Brendon Harvey

Encountering empowerment rhetoric: assumptions, choices and dilemmas for individuals and organisations.

Doctor of Philosophy
University of Leicester

2004

Contents

Chapter 3   Methodological Rationale and Design

References

Appendices

1 Example of a participant feedback sheet

2 Participant Email Correspondence

3 Summary of Research Cycles

4. CRAR Reflexive Inquiry in Action

5. Agency-cycle outcomes literature

Total Word count: approx 92k

An early memory of my father working in a shoe factory, Northampton in 1972-4:

He Looked Out as I Looked In

Grammar school boy out at four
Meeting, waiting, kerbside
The factory window glimpsing
Figures and shoes
Like a speeded - up silent movie of toil.

Belts barely passing leather-spattered hairlines
I saw him, my Dad, in front of his machine

Knarled fingers like chopped Dutch elms in the nearby avenue.

I hated him and loved him

Trapped in the sausage skin of the shoe room

Intellect deadened.

....

I saw him out on the street

My lad in his uniform

That uniform, you know.

He caught my eye

Waved

Shuffled back and forth

Embarrassed by the others here

seeing him

viewing me.

He will never work in this zoo

With us

And my hatred of time and piece work tickets.

'Stain and then dye' the foreman said when I first started

'Just stand here, Len'

Stain and then Dye

With my uniform of no opportunity

No choice like him

outside

through the window.

On returning to Northampton to study for this PhD:

Return

To bijou flats where factories once stood

New Town

Now an old town

To home

Bedroom neat as it was

Service with a smile

But no adolescent angst

This is my homeport

Where I came back for refits

Then departed

Life long leaving

Of parents

On the front step

Like waving the troops off to war

Coming back

Yet moving forward

Laying in the familiar single bed

Strange

I never used to worry about their breathing

When I was younger.

Puzzles and doubts at the outset of the PhD inquiry 1997:

A Tide of Hope

A tide of hope

As it rolls

Envelops

Disintegrates doubts

Like a sea spout

Taking up the negative

And really showing its power

As it flings and whirls

Weightless worries

And then deposits them

With a thump

Desolate

Cold

and thankfully undernourished

For a time.

This thesis is about empowerment.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Scene-Setting

Summary

This chapter serves to introduce the puzzles that generated this PhD process; section

1.1 describes the first tentative questions that shaped its subsequent inquiry form and

the particular forms of writing that became an integrative part of how I went about

that. In section 1.2 a number of interrelated trends are introduced that managers

experienced in the three companies of the inquiry, Castings, Brewing and the Agency.

Section 1.3 seeks to offers a view of what could be considered empowerment. That in

effect such a prevailing notion of empowerment as encountered by managers in the three

companies led to choices and actions removed from the intent of the rhetoric. How was

I, and others, to work with these disjunctions? The chapter therefore ends with two

sections, 1.4 and 1.5. which seek to demonstrate how, through collaborative inquiry, I

engaged with others and myself in critical reflection of actions in different terrains of

our lives through embracing a different view of empowerment rhetoric.

1.1. Puzzling about Empowerment

This PhD is about the ways in which managers from three companies, Castings, Brewing and the Agency, encountered the rhetorics of empowerment. It seeks to discover the connections such employees make with their experience of working in their organisations when faced with such rhetoric. The inquiry is focused on some key questions:

What processes and sense making around notions of empowerment characterise their experience? Do the various pressures upon managers – to be more involved, to empower, to develop – influence their own processes of choice and action [or inaction] within their own work situations?

Yet it also inquires into the disconnections, the disjunctions, that such rhetoric may promote: to what extent the espoused corporate meanings of empowerment fail to fit, or fuse [conjunctions], with the lived realities of the managers. Moreover, this thesis is not bounded within the sphere of the business environment. For it recognises that working lives are influenced by the particular context of the individual, sometimes forming a complex web of interrelationships between home and work. It is clear

from this thesis that these relationships are important influences on certain manager's actions/reactions to what they heard being espoused.

Many managers had worked in environments where the traditional emphasis was on management power and control. Now they were facing new methods of organisational transformation and management development. This thesis sets out to disclose the tensions that such movement created for managers and myself working alongside them as a consultant and trainer, and asks whether these tensions stay within the work environment or whether notions of empowerment transfer between particular environments, particularly work and home or between different work locations?

The research moves beyond merely 'noticing' conjunctions and disjunctions. When working as a consultant with various individuals and groups I became curious how, for many, their meanings of empowerment influenced how they dealt with tensions and conflict. I sought to explore the possibilities of working *with* the tension and conflict, in contrast to their organisations which *manage and control* employees, as they work with notions of development and change. For it became clear, as this Inquiry progressed from its inception in 1997, that a different approach

to working with managers, based on collaborative inquiry, can support their understanding of how they act/react and generate opportunities to act differently when encountering rhetorics of change.

It has been said that writing is often, in its academic form, of a style as though it is from 'nowhere by nobody' [Ellis and Bochner 2000]. My intent is therefore to present this thesis so it is clear that it is from somewhere and by somebody. The poems that preceded this introduction are about growing up in a provincial town and returning to that town to engage in part-time study that has generated this thesis. The stories that immediately follow are about encounters with managers, from three different companies in different sectors that I worked with through my consultancy practice during the 1990's. Both poems and stories engender notions of person, location and empowerment. I have therefore been committed throughout this research to *showing* in the first person not just *telling* the story of this inquiry. The literary forms that are used are intended to convey this.

