Chapter 9

Case Study 1

Negotiating Power and Voice:
Dilemmas for Feminist Inquiry

Summary

This case study is the first of three. It explores dilemmas I experienced during a consultancy assignment to write a research report designed to validate the experiences of refugee women managers. Conflict arose when accreditation of my authorship of the publication was withheld. This raised methodological, ontological and political dilemmas for me, which I explore through inquiry in this case study.

Through the inquiry described in this case study I explore the generative and shadow sides of a feminist collaboration within a consultancy relationship. I reflect on my relationship to the research data, the process through which I engaged with and interpreted it and how the affinity I experienced in relation to the data intertwined with political and ethical challenges that were played out in relation to my client. I introduce the theme of mutual recognition as a destructive or creative force between women in organisations; this theme is first introduced in my analysis of interviews in chapter 6, and explored further in the two subsequent case studies.

This case study begins with a brief account of how I came to write it. In the narrative that follows I situate the research dilemmas I am exploring within the context of the consultancy contract. I then reflect on the research dilemmas that speak to my wider inquiry focus on relationships between women who are working towards gender equality in organisations.

The second 'Red Thread' which follows this chapter contains a further cycle of reflection and analysis.

How I came to write this case study

This case study is the penultimate cycle of an inquiry that began as a consultancy contract, and ended as a reflection on issues that arose within the consultancy relationship. It is based on a paper I presented at the UK Women's Studies Network annual conference in July 1999. The initial purpose of this paper was to bring myself into voice in a way that was not possible within the research assignment. In doing so I hoped to compensate for the experience of being silenced as author of the research report and subsequent publications.

In writing this case study I explored the issues that had arisen in the hope that this might prepare me to repair the working alliance with my client. Throughout this process my inquiry provided me with a means to disentangle the complex web of political, professional and methodological issues which had arisen for me, and to work through the conflicting emotion generated by the conflict which had developed with my client.

In the following summary I briefly describe my inquiry activities in relation to the events leading up to writing this case study:

- In 1997 I drafted the research report, published as *Compassionate Leadership; a Question of Gender? The experience of women managers in refugee organisations (Evelyn Oldfield 1998).* During my drafting I struggled with dilemmas generated by the tension between the positivist approach which was integral to the political strategy adopted by my client and my wish to make my interpretive role explicit within the text. I decided to frame the process of exploration in which my clients were engaged as inquiry, and in the draft text of my research report made explicit the interpretive processes in which my clients and I had each separately been engaged. I presented the women manager's experiences as both gender specific and diverse, and on this basis framed the report as an invitation to men to engage in a dialogue about gender specific approaches to management.
- I discussed this approach with my clients; while references to my own interpretive role were edited out of the text, my framing of my clients experiences in my report

as a process of inquiry was accepted. My clients also accepted my use of this framing as a basis for inviting men to dialogue with women about their experiences as managers.

- I discussed my final draft with my clients and incorporated their suggestions and editorial feedback into the text.

- In discussions with my client about dissemination and marketing it became apparent that in line with the organisation's policy I was not to be named as author of the publication. In response to my representations my client suggested a compromise to which I agreed, though which my role was acknowledged in the report as 'collating material and referencing it to management literature'. In return my client agreed that I could use the report as the basis for academic publications submitted in my own name at a future date. This was consistent with earlier discussions about my possible further involvement in dissemination and practical training for implementation of the report.

- The publication was launched in January 1998. At the event I was not publicly acknowledged, although one of the women I had worked on with draft text and who introduced the report at the event apologised for this subsequently. In response to my direct approach the director of the client organisation gave me positive feedback about my work on the publication. I interpreted this lack of acknowledgement as political unease, and contained my discomfort as inappropriate to the occasion.

- I submitted an abstract to UK Women's Studies Network (WSN) annual conference in which I describe my paper as 'reinserting my own voice' into the text of the research. My intention was to write a paper exploring my relationship to the research material. When accepted I contacted my client and invited her to discuss my plan for the paper and a possible joint presentation at the conference.

