action.*
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> *Through this process I feel as if old patterns are potentially breaking and I am opening to the possibility of acting and feeling from new paradigms.*
> Journal, June 1998

I re-read my early inquiry material to gain an overview of its scope and territory. Strength of purpose and consistency emerged of which I had not previously been so keenly aware. I saw that I had been breaking patterns and writing new narratives in ways that challenged previously held positions on the margins. This process had taken place in professional and personal spheres, and was associated with life changes that were painful and exhilarating. My return to this material offered a space to reflect on this process in retrospect. In the remainder of this section, I offer my reflections on this process.

As my inquiry developed, a new feeling self seemed to burst into being. Choices had begun to open up around how I chose to represent myself within professional and family interactions.

In relation to my family I began to recognise and to explore continuities between positions my father and I had taken up as outsiders. My inquiry tracked a growing sense that placing myself outside my family as a lesbian and as a feminist was no longer fruitful for

me. Taking up a position of challenge from the outside was beginning to feel like self-exclusion, and based on assumptions that I would be rejected in my chosen identities.

In the following journal extract I illustrate how through free association I made a connection between an experience of feeling excluded at a CARPP event, and previous initiatives I had taken to break this pattern within my family:

> On return home from CARPP
> *I was thinking about this process of breaking a pattern - coming out of the position of being on the margins, excluded, not wanted. Remembering the golden wedding anniversary of my godmother- wanting to go and being conscious that this was about me taking up a position in my family. At the event feeling: 'Yes, I have a right to be here, I have something to offer; I can be present as a lesbian and as a feminist without either conforming to or needing to challenge heterosexual culture'. Thinking: 'I will take up my role as a aunt, a family member', and that I was doing this on behalf of my whole family, in particular my father who when he had emigrated with us left the country feeling unwanted and persecuted.*
> *Discussing this pattern of family exclusion afterwards with my mother. When she made it clear that she did not share my perception asking myself: how much of this feeling of being unaccepted and unacceptable is my father's burden that I have been carrying? Can I put it down?*
> Journal, January 1998

After this event I tracked how I began to test scope for more 'insider' status within my family. For example I acted 'as if' I were included, participating in family events, and entering into a dialogue with my brother about our different narratives about our childhood. I experienced a growing sense of possibility of 'taking up my place' as a family member without giving up my values or hiding my sexual identity, for example as an aunt in relation to my nieces and in relation to my brother and sister in law. My inquiry practices were iterative enactment of participation and reflection, testing scope for 'belonging' without loss of identity through action and dialogue, recording my activities and experience. I shared some of this writing within my CARPP inquiry group, illustrated in the extracts below:

> *During a visit to my mother I opened a dialogue with my brother which took us into new territories. We began to explore differences and similarities in our experiences of our childhood; the ways in which we had each made sense of conflict between*

our parents and used the experience in our professional lives; how this related to our values, life and career choices in the present. Afterwards I wrote:

The power of feeling listened to, accepted, valued in what I have to contribute by him, a male figure - and the total novelty of the experience - has put me in touch with such longing for dialogue, to be valued and accepted for who I am by family
Writing presented to CARPP inquiry group, November 1997

My Inquiry group members and supervisor contributed to this process in a number of ways. Their critical feedback on my writing and my subsequent dialogue with them in the group contributed to my growing acceptance of this process as a valid part of my inquiry, challenging my sense that it was a diversion. At the same time having a receptive audience to 'write for' enabled the inner process to take place. I sharpened my inquiry skills and paid more attention to dialogue as my exploration developed. The following review was written for my inquiry group and illustrates the quality of interaction that developed within this dialogue with my brother:

My inquiry activities [since the last visit] have concentrated on:
Revisiting my family life with my brother: checking our different experience by sharing elements of mine, asking him to share elements of his. Exercising care to respect his perceptions and responding with mine. Arriving, as he said, at a different understanding between us in this process of exchange. Listening to his views of leadership and management. Remarking and inviting him to reflect on difference and sameness between us. Exploring our different paths with him and asking him to tell me how he perceived mine; remarking that I would use the same phrase as him to describe the work we had each chosen to do: creating environments for others to thrive in.
CARRP writing, January 2000

On another level the process of inquiry which took place within the group modelled and enacted the shift which was taking place through my inquiry. The experience of doing inquiry in a group where different sense making frames were used to make sense of experience seemed to provide a paradigm for belonging which was not based on shared identity or politics, and provided an alternative to the mainstream/margin opposition. Other members of the group at our last meeting, March 2001, acknowledged the importance of this experience.

Paradigm shift

Through these processes I enacted a sense of self that was new on a number of levels. I felt more able to hold onto a sense of myself as different, in environments in which my beliefs and identity might be accepted, but not be reflected back or necessarily affirmed through agreement. This shift opened up new positions from which to speak, and possibilities for entering into dialogue and relationships on a different basis. I felt able to address differences within relationships more directly, and relied less on a sense of shared experience and political frames. I engaged more directly with research writings from different conceptual frames and began to draw them together as I conceptualised my consultancy practice.

In my inquiry writing I explored my experience and enactment of these shifts in friendships, family relationships, professional relationships, and in my inquiry group. I took part in several group relations events as participant and staff member. I traced parallels between shifts in my own process and interventions I was able to make in consultancy with women, and then asked myself 'how' these shifts had taken place. In my consultancy I began to experiment by speaking out more strongly in 'mainstream' events 'as if I belonged', observing responses and offering feed back on my experience. I recorded these experiences and began to make choices about professional associations, based on openness to dialogue.

I noticed increasingly that my feeling of inclusion or exclusion could shift within interactions. My inquiry focus shifted to the dynamics of inclusion / exclusion and I began to record examples of triggers that seemed to shift me from feeling included to feeling excluded. Within a group relations event on social exclusion[2] I practised feeding back my experience of such a shift and found that through doing so I had opened up dialogue between participants and developed my own understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. I explore and develop this discussion in Chapter 7.

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[2] OPUS (1998) Report of a working conference on 'social exclusion', 28th & 29th November 1998, OPUS occasional paper, http://www.opus.org.uk/

During this process I engaged critically with psychodynamic and feminist research to develop a conceptual frame which reflected the dynamic quality of my inquiry, as it moved between mainstream and marginal consultancy territories (see chapter 2).

Conclusions

This brief overview is intended to illustrate the process of 'taking my place in the mainstream' through engagement with life issues within my wider inquiry. Throughout my overall inquiry the boundaries between life issues, consultancy and inquiry were permeable. My process of taking up new ontological positions and finding new ways to enact my feminist politics was not confined to any one sphere and has been enabled by my inquiry practices.

I offer this chapter as ontological grounding for the inquiry that unfolds in subsequent chapters. In writing it I have got more in touch with how deeply identified I am with 'insider/outsider' themes and with the contribution of autobiographical writing to my overall inquiry.