Three stories of critical incidents in each of the companies are presented. They serve to introduce the interpretation of empowerment in the three companies at the heart of this PhD inquiry:

<u>Story One: Castings Company</u>*:

Its 1994 and the Christmas meeting of a major manufacturer - a hired off-site space in the West Midlands.

Castings Company is committed to continuous improvement and is at the forefront, within its sector, of developing teams and processes for bringing about innovation and cost cutting initiatives. It has a designated training budget with a responsibility given to a young manager, eager to advance within this company, to spend in line with their improvement strategy.

The context for this meeting is the culmination of a year's activity by a series of plant teams from across the company. The teams comprise the managers in the company and 'invited' shopfloor representatives. All functions of the company, except administration, have membership here. They come together to share results of their activities during the year by giving formal presentations, to hear the MD comment on the progress of the business, and then engage in an interactive activity that is meant to

---

* For reasons of anonymity all three companies of the Inquiry have been given fictitious names .

support the sharing of knowledge, opinions and key learning of the whole group.

On a smaller scale a meeting takes place at six weekly intervals but everyone knows that this one is a little bit different. The reason for this expectancy is not to do with the formal process of engaging with the savings made or the new innovations developed and introduced since they last met. It is more to do with the envelopes that the MD brings along and gives to the co-ordinator of the total project to give out to teams and individuals. Contained in the brown envelopes are cheques of varying amounts as a personal 'thank-you' for contributions made to the overall purpose since the last Christmas meeting, when the same ritual took place in the same setting, in the same way. The amounts contained in the envelopes, or who the recipients will be, are not known to all. It's a 'closed' process.

Once people finished lunch in the informal setting the co-ordinator acts as the messaging service for the MD. He moves between the various groups and in a variety of encounters he hands over the envelopes to the lucky participants. He is watched closely and word soon spreads who has been visited and how much they received. The recriminations and gossip

begins in earnest, soon after the MD's words had rung around the room

urging all of the participants to work extra hard next year. He offers the

rallying cry for them to carry forward this team effort because if they

didn't then the company would not be able to keep its component prices

low and conform to the requirements of the customer. As the

participants leave some individuals decide how they are to share out their

rewards to the rest of their team. Others finish their lunch quickly, get

in their company car and start their holiday.

It is the view of the MD that this is empowerment.

Story two: The Agency

A Lay-By just on the outskirts of Nottingham 1997.

A manager of The Agency sits in his car. He has had to stop because he

blacked out whilst driving just a quarter of a mile up the road. It was not

for long, probably just a few seconds but it scared him to death. It's not

the first time it has happened. In recent months, since taking on the

responsibility for running two offices fifty miles apart, he has travelled

many hundreds of miles. Not easy miles either because his mind has been full of the problems that both offices are facing at the moment.

He is constantly feeling that he is chasing his tail, rushing to and fro never getting a sense that he is in control of what is happening to him. The firm knows he is able and ambitious. He fears that if he does not take this chance for further development then he will not progress in the company. There is already talk of further 'rationalisation' and 'reorganisation'. The pressure is on to develop the business further. If they do not, then the company will be left behind by the competition. But this pressure is taking its toll on the manager. Blackouts are only part of the story; it's the constant lack of sleep that is also worrying him. How can he keep going if he feels so weary all the time? What is the cost in terms of his health, his lack of contact with others outside of the work context, and the shortage of real listeners to unpack his fears and anxieties?

He sits opposite me and starts to break down. We talk of his firm's espoused rhetoric of empowerment.

<u>Story three: Brewing</u>

The office of the education and development manager for a major brewer – 1996.

Laid out on the expansive desk in front of us are a number of policy documents. They all have the corporate logo and an extract from the mission statement that are so familiar to all. The company is experiencing its latest reorganisation; the last was just eighteen months ago. The manager is speaking of the change in company culture that they are experiencing. His boss used to regularly come down to the training centre on a Friday evening towards the end of work and share a drink with him and other members of the staff at the end of a long week. No more. They use e-mail now and anyway the new bar only serves non-alcoholic drinks. Its manager is trying to run the catering facilities in line with the catering college that now provides all the services that were once in-house. The friendly staff that served guests and employees have now been made redundant, replaced by eager but in-experienced students whose loyalties lie elsewhere. Yet he recognises they are cheap.

One of the company documents on the desk is headed Managers

Competency Framework. He has just a few months to set up the framework and start to profile all managers. We look at its contents. At the end of an extensive list is 'to empower others…'

Earlier in this thesis was the poem 'He looked out as I looked in' denoting the 'factory' of my youth, where my father worked, which symbolised all that I wished to avoid. This had connotations of routine, low self-esteem, and a macho environment of limited opportunity. As I worked with the managers in this research, I recognised that I was also hearing 'my own story', encountering themes and bringing to the fore connections of 'moving forward' in career and other areas of my life. I sensed also possible disjunctions that 'blocked' possible action and rooted me in not doing things for myself- a feeling of being disempowered. I began therefore to become aware of a parallel inquiry, my own, being nourished by yet also feeding the inquiry with the managers.

I sought to explore ways in which these fractured thoughts and feelings could be captured. At first, I used a learning journal and wrote freely of experiences that were stimulated by encounters with managers in their organisations. Yet the attempt to write in such a formal structured way seemed to stifle and block what I really wanted to say. I began to tap into

my reactions through poetry and free writing. This proved much more

fruitful and there are examples of these poems through out this thesis

that are intended to illuminate the discussion and provide a backdrop to

the theme/s being explored.