- My client responded by asking me to withdraw my abstract, and indicated that her organisation was concerned that I intended to use research data that did not appear in the research report. A copyright dispute developed with legal representations. I felt my good faith had been abused and asserted my rights to copyright.

- After much deliberation and discussion of the ethical issues with other feminist researchers, my supervisor and members of my inquiry group, I decided to make the focus of my paper the research issues raised for me by the dispute. I set out to work with my anger and sense of betrayal, and explore their ethical and political

implications. I discussed draft versions of this paper with my supervisor and inquiry group, worked with their feedback, and prepared my presentation.

- My presentation at the WSN conference was not well attended. After the event I invited feedback from individual participants. This suggested they were more interested in the research findings of my original report than in the methodological issues I was addressing in my paper and that more contextual detail was needed for them to make sense of the material I had presented. It was not however possible to provide this without identifying the client organisation. This left me with a dilemma; I wanted to protect my client organisation from adverse publicity, but also to hold them to our agreement that I could publish in my own name.

- I discussed the ethical issues related to my role and contract again with my inquiry group, and decided not to submit my paper to the conference publication. Still flooded by anger I embarked on further cycles of reflection and discussion of the methodological and political issues raised for me through the experience. My concern now was to use the learning from my experience to clarify my stance as a feminist action researcher.

- I began to draft my case study using notes taken throughout the process, my reflections on feedback from CARPP group members, and discussions with feminist researchers.

- In final cycles of this inquiry track I re-engaged with the process from the position I had arrived at in the closing phase of writing this thesis. These reflections are in the 'Red Thread' which follows this chapter.

Research dilemmas

Agency and subjectivity in the research alliance

In this section I situate the research dilemmas I am exploring within the context of the consultancy relationship.

In my WSN paper I described the key dilemma which I experienced thus:

I agreed to be a channel for the voices of others to come into the public arena – but now I have discovered I too have a need to be heard. My need seems to be in conflict with the contract I made.

> Does my voice have to be silenced, so others can be heard?
> (Page, July 1999)

My client's strategy was to commission an objective piece of research in order to validate the voices of the research subjects. As the project progressed it became apparent to me that her positivist approach to research had shaped her understanding of my contribution as well as her understanding of research methodology. From her perspective I had taken on the role of validating and not interpreting material, of 'collation' and not 'authorship' (Evelyn Oldfield 1998). The implications of this only became fully apparent to me on completion of the contract.

I approached the contract as a feminist working alliance in which power and values were shared. In doing so however I had not sufficiently taken into account how our different approaches to research method might shape our working alliance. When the report was ready for publication a conflict arose when my client withheld accreditation of my role as author and I attempted to challenge this. This precipitated a crisis in which my client's position was expressed in terms or organisational policy and copyright. Her account of my contribution seemed bounded by notions of 'objectivity' which could not acknowledge the subjectivity and agency that I had actually drawn upon in order to produce the research report.

At this moment of crisis it felt as if the 'I' who had engaged in a collaborative project was erased; as if I was expected to accept for myself the withholding of recognition which my research subjects had challenged in relation to their managerial activities. While I was aware that I had taken on the project in the role of acting as a 'channel' for other voices, I had not expected either to be asked to withhold my name, or to experience this withholding as a moment of erasure. At this moment an 'alliance' for shared political ends became in my felt experience 'collusion' with self-abuse.

How did this situation get constructed? How should I respond to my desire for recognition, while respecting the political position and priorities of my client? How would I now understand the political and ethical issues raised?

link to: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/doc_theses_links/m_page.html

My stake in the project: a feminist working alliance

As a first step I will consider my stake in the research project, my initial reservations and how I resolved them in the process of negotiating the consultancy contract.

I first met my client at a voluntary sector workshop on black and minority ethnic women and leadership. She was the development worker of an organisation that provided training and support for refugee organisations in the voluntary sector. After hearing my contribution to the discussion, she asked me if I would be interested in writing a research report for her organisation, using her notes of discussion at meetings of a support group of women managers of refugee organisations. My client had convened meetings of this group over a period of a year. The women were all members of refugee communities and of different cultures and races. The group had now disbanded, and she was determined that something should be written which would profile the support group and the experiences participants had recounted. Her strategy was to seek a researcher who could write up the material in a form that would lend it validity, by referencing it to literature on women in management. The document was to be written in academic mode, as she believed that this would give it credibility in the eyes of the men who were undermining the women managers' authority.

She invited me to read the material to see if I could empathise with it. When I read it I discovered that many of the issues described by the refugee women managers resonated both with my experience of being an equalities consultant, and with experiences described in feminist literature on gendering management and organisation analysis. I entered into discussions to clarify the potential contract between us, including my own stake in the project, and to satisfy myself that I was the right person to do it.

The invitation to write the research report seemed a wonderful and rare opportunity to put the research I had done into service for an action based intervention by and for women. As a feminist action researcher this is how I wanted my research to be used, to create knowledge, but also to challenge oppressive behaviours and practices (Kelly, Burton and Reagan, 1994). I also saw it as a research opportunity to explore dilemmas in which I had a strong stake such as: how to be female and have authority in the public sphere; how to understand race and cultural differences in ways of being women managers and in enacting gender differences. Working with material generated by a multi-cultural group of women in refugee communities seemed to offer potential for engaging with all of these

issues. I was keen to pick up issues I had identified in my previous research, and to which I had referred in my contribution to the workshop where I had met my client (Page and Lorandi 1992). I was also keen to develop my writing for publication in a form that would be of use to other practitioners.

Underneath this was something deeper: a gut feeling of identification with the women who wanted their voices heard and who felt that by writing their experiences others in reading them would understand, listen and in listening would engage with them. In this I was aware that this was an opportunity to engage in research which had meaning for me personally (Marshall 1992).

I had some misgivings. These both concerned the politics of my research role as a white non-refugee feminist working with data belonging to black and white refugee women; and the positivist research strategy on which the contract was based.

As a white feminist non-refugee woman, should I be taking on the task of shaping and making meaning out of material 'belonging' to women of such differently situated identities (Stanley 1997)? Was it right to reference the material to the body of literature on women in management which had itself been criticised for generalising from the experience of white women, and for colluding with silence about the experiences of black women, and indeed other differences of identity and power between women? (Nkomo 1988; Davidson 1997). How could I avoid replicating this silence, in relation to women whose experiences of gender and of race would be specific and almost certainly not addressed within western management literature? Hearing a presentation from Ella Bell (Bell, Nkomo et al 2000) about her research into black and white women's perceptions of each other had sensitised me to the potential for mismatch of meaning between women of different races and cultures as well as the potential rewards for dialogue. I became more aware of my own limited contact with black women managers and researchers, and of how this might limit my understanding of the data.

The way the project was conceived was not consistent with my preferred interactive style of working, itself based on a politics and epistemology with which this project seemed to be in conflict. The main source material was a note of group discussions written by my client, and was therefore secondary rather than primary data. There would be limited opportunities for direct fact to face contact with the women who were the research subjects.

The research project was to write the material up in a traditional academic format, in order to lend it authority and validity in the eyes of the male managers and trustees in the refugee organisations who were not recognising the authority of women managers. However I had moved away from this way of writing; I wanted to make explicit my contribution to making meaning of the material (Mauthner and Doucet 1998). It seemed particularly important to acknowledge the issues of power and identity embedded in the research alliance, and my approach to the material.

I discussed these misgivings with my client. She assured me that on the basis of my empathy with the material, together with my experience and knowledge of the research field, I was qualified for the job; and that the issue of my own identity was not considered a disqualifier. She agreed to my request that members of the group would read and be invited to provide feedback on draft text, and stated that I would work closely with her as editor. My understanding was that we were working to shared objectives, to produce a report that would put the issues identified by her group on the agenda of her organisation, and break the silence surrounding gender issues in the management development programmes they were providing.