I have sought to interweave personal insights from my own story to

stimulate new awareness for the managers as they seek different

alternative ways of knowing and choices of action within their

organisations, and beyond.

1.2   Managers experiencing initiatives

From my own experience of working as a self-employed consultant from

1992-8, supporting a range of organisations and individuals undergoing

change, across sectors, at both the corporate and personal level, it is

clear that managers have experienced a number of significant

interrelated trends.

Castings, where empowerment came as a Christmas gift in a brown envelope, was established in the Midlands and Wales in 1920. It had been at the centre of major transformations in the engineering industry and particularly the automobile component sector, as first-tier suppliers to Rover, Ford and Jaguar. The impact of Japanese production methods and associated management initiatives in team development, 'effective leadership', and the establishment of the internal customer concept, had a profound influence on firms in the sector. They were at the mercy of pronouncements from their powerful customers who demanded lower prices from their suppliers year-on-year in return for the carrot of 'single-supplier' status as long as they conformed to stringent customer requirements. In this way the 'quality culture' and TQM, Total Quality Management, so beloved of manufacturing flag bearers from the Far East was forced on organisations of all sizes and complexities.

Unfortunately, the same infrastructure that existed in large manufacturing organisations for development and training did not exist in most of their suppliers. In organisations of less than 500 employees training and development was rarely a top priority. Many smaller companies, including Castings, took the lead from their larger customers. A good example is the attempt to establish teamworking by imposing

certain ways of acting that 'worked' in one cultural context but did not

necessarily transfer to another. Consequently, the supplier culture

rejected the new 'donor organ', the customer's practices, in many

instances. The government of the time, the late 1980's, sought to support

such initiatives through the promptings of the Department of Trade and

Industry[DTI]. 'Roadshows', publications and demonstration company

visits were used to disseminate the message – how to face 'the challenges'

over the next decade. Local Training and Enterprise Councils [TECS], and

the DTI itself, gave inducements to firms wishing to initiate such

programmes, through the channelling of funds for training and capital

investment.

Working alongside some of these companies, what struck me was how

managers in particular experienced these initiatives. The written and

spoken rhetoric coming out of promotional publications and the writings of

'learned quality guru's' of the time [Crosby 1984, Deming 1982, Juran

1988, Oakland 1989] exhorted this call to 'do something', to 'act', to be

strive constantly to achieve measurable outcomes. Management literature

developed such ideas into clear 'how to' guidelines [Morris and Brandon

1993, Obeng and Cranier 1994, Carr and Johansson 1995], supported

These writers were supported by the exhortations of large business

consultancies. A spokesperson for Arthur Anderson writing in the Sunday

Times in October 1992 stated:

> 'Companies benefiting most from TQM have given
>
> their workforce the drive and ability to learn **constantly**
>
> what is needed to succeed, and translate that learning into
>
> **action**'.[my underlining]

A case study of the major British computer company, ICL, promoted as

'best practice' in a DTI publication from their 'Managing in to the 90's'

programme, highlights the tenor of the messages being received by

managers at this time:

> *'there are now more than 80 Quality Improvement Teams in ICL*
>
> *worldwide...**action oriented** teams of line managers charged with*
>
> *ensuring that major areas of non-conformance are recognised,*
>
> *traced to their origins and **eliminated permanently**[my emphasis],so*
>
> *resources can be shifted to new products and services.'* [pp.37-44].

'Empowerment means getting it across to individuals that if

something is in the way of meeting customer requirements then,

regardless of rank, they are empowered to shift it or, if it is

beyond their control, to kick and shout until it is shifted. [my

emphasis] p.42.

'It is not easy to win acceptance for these ideas. There has to be

a clear statement of top managers' determination, a demonstration

of it through a massive training programme, and re-orientation of

managers to recognise their role in managing people.

[emphasis added] p.42

It is interesting to note that the introduction to this same document

argues that the 'traditional management style' will not work under

changing conditions. The traditional style is characterised by the

'firefighting manager...the trouble-shooter...who only succeeds if the

employees do as they are told'. p.2.

Encountering, over ten years, a succession of managers who were put in

charge of major change programmes marked my experience in the

manufacturing sector. Careers were enhanced by possession of these very 'action man' qualities. Workforces, through the threat or enactment of job losses, were rendered compliant to their wishes. All of the senior managers that I encountered emphasised the primacy of action, of doing something, to be constantly striving to be different and better. Yet most, in my experience, lacked an understanding of what it may mean to stimulate and facilitate significant cultural and organisational change. They sought to liberally scatter their keynote speeches with terms such as empowerment without understanding that this is not something that can purely be 'managed'.

1.3   What is empowerment?

Lather's [1991] comment on empowerment is a useful starting point in exploring empowerment. She states:

> '...empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done "to" or "for" someone.'
>
> [1991:p.4]

Lather believes it is [to do with] the 'person involved in the dissection of ideas about the causes of powerlessness, identifying systemic repressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the

conditions of their lives'[p.4]. This transcends the rather simplistic and functional view of managers and their activities held, as we have seen, by the DTI and advocated by some other writers [Mintzberg, 1975: p.737, Drucker, 1977: p.p.32-3, Peters, T.,1988: p.39] that tend to view managers purely as 'agents' to get things done through people.