On this basis I agreed to take on the project. I felt that as a feminist it was my job to use the power that I had in terms of familiarity with the field and research skills to find a form for the material that would validate it within the strategy they had chosen. I set aside my own preference for a more interactive approach, and agreed to work within the limitations of the possible. In doing so I acted on my self-definition of being a feminist researcher based on a way of being in the world, rather than on a specific research methodology (Stanley 1990).

The seeds of conflict

The research report I was commissioned to write was written as part of a strategy, an action intervention. This strategy contained a number of interesting contradictions which became apparent to me as the research progressed. They proved to be seeds of conflict that I was able to hold in tension, until the moment when accreditation of authorship was withheld.

The content of the report was to be the experience of refugee women managers in refugee organisations, of the gendered dynamics that undermined their authority as

managers. The aim was to assert their reality, as women and as managers, to draw attention to the devaluing of their experience and to assert the value and uniqueness of their contribution. By publishing an academic document which would validate their experiences my client hoped to get a hearing and a response from a male audience which was not willing to listen to these experiences when articulated by the women who owned them. Use of externally validated research on women in management was the strategy to add authority to their voices, an instance of feminist solidarity to be mediated by the academy.

These are the contradictions as I am able to see them now:

- The research was to be 'objective'; my interpretive voice was not to be made explicit. Yet qualities which contributed to my interpretative voice were key selection criteria used by my client for the job: ability to feel empathy with the material; ability to reference material to Western management research from a feminist perspective.

- My client and I approached the material and the contract from a shared feminist, political stance as well as from our contractually defined roles as client and consultant. She had fought hard to get resources from her organisation for the women managers' support group and for this publication, and accepted and expected no recognition for this or for her editorial role. As she pointed out to me, it was not just I who was not accredited in the publication; her name as editor was also absent.

- The material on which the report was based resonated with aspects of my own experience; this resonance enabled me to create something of it (Marshall 1992). At what point can we say that material belongs to you and not to me, when inevitably in order to make meaning we put something of ourselves into what we create as writers and researchers?

These contradictions contained ambiguities that reproduced the gendered dynamics challenged by the research report, albeit for a different purpose. From my perspective they contained painful dilemmas concerning women's collusion in their oppression, silencing attempts to assert the part played by women's subjectivity in creating new knowing. Ironically the research report was an assertion which attempted to break this cycle, making a strategic alliance to assert the value of women's knowing within the context of refugee organisations. In the following section I move into a reflection on my

experience of these issues and describe how the use of inquiry enabled me to clarify my ontological and epistemological stance.

Reflections

Ownership, Validity and Power

When told I was not to be named as author of the report, I negotiated a compromise. I retained the right to use material from the report to author articles in my own name that would be published elsewhere. This satisfied both my desire for individual accreditation and my desire to play a part in disseminating the material. It also seemed to be consistent with the aim of the project – to give validity to the material in its own right, rather than as the product of someone else – the writer.

However this notion of validity confirmed the positivist notion of knowing by re-inscribing objectivity as a basis for knowledge claims. In editing the author / researcher out of the picture it effectively edited out the creative role of the writer. This bore no resemblance to my experience of actively engaging with the material in order to write the report; or to the role of the editor, who had written the research notes. As I thought about this during the process of drafting the report I felt growing unease. How could I represent the creative process of authoring without diminishing the urgency of the material produced by the women with whom I was working? How could I represent my voice in the publication, without seeming to compete for attention from the readers?

Underneath my unease, there was anger too. Why should my contribution be edited out, and why should this be necessary in order to give validity to other women's experience? Was the project not about making explicit a basis for solidarity, for alliance, between women of different cultures, through shared experience? Was not my contribution as a feminist researcher an alliance, an act of solidarity?

During this process my need for recognition as an author became more urgent, as if I were joining with my research subjects from a sense of wanting my voice to be heard too. In asserting the case for recognition of their contribution I was becoming more in touch with my own need for recognition, and less able to forego it.