Alvesson and Wilmott[1998: 26] comment how this view reinforces the belief that what managers are doing is 'given or unproblematic': and the division between managers and managed is presented as 'something that is either natural or functionally necessary for achieving the desired results' Empowerment is, according to this view, part of a **'technocratic activity'** a manager **enacts**. It views the recipients of this, the employees, as passive, neutral and compliant in order to achieve the strategic ends of the organisation.

1.4. The Story of this Inquiry: challenging orthodoxy with different perspectives of Empowerment

Where management is a technocratic activity the manager and the employees are part of a 'strategic web', their relationships harnessed by the common corporate 'good' that will bring the organisation success. But

the pattern that I have observed is that of senior managers becoming

more and more isolated. The so-called interlinking internal customer-

supplier relations were no help to the manager from The Agency in the

'lay-by'. His lived experience was, as he described it, 'working and living in

a bubble'. Business pressures on him to 'come up with the goods' required

that he gave the impression that he was coping, succeeding, striving and in

line with the company purpose. To give any sign to his employees that this

was not the case would be detrimental to him and his career. Crucially,

this was never explicitly stated. It was how he perceived the situation and

acted in context.

1.5. What is empowerment rhetoric?

From working with the manager from The Agency, Neville, in a

professional capacity I began to realise that what was spoken and written

about formed the rhetoric of empowerment, the espoused:

'meaning the form that discourse takes when it goes public' [Simons

1989, p.2]

What Neville was experiencing was not liberation and the freedom to

bring about change. He spoke of a dichotomy between a need for 'spaces'

where his anxieties and thoughts could be expressed but at the same

time he was feeling more and more constricted. The working relationships were not of a type that would allow spaces for reflection. The nature of the 'action culture' stopped their creation or evolution. The perceived lack of time prevented reflection and consultation and a sense of experiencing 'now', his reality, without the urge to 'do something'. Yet his body was telling him something very different. Coupled with this was the foresight that he had to establish such spaces for himself, in his case working with me, outside of the work situation. It began to intrigue me that out of this seemingly disempowering work context he created a space for himself through our dialogue.

This thesis argues that the empowerment rhetoric has gone further than to exhort action and restrict spaces for reflection. Encountering managers in their workplaces it is apparent that the very <u>language of empowerment</u> that has sought to:

- encourage them to take more responsibility,

- to embrace risk

- and develop their creativity

..in reality has resulted in opposite outcomes . The manager in the brewery, Steve, did not speak of feeling free to question, to develop ways

collectively or individually so that managers could change their working lives. What was ever present for him was 'rolling-out' [his phrase] a set of pre-determined competence's that restricted the managers ability to be different. What the company was wanting was conformity to certain behaviours and abilities that, I believe was restricting the choice of managers. This theme is explored later in this thesis as 'lean management'. It is the contention of this thesis that as manufacturing industry experienced a wave of innovation towards the nirvana of 'lean manufacture', the workplaces I encountered were experiencing its unforeseen and undesirable consequences.

Up to now this chapter has spoken of the managers acting and reacting within their organisations. Yet I feel we need to move beyond the organisational setting. Listening to the managers as they spoke of their experience of work it became clear that the impact of their working lives stretched beyond the company car park and into their own relationships and social settings.

It is the contention of this thesis that the rhetoric of empowerment is being encountered in such a way that managers are acting in ways that impact on their home relationships and social settings.

Their stories speak of the tensions this caused them and those close to them. For example:

One participant spoke of a colleague who 'walks' his child to school each morning. He recounted how this person, when speaking of his son tells of the stories, the laughs, and the general banter that goes on in the ten minutes between his home and school. He turned to me and said ' he is having the conversations I should be having'. He feels it is imperative to get into work early, to work late to keep on 'top of things and achieve'. The 'culture' of the company is one where it is not seen to be 'a good thing' for managers to leave 'too early'. Therefore, he stays-on missing out on homelife and his children's development. This story only confirms for me the difficulty of viewing what employees' experience, and then 'do', as something that remains within the bounds of the office door or the factory gate.

The question arises of how we can move beyond mere 'representation' of differing disjunctions and choices of action within organisations where empowerment rhetorics dominate. The themes and stories that form this discourse are inconsistent with the representation of managers and

employees engaged in some form of technical activity or in a series of specified functions. The 'social relations through which managerial work is accomplished and upon which it ultimately depends' [Whittington, 1992: p. 696] are the bases for a critical analysis of the rhetoric of empowerment as encountered by employees. Alvesson and Wilmott [1998] contend that although Critical Theory, and Habermas's contributions to it, can provide 'a process of critical self reflection and struggle [and that] people can become freed from diverse forms of domination, its analysis is highly abstract and esoteric'. Nevertheless, Critical Theory is important because it regards empowerment not as something to be 'bestowed' upon employees but more that:

> 'substantial forms of emancipatory change must involve a continuing process of critical self reflection'[163.1998]

This thesis seeks to explore the process of critical self reflection with the co-inquirers involved in the research.

Further, this study has enabled employees to use the collaborative inquiry process to encircle, view and critically reflect in, and on, actions across different terrain's of their lives. It has also opened up possibilities for alternatives to existing 'epistemologies of practice' related to working

with change, through recognition and unravelling of multiple realities and rhetorics [Weil 1998].

It therefore offers challenges to the powerful dominant logic of the positivist strategic change model, outlined earlier in this chapter, in the context of employees' and managers' experiences of complexity and 'mess' in and across complex living systems. Further, it seeks to develop substantive and generative theory relating to employees' experiences as they shape, and become shaped, by the empowerment rhetoric they encounter.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A MULTIPLICITY OF KNOWING

Summary

This chapter is in two parts. The first chronicles the engagement with management

literature through study, teaching and practice. Then transforming my ideas as a trainer and

consultant reacting to the 'new wave' of management literature that underpinned the change

programmes associated with Total Quality Management and Business Process Reengineering.

In the section 2.1.1. 'Literature informing my practice' I have explored the literature in

respect of TQM and empowerment. Then in the section 2.1.5. 'Concepts informing my

consultancy practice' relate this to my data. Such literature formed my dominant ways of

thinking about empowerment and, at the time, its chief tenets really mattered to assisting

clients, eager for 'answers' to seemingly intractable problems of implementing change

programmes - 'getting people on board', or 'overcoming resistance'. These insights into the

literature are particularly important in this relation to the Inquiry. For they are the

backdrop against which the Inquiry began: these are my starting points in terms of

literature that was informing my practice as a consultant as I began this PhD.

The second part of the chapter, starting at section 2.2.1. Attracted by Gestalt: the itch

impacting on my practice, seeks to identify the ideas and concepts from literature that, as

the Inquiry progressed I became more aware of, challenging the dominant ways of thinking

highlighted above. This is especially discussed in terms of how power is exercised. Gestalt,

critical theory, and social constructionist perspectives, challenged and opened up new

avenues for this Inquiry, seemingly making sense of 'the dislocation' as described in this

thesis in the discussion of Castings Company and after. These enabled me to amplify what

was previously unspoken, challenging assumptions underpinning the dominant metaphor of

rational strategic intent, and offering fresh perspectives on the established tenets of what

had gone before. Moreover, this 'dislocation' has opened up possibilities of new ways of

acting with others in organisational settings.

In both of these parts I will be visiting the people at the core of this inquiry - myself, as the

consultant then researcher, and the participants from the three companies, as introduced in

the following data analysis chapters. I will explore notions of empowerment presented by the

literature and relate these to the themes and experiences of my inquiry and its participant's

encounters with empowerment rhetorics.

Part One

2.1.1   What mattered then: Literature Informing Practice

I want to begin by placing in historical context the change literature

associated with change programmes I was involved in, and studied, during the

1980's and 1990's. Organisational Change literature has evolved through a

number of cycles [Perrow 1973, Morgan 1986] and my own experience of

basing practice around it, mirrors this development. Its starting point is

founded on the tenets of Scientific Management. 'Taylorism', named after

its founder Frederick William Taylor, may have been consigned to a

historical compartment in management and organisational literature, yet I

contend that its central belief in precision, and finding the 'one best way of

organising', is prevalent through successive cycles of literature development

in this field, including the TQM literature that informed my practice. Since

teaching and consulting from the early 1980's I recognised that this was

very much the case.

What is scientific management's allure? Well, for managers and consultants it seems to offer a simple solution: an opportunity to train managers, get them to practice in a certain way and hold up models that others can then aspire to. Its central tenet, identified by Hollway [1991] is the 'task idea':

> 'The task of each worker should be determined in advance by management, which specifies not only what must be done but – in the minutest detail – how it should be done'.
>
> [Hollway 1991 p.14]

My own experiences of working with managers from the manufacturing sector shows how deep-rooted these principles were. The rational, step-by-step, precise nature of, for example, manufacturing a sunroof for a motor vehicle, determined how operatives were managed in the sector. Predominantly former engineers, the managers gravitated to those theories and underlying belief systems that mirrored such operations, and a set of organising principles that seemed to offer 'the answer'.

Moreover, the task idea that, Hollway argues, was fundamental to the emergence of management, focused on the individual worker. This focus has links to my inquiry [and is echoed in the empowerment literature] where so

much of the empowerment rhetoric I encountered appealed to the

sensibilities of the <u>individual</u> employee. The focus was on the individual

manager, 'administering' empowerment and doing it <u>to</u> others. Hollway

further contends that this concentration on the individual regulation of work

practice led to the emergence of the dominant terrain of industrial

psychology. The TQM literature that dominated my own practice at the

outset of my PhD research followed closely the concepts of that discipline.

2.1.2.   TQM and Empowerment

Ripley and Ripley [1992] exemplify the role empowerment discourses played

in what they called 'quality empowering management'. They state:

> 'In quality-empowering management, management is woven together
>
> with and welded to total quality management [TQM] and <u>applied</u>
>
> <u>behavioral knowledge</u> [my underlining].... Empowerment is the superglue
>
> by which the elements of customer focus, quality process and
>
> products, continuous improvements, self managing teams, quality
>
> measurement, and utilization of the total workforce abilities are held
>
> together.' [p.20]

Ripley and Ripley are important because they consulted for one of the

highest-profile TQM programmes of the 1980's, that of Motorola. Their

work was regarded as 'best practice' at the time. For example, the DTI 'roadshow' - 'The Enterprise Initiative'- and booklets for the 'Enterprise Initiative: Managing in the 90's', that accompanied presentations in March 1992 across the UK, cited Motorola as 'best practice'. In turn, the company gained prestige in becoming one of the first to win the US Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Programme. The programme can be seen as a distillation of what was thought to be the best of the TQM 'guru's' thinking: Deming 'points' [1986], Crosby's 'steps' [1979] and Juran's 'plan' [1989].