In subsequent reflection on this process through action inquiry I discovered an ontological basis for my stance as feminist action researcher. My empathy had been rooted in a shared need for recognition and for being valued in my professional role, as well as in a shared sense of acting from the margins. In adding my feminist voice as sense maker to those of the women refugees I had hoped for mutual accreditation. During the consultancy, and for some time afterwards, I was unable and unwilling to suspend this desire, and this brought me into conflict with the terms of the consultancy. In subsequent cycles of inquiry I continued to reflect on this process and arrive at a different understanding. These further reflections are contained in the meta-commentary in the 'Red Thread' that follows this chapter.

Framing Experience as Inquiry

In my approach to the research assignment I had sought to create a research process that was as participatory as possible within the constraints of the consultancy contract.

I negotiated maximum contact with the women who had contributed the material. This was limited as the group had disbanded. Nevertheless I was able to meet once with two individual members and they provided me with detailed feedback on my draft text. Later in the process, my contract was extended to include participation in a seminar organised by the commissioning organisation on 'compassionate leadership'. This seminar was the third in a series for managers of refugee organisations and was intended to focus on gender issues. I attended as a participant observer and this provided opportunities to test my analysis of the secondary material in conversation with women managers, observe gender dynamics in interactions with men, and get a glimpse of the tensions between refugee communities. At this event I was able to see how the political context in which the women were working influenced the ways in which they enacted gender roles. for example at this event it seemed that the role women played in smoothing over these inter-community tensions made it more difficult for them to challenge gender stereotypes as this might have introduced further conflict.

Equally importantly, encouraged by my editor, I had immersed myself in the material, seeking points of empathy and resonance with its themes. I sought to identify these points of resonance, but also to suspend my initial reactions and assumptions. In her account of her process of sense making of the experiences of women managers she interviewed,

Marshall described a similar process. She asks readers to engage in 'a kind of questioning or suspension of initial reactions and assumptions' in engaging with her data and noted that 'in gender related areas this can be particularly challenging' (Marshall 1995, p. 11). As I read my client's notes of discussions by women refugee managers of their experiences, I found meaning both in the process of inquiry in which they were engaged, and in the substance of the experiences they described. On this basis I tried to introduce my own inquiring voice into the text, in order to invite readers into a process of further exploration.

In working with the research data I was aware of temptation to conflate my experience with the experiences described by the research subjects. I sought to maintain the locus of meaning making in the space between our different experiences and to make our interpretative processes explicit. I was aware of both my active process of engagement with the material, and of an immediate resonance, an alchemy that enabled me to shape to find points of contact with the body of literature to I referenced it. I recognised degenerative as well as generative aspects of this process: potential pitfalls of identification based on unchecked assumptions, assumed similarities which might mask significant differences and lead to misinterpretation of the material.

I checked drafts with my editor, and received detailed drafting suggestions and enthusiastic feedback from members of the group. I used the experience of participating in the seminar to inform and check my interpretations of the written material, listening to discussion, observing interactions and talking with participants to check contentious areas. I did not anticipate the difficulty that my close identification with the material would later lead to in pulling back from the conflict that erupted.

In my research report I went a step further to reconcile my research stance with the approach of my research commissioner and feminist co-worker. On the basis of my reading of the accounts by women in the research material I described the members of the support group as engaged in their own inquiry: moving back and forth between different ways of making sense of their experience of being undermined as managers:

> Women managers experienced the constant feeling that in order to be effective they needed to behave like men or even to be male. …. this took the form of a constant inner dialogue: a series of questions which the woman asked herself to make sense of the conflicts she experienced:
> *This is what happened to me; would a man have been expected to do x? have been treated like y?*