Empowerment, in respect of the TQM literature, has many facets. It can be thought of as a concept, whereby responsibility for decision making is placed further and further within the organisation [Lees and Dale 1990]; it is also a set of organisational behavioural practices, which 'channels' the organisational culture so that the aims and goals of the organisation and those of the employees, are not in conflict [Dean and Evans 1994]. Furthermore, empowerment can be seen as:

1. a 'programme' where a 'framework' is 'provided' …

2. which, in turn 'gives permission' to the 'total workforce' to…

3. 'unleash their potential'. *

[Ripley and Ripley 1992 pp. 22-23]

2.1.3.   Problems with 'Empowerment' discourses.

Ripley and Ripley's three facets of empowerment: *programmed, given*

permission to, unleashing potential, are contentious. Through the granting of

permission to be empowered, a perspective is promoted of the 'transfer of

power' from employer to employees. So, Conger and Kanungo [1988]

identified empowerment as being viewed as a <u>relational</u> construct, with

power being delegated away from one to another. However, I also contend

that they tend to ignore the <u>motivational</u> construct in the shape of the

'frameworks' designed to allow the unleashing of potential - an enabling

function of empowerment. This discourse is at odds with the relational

perspective, for intrinsic power now is being 'unleashed' from the possessor,

* Later, in this section, I will unpack the assumptions that underlie this persuasive notion of

'empowerment' being 'packaged', of 'ownership' and employees 'potential' being used for

specific ends.

the employee rather than being transferred from another. The literature

seems to suggest that all that needs to be in place are the conditions that

enable this to happen. It is as though this is all that is required.

Klagge [1998], in a review of the literature, suggested that there was a

compulsion amongst writers to find agreement on a definition. Common

elements identified were: authority being delegated from those with

positional power; to the lowest possible level within the organisation and

society; to increase accountability; to develop problem-solving abilities; so to

assist people to take charge of their own destinies; which would lead to the

positive impacts of empowerment on the lives of people.

A critique of the notions of empowerment put forward here is provided later

in this chapter. However, it is important to note the need amongst writers to

try and find some common understanding of empowerment, and the careful

selection of particular writers by government advisory bodies and

consultants in order to bring about a consensual perspective. I was party to

this in my consultancy practice, particularly in presenting to employees at

Castings where the 'easily understood' quote was extracted and used to

portray empowerment as though it was non-problematic' and a case of 'just

doing it'. I challenge therefore, whether such a 'common definition' is

possible and whether even given the recognition that the term is

problematic, there is a need to come up with some form of consensus.

Pickard [1993] quoted one of the 'best selling authors' on empowerment, Bill

Byham. [whose *Zapp !* was given to every Rover worker, a key customer of

Castings, to read as part of their training in TQM]. Although Byham

underlined the fact that there was no 'one model of empowerment' he still,

confusingly, admitted that one of the major problems is that companies are

committing themselves to empowerment without knowing what it means.

Given the confusion over it's meaning in the literature this is not surprising.

2.1.4. What of 'leaders'?

If we pursue the conventional view of empowerment discussed above then

critical to empowerment 'provision' is the 'Quality-empowering leader ' who

adopts a style characterized by 'vision', 'sensitivity', and 'involvement'. They

have a strong power motivation because according to McClelland [1976]

'good managers' are those that appreciate and desire 'impact, strength and

influence'. Their attributes are used, though, for the 'common good', in the development of continuous quality improvement, of the type illustrated in the narratives described earlier within Castings. The limits of other employee's power are clearly defined. Self-managing teams can deal with 'much of the "fire-fighting" as the teams are <u>allowed</u> [my underlining] to solve most of the problems that arise. However, those aspects of

.....planning and control, such as deciding strategic priorities, or organisation culture determination, are management's paramount responsibility. [McClelland p.29]

Language, as shaped and promoted by leaders, was fundamental to gaining company support for such programmes and this common organisation language should come about through training and education [Juran 1988, Crosby, 1979]. It is clear though that much of this writing is clearer on the exhortation of empowerment than on the finer points of organisational systems required to 'bring it about'.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter also attempted to direct senior management to the importance of people in organisations. Carrying the 'empowerment torch' she sought to convince those that doubted that managers should be responsible

for energising their workforce, providing rules, a 'framework', for enabling

commitment in the workforce and to maintain their powers of creativity.

When Giants Learn to Dance [Moss Kanter 1989] emphasises the power of

small autonomous teams of employees supported by organisational structures

that encourage enterprise and problem-solving. 'People issues' did not just

happen, according to Moss Kanter, they needed to be managed by a new

breed of leader.

This 'transformation' towards the 'management of human resources [HRM]',

of 'leaders' being proactive in laying the foundations for empowerment, was a

dominant management discourse of the early 1990s in the UK. Moreover, the

related literature is particularly important to the onset of this Inquiry in

1997 when I was still running my own business as a consultant. It informed

my practice in the numerous initiatives that I pursued, helping to shape the

content of presentations and training skills materials for senior and middle

managers.

Storey and Sisson [1990] have asserted that there was a tendency in the

literature that promoted such transformations to imply that goal attainment

was merely a matter of will. They regard this as rather naive for it ignored

the deep-seated structural conditions in UK industry. [This is discussed in an

later chapter where Castings' relationship with a larger multinational

customer led to differing perceptions of the capabilities of small/medium

enterprises [SME's] in the UK.] However, Storey and Sisson felt that

despite their rather 'pessimistic' analysis, research suggested that 'discrete

changes', an 'awakening to new forms of managing', were taking place in

certain companies and management education 'was growing' in Business

Schools. [1990, pp63-64] Also, the E.U. Single Market would force firms to

be more competitive. They concluded with a familiar refrain, heard by at

numerous meetings and DTI 'events', that if companies did not do this then

they would be at a 'marked comparative disadvantage' in their market place.

A 'European dimension', of UK firms competing in new global markets, was

offered by Oakland [1993], recognised as the British 'guru' of quality

[Beckford 1998]. It is his work, more than any other, which initially

influenced my practice with Castings. Central to Oakland's view is the

preeminence he gives to quality as being the **'the way'** of managing for the

future. I contend that it is this dominance of 'quality' as being the strategic

issue that drives so much of the rhetoric explored here. It was the 'din' that served to drown out other perspectives or criticisms of company programmes.

Oakland stresses, as part of his 'seven key characteristics', that quality must be managed not planned and that meeting customer requirements is inherent in every decision made in the organisation. I draw the following conclusions from this: that the assumptions are first, that in order to survive quality is the only issue; secondly, that the processes in place ensure that errors are not made. There is no scope for error or human frailty, relationship difficulties, or day-to-day problems that might inhibit the 'processes'. The belief in managing over planning extended to his key component for successful implementation that, more than any other writer of the time, focused on the role of senior management in giving absolute commitment. His assumption was that not only would they declare through the rhetoric that they were 'committed to quality' but also change their behaviour in order to show others that their commitment was genuine.

2.1.5.   Concepts Informing My Consultancy Practice

Oakland's seemingly holistic approach, his understandable 'TQM model', and 'ten points for senior management', acted as a persuasive tool in informing my practice at all levels in Castings and Brewing. These ideas worked for me. They were systematic; seemingly fitting the needs of clients being pressured by more powerful customers who used the same language I was using; they served to address different audiences at senior management and middle management levels; they were 'upbeat', 'positive' for me, at times, for others. They were also commercially effective for the company: considerable costs being saved and work was captured with like-minded customers. Success in winning business could be included in the rhetoric of why empowerment was so important.

In both Ripleys' and Oakland's work, together with that of Deming [1986] and Juran [1988], a belief was being proffered, I contend, of a world in 'crisis'. A fear of competitive failure was created that solely should be enough to empower workers to change their ways. Through change they

would 'survive'. In the short-term fear of competitive failure seemed to

work. Beckford [1998] comments hauntingly:

> '... how this relies on people running away from something. – a negative
> reaction – rather than running to something – a positive reaction. In
> the first case as soon as the stimulus is relaxed, that is, the current
> danger subsides to a comfortable level, the negative response will
> cease and with it the passion for quality'.
>
> [1998, p.135]

However, this use of the 'outside threat' was a potent one, particularly for a

British SME, like my client Castings, trying to compete in global markets. An

often-used slide in my presentations to groups as a consultant was the

following from Takeo Miura of the Hitachi Corporation:

> 'We are going to win and the Industrial West is going to lose out:
> there's nothing much you can do about it, because the reasons for your
> failure are within yourselves...with your bosses doing the thinking
> while the workers wield the screwdrivers...for you the essence of
> management is getting the ideas out of the heads of bosses and into
> the hands of labour. We are beyond the Taylor model; business we
> know, is so complex and difficult that survival for firms...depends on
> the day to day mobilization of every ounce of intelligence'.
>
> [quoted in Ulrich and Lake 1991, pp.81-2]

Interpreting the literature of TQM as a way of utilising 'empowerment' and

establishing frameworks for empowerment for clients like Castings, became

a central part of my consultancy practice.

By the mid 1990's it could be argued that the quality 'industry' was well

established. By that time the first management book ever to rank at No. 1 on

the American national best-seller list, the best-selling business book of all

time, Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, spawned a raft of

'roadshows' and 'inspirational' quasi-religious gatherings in the UK. The

message was delivered by one of its authors, Tom Peters. The impact of

populist literature and attendant pilgrimages on everyday

consultancy/management practices, mainly funded by the DTI, should not be

underestimated. Many consultants, representatives from the Training

Enterprise Councils [TEC's], as well as Managing Directors of companies,

working within the manufacturing base of the West Midlands at that time,

attended roadshows and brought back ideas that formed the basis of

subsequent practices in companies.

2.1.6.   Other Ideas working for me: utilisation of 'helping' models.

From 1986-1990 I was closely involved in the counselling movement in the

UK, gaining a post-graduate qualification in the field, being active as a

trainer [at three Egan Summer Schools], a college lecturer, and as a personal

therapist. This practice was heavily influenced by the 'interdisciplinary'

approach to helping led by Gerald Egan [1986], whose '*Skilled Helper*' [by

2002, in its 7th edition] provided the framework for 'modelling' change and

integrating theory. Egan founded his work both on the person-centred

approach of Carl Rogers and the integration of concepts from psychoanalytic

and behavioural traditions.

 Its appeal for my practice lay in its practical applicability. The focus was on

problem solving and action, which could be applied to an organisation, public

or private, as much as an individual. The York Summer Schools attracted a

broad range of participants: individuals from diverse employment

backgrounds seeking their own training, BT and British Gas employees

developing systems post privatization, as well as employees from the NHS

and the voluntary sector. The 'Skilled Helper' models 'exploration' of

'developing new understanding' through an 'action' framework and complemented the rational diagnostic determinism of TQM.

For Egan:

> Consultants...take clients as they are and try to use their resources to *empower* their clients..they should take every opportunity to help clients empower themselves to manage their lives more effectively.
> [1986:24]

Moreover, Egan's later work [1988, 1993, 1994] sought to solve problems that were recognised by those who needed to implement organisational change, as well as fit well with existing practices.