The recurring refrain, would a man or someone better qualified have done what I am doing better or been treated differently, echoed the inner struggles described by some of the women I had interviewed in earlier cycles of this inquiry (chapter 6). Feminist researchers speak of a deeply internalised sense of 'being a fraud' experienced by some women professionals, and relate this to a mismatch between their own sense of competence and gendered images around them of professionalism and of competence in work environments (McIntosh 1985; 1989). In my consultancy development inquiry track I explored some of the identity issues related to my own sense of professional competence (chapter 4). In reading this research data I strongly identified with my research subjects' struggles to reconcile different sets of expectations arising from gender and ethnicity with ways of being managers which could not accommodate them. While noting that the complex issues of race and ethnicity which they explored were absent in my case, I felt there were parallels in my experience of lesbian sexual identity in relation to unspoken heterosexual assumptions within management cultures.

My framing of the research data as an inquiry process enabled me to 'join' with the women whose written accounts were my source material, and to think of them as co-researchers. However as I show below, while I was able to show my research subjects as engaged in an inquiry process, I was not able to bring my own inquiring voice into the text.

This approach shaped my writing style. My account grouped the experiences described by the women managers as a series of inquiry dilemmas with which they are actively engaged, while also illustrating their competence in practice. I used my own commentary to engage the reader in an open process of reflection, rather than to come up with solutions. I used research references to women in management to illustrate feminist challenge to the idea that leadership or management can be gender neutral, focusing on the complexity of gendered assumptions, rather than suggesting that there might be one alternative correct way of resolving the issues.

Invitation to dialogue

I framed the research report as an invitation from the women whose experiences were described in the report to men in the refugee sector to explore gendered and ethnically determined assumptions about the management and leadership of refugee organisations.

This more reflective, dialogic stance towards my research data was one that I had not taken before in my research writing. It was a new departure for me to suggest that women played a part in constructing gender, rather than being only recipients, and to suggest that new forms of engagement by and between male and female actors might be possible (Gherardi 1995; Marshall 1995). In this case it felt appropriate as an action intervention.

Members of the group had been overwhelmed by shared negative experience and a sense of their own powerlessness to resolve complex dilemmas concerning their professional authority in relation to power based on gender and ethnicity in their communities and organisations. Validation of their experiences was needed, and was the basis of my research contract. However I felt there was a danger of constructing the report as a statement of closure that would not allow the research to be used constructively. Framing the research publication as an invitation from the women to dialogue with men within management training and practice was a strategy I discussed and agreed with my editor and with members of the group with whom I met.

Feminist inquiry across situated identities

The women refugee managers identified gendered power relations as an area of common ground for solidarity with other women managers, across the specifics of cultural difference and their history and status as refugees. My reading of their material suggested rich potential for further exploration of differences and similarities between women who find themselves outside the dominant culture of the organisations for which they work. In this section I explore how I engaged as a researcher with the tension between recognizing identity difference between myself and research subjects, and empathy based on shared experience of marginality.

Black women managers speak of their experience of moving back and forth between hostile organisational cultures and affirming cultures at 'home' (Bravette 1996; Davidson 1997). In my report I described how women in refugee communities spoke of challenging gender roles in their communities as well as in their organisations:

> The material is complex, and speaks of how the refugee women managers' experience of gender difference is interwoven with other differences - political, cultural, and social, all of which inform and influence expectations of women

leaders within refugee projects. The voices of women managers of refugee projects describe the intricate movements back and forth as they negotiate their way between culturally shaped expectations directed towards them as women, and as managers, by their staff, colleagues and management committee members. Unsurprisingly, their discussions did not arrive at a blueprint, or model, for how to be a woman leader or manager in refugee communities, or a precise definition of how she would be different from a male leader or manager. They did convey their urgent need to find a space to share their experience to engage in a dialogue with men about their mutual expectations and experiences of leadership in order to serve more effectively the refugee organisations and communities for which they work, and in order to release the potential of women and men in future generations.
(Evelyn Oldfield 1998, p. 5)

I drew on a small and growing literature on the experiences of black women and minority ethnic women managers (Davidson, 1997; Bravette, 1996; Bell et al 1993; Hite, 1996; Nkomo 1988) to explore similarities and differences between the experiences of women refugee managers and the experiences of black women managers. The writings of black women in the UK focus on their experience of racism in relation to white colleagues and institutional structures and cultures (Bravette 1996; Davidson 1997; Graves Dumas 1985). The research material and discussions I initiated with support group members suggested this was a strongly shared experience for both women and men within the refugee sector. However refugee women felt their experiences were specific and had differences as well as similarities to the experiences of black women managers. I described this in my report:

> The conflicts described by women managers of refugee projects are similar to those experienced by women managers outside refugee communities. However within refugee community organisations they are given a particular edge and meaning by the specific histories, politics and cultures of the communities that they serve and to which they belong. Their inter-actions with colleagues and service users inevitably takes on an emotional loading from the traumatic life experiences and support needs of individuals within refugee communities (Evelyn Oldfield Unit 1975, and 1997; Hollander 1997), some of which may also be part of their personal experience. (Evelyn Oldfield 1998, p. 7)

The refugee women managers' support group was trying to create a safe reflective space where a counter-cultural reality could be explored and experienced. In order to use this

space they had to resist pressures to devote every available moment to their organisations that were delivering badly needed services to refugee communities. There were no cultural models which justified women taking time out for relaxation or leisure let alone reflective practices, whereas men were expected to 'chew quat for hours' or sit together drinking coffee over discussion and decision making (1998: 21). Reflective space for these women was a luxury that had no cultural referent to support it.

These women managers were asserting their lived experience/s as both 'other than' and 'equally valid' to predominant male discourses and practices about leadership within their refugee communities. In my report I drew upon Western research on the specificity of women's experiences of management to lend solidarity and validity to their experience. However as discussion showed at the seminar on 'compassionate leadership', both men and women within refugee communities were also defending their identities as minorities against attack and erosion. In this context first generation women in refugee organisations were under contradictory pressures to hold traditional gender roles and to be effective managers. Some seminar participants felt that the second generation of young women and men were renegotiating their gender identifies, and discussed the need to support them in finding elements from their traditional cultures which they might transfer into their current context.

In the research report I suggested that if research were action and inquiry orientated, it could widen involvement in addressing these conflicts. It could offer opportunities for exploring what is at stake for women and for men in different communities, and offer a greater choice of strategies for individual managers in their negotiation of multiple roles and complex realities (Marshall 1995). I suggested that inter-generational dialogue could be built into this process to contribute to debates around cultural assimilation and identity. The relevant research findings from Western research could be critically explored for their value in the dialogue that could open up (1998: 22).

Re-inscribing my own voice

I have said that in writing the research report I tried to convey the active process of sense-making in which my research subjects were engaged. In this final section of my case study I describe this process more fully.

While I was able to refer explicitly to my research subjects' sense making process within the text of my research report, the positivist approach which was the basis of my consultancy contract, meant that I was unable to refer to my own interpretative process. In order to work with the data in a way which would give it validity within the terms of the contract, and retain my integrity as a feminist action researcher I made a series of choices.

First, to allow for ambiguity in the ways in which gender difference in being managers was understood by my research subjects. In the process of working with the data I found myself identifying with the sense of shifting realities and meaning which the women were expressing, within a framework which recognised the dominance of male values and discourses in the world of organisations in which they moved. I tried to articulate and capture something of the ways in which the women who took part in the discussions were acting as researchers, engaging in an active process to explore different ways of making meaning from their experiences but without losing sight of the reality of institutionalised power structures. This felt different to seeking clear definitions or consensus in my reading of their material, or avoiding ambiguity in how relations of power were interpreted and enacted, an approach I might have taken before I had been introduced to human inquiry (Reason 1988 and 1994; Marshall 1992; 1995).

Secondly, as I have said, I set out to produce a report that would open up safe spaces for dialogue between women and men, and between women with different voices. This felt very different from writing something that would polarise further, or cement oppositional stances. In order to do so I used the notion of 'doing gender' developed by feminist writers (Frye 1983; Gherardi 1995; Zimmerman and West 1991):

> 'The ways we act as women and men and the ways we act towards women and men mould our bodies and minds to the shape of subordination and dominance'. (Frye 1983, p. 34, quoted in Zimmerman and West 1991, p. 33

According to this view, gender relations are not only shaped by external factors such as organisational practices, and male behaviours and expectations, but are constructed through interactions in which women as well as men are actively engaged. In chapter 8 I show how my approach was informed by critical engagement with this literature.

Finally, I decided to try to make my own voice explicit, using 'I ' instead of the third person and making reference to my own sense making process. I wanted to try to make transparent my own engagement in a dialogue with the material, and to find a way of doing so which would not detract from the focus on the women refugee managers' material. This was in response to a growing feeling of unease, as my own engagement with the material deepened. I felt increasingly more keenly the disjuncture between my own engagement and the requirement to write something for an audience for whom the presence of the author's voice would be interpreted as reducing the validity and credibility of the content. To resolve this I drafted a new section for the introduction to the report:

As a white woman who is not a refugee this has raised a number of challenging political and methodological issues for me. Would I find a way of enabling the material to take its own form, find its own coherence, without supplanting it with my own beliefs and concerns? How could I use my own experience as a woman who has worked in a number of roles to promote women's equality within public and voluntary sector organisations, and as a researcher familiar with the body of literature on women managers, to add validity to the material I had been given, without giving it a form which it actually did not have? How could the publication give due credit to the women who had met over a period of a year, been through a painful process of exploration and sharing, without losing my own voice and contribution?

I have sought to approach the material I have been given with respect for its integrity without losing my own, and to open up rather than close off spaces for further exploration and dialogue. My approach has been one of inquiry, and this has meant that I have chosen to use research material to pose questions rather than to point to answers or solutions (Marshall 1995). As well as being my preferred style, this seemed appropriate given the limited opportunity for direct face to face discussion with the women who had contributed their material for me to work with. As I read and interacted with the material key themes emerged; I have organised the material around these. At times the material suggested different readings; I found myself returning to it and approaching it differently over a period of time. I have tried to reflect this in my use of the material in the body of the report. Themes overlap and because of this section headings may appear somewhat arbitrary. I have tried to convey a sense of evolving meaning for the women who took part in the discussions as well as their need to make a statement

about their lived experiences as they cross cultural, gender and organisational boundaries to create new identities as women managers.

In offering this text I had wanted to convey something of the politics of my approach to the data in the text. This was however inconsistent with the positivist frame of the research project and edited out of the text by my client. Paradoxically my writing was framed as the voice of objectivity.

The gesture of writing myself into the research and of having this rejected did serve a useful purpose for me. It pushed me into embarking on further cycles of my own inquiry, and into creating a space to engage more explicitly with the methodological and political issues raised. I became more aware of the need to work explicitly with my own inner world need for recognition, and how this might interface in generative or degenerative ways with similar needs from my clients. I determined to explore the ethical and political dilemmas raised in the process of this exploration.

In writing this case study I explored how generative use of empathy enabled me to engage closely with the experiences of my research subjects. I also suggested that close identification with the anger expressed by women in the research data fuelled my challenge to my client to name me as author. My unease with the positivist research approach required by my client and rejected attempt to resolve this, should have warned me to hold onto and separate my interests and needs from the research contract. However at this point my own unmet desire for accreditation and professional recognition made it harder for me to honour the constraints of my research contract and to act as the anonymous channel for my clients which would have met their needs.

During the many cycles of reflection, discussion and negotiation in which I engaged in this inquiry, I worked with my own rage and confusion in order to arrive at an analysis of the politics of the conflict with my client and of my part in it. In the process I discovered an ontological basis for my commitment to making my interpretative voice explicit within my inquiry, and in this sense to action inquiry as a method. In doing so I have cleared the ground for more mutually productive potential alliances with my co-researchers of the future.