In summary, his practical 'instruments' that could be utilised in a variety of organisational settings, yet were rooted in a person-centred value base, fitted my intent of helping clients and secured further income for my business.

Such 'action-oriented' instruments I believe filled a gap between organisations and their employees. Summerfield and Oudtshorn [1995] commented:

'The time has come for a new relationship between organisations and their employees, one that will regain the commitment and enthusiasm so sorely needed following the ravages of recession...many organisations are searching for ways to regain commitment and have turned to new concepts...with many of these management systems, the 'engine' is sound but the 'oil' is missing. We believe that the oil is the creating of new working relationships based on trust, respect and mutual understanding.'

[1995 p.8]

Therefore, I regularly 'serviced' my clients, through the initiatives I led, helping to administer the 'oil', the conventional empowerment discourse, which would bring about commitment. It activated team development programmes, personal development for managers, 'coaching skills' and establishing employee assistance programmes. For, as Summerfield and Oudtshorn contend:

'Many change management programmes in the UK include a move to empowering employees...and our conviction is that successful empowerment is rooted in counselling skills and approaches'.

[1995 p.191]

Working with thoughts and feelings form the bedrock of counselling, for both client and counselor, and my consultancy practice was no different. The

Industrial Society's [now rebranded the Work Federation] survey 'Managing

Best Practice' [1995] spoke of the need to support the transition in thought

and feeling that empowerment 'produces':

> 'Empowerment ...is based on the belief that organisations must harness
>
> the creativity and brainpower of all their employees. The ramifications
>
> of this fundamental shift in thinking are widely underestimated and
>
> not fully understood by many organisations.... as a consequence
>
> empowerment initiatives <u>have stalled</u> or fizzled out – leading to
>
> employees' feeling let down and suspicious. Once this has happened it's
>
> extremely difficult to <u>restart</u> the initiative'. [my underlining]
>
> [quoted by Summerfield and Oudtshorn [1995, p192.]

A widely held belief was that middle managers would 'resist' empowerment;

and according to the Industrial Society survey, they are most likely to be

hostile to it. The assumption was that they would have to 'give up control' to

employees below them. Careful consideration needed to be given to what

surrendered 'control' would be replaced by. Possible carrots, such as 'career

development' initiatives or 'financial rewards', were discussed as possible

substitutes for the loss of 'control'.

Summerfield and Outdshoorn [1995] saw potential problems in marrying

behaviours - congruence [being genuine and honest], effective relationships,

and 'unblocking emotions' - in organisations undergoing change. However, they

argued that integration of counselling skills and approaches provide the key

to success, so producing a 'mutual learning process'. They asserted that:

'In the UK, the time is right for something new to happen between

organisations and their employees. Counselling skills and approaches

can create the new relationships that will be essential to successful

change'

[1995, p.195]

At the point of the commencement of this PhD inquiry in 1997, my practice

was informed by a number of concepts rooted in the TQM change literature,

as well as drawing on concepts and frameworks from my counseling academic

base and practice. I seemed to provide 'the oil' to enable others to develop

different working relationships centred on the goal of empowerment. This

'machine' metaphor, with me attending to the 'stalled organisation and

getting it 'restarted', fitted well will the strategic intent of client companies

as they sought to promote different ways of working in their commercial field.

2.1.7. Rhetorics and Discourse: Inducement and ideologies of the real.

The 'machine' imagery of the companies I was encountering fuelled a rhetoric that had much to do with knowing what was 'best' for employees. Segal [1995] calls this the 'editorial line on the human condition'. In a criticism of the misuse of 'popular psychology' in social settings he comments on the type of psychology that makes its way into social and corporate structures which reflects the way certain interested parties would like things to be. Rowe [1994] suggests that 'personal rhetoric is concerned with getting people around us to do things that we want them to do' [p.191]. It is often linked to personal display, Elshtain [1984], quoted by Simons [1989], states that:

> 'rhetoric is the form that discourse takes when it goes public...when geared to an audience, readied for an occasion, adapted to its ends...relying on more than fact or logic or beauty or feeling to accomplish its ends.'
> [1989, p.2]

This meaning of rhetoric strikes a helpful chord in relation to the aims of this Inquiry. For it brings to the fore the importance of display and appeal to 'reason' that was so much in evidence at the six weekly meetings of Castings, and in the literature produced by the Agency. Here are some examples from both Castings and The Agency:

> '.....the world around us is changing and unless we keep ahead with these changes we will fall behind those countries and companies that recognise that to stand still is to die away.'
>
> [Castings Company notice developed from improvement meeting]

> '.... More accounts are won or lost on the strength of relationships than on any other issue. So we've invested a lot of thought into getting our relationships right. We give you direct access to a **small team of people** who **take the time** to build an understanding of your company, your industry and specific issues you face.'
>
> [Agency literature distributed to all new employees and clients]

Booth [1974], speaks of rhetoric as the 'art of discovering good reasons, finding what really warrants assent, because any reasonable person ought to be persuaded'. This is a different conception of rhetoric, the emphasis on the desirability of being reasonable, and closer to the way in which

'transformations' associated with TQM were displayed and communicated to employees. I contend that three different 'ideologies of the real' [Simons 1986] were put forward in the rhetoric associated with TQM as studied and practiced. The first ideology identifies the real with the true, and reason and investigation will uncover this truth. Therefore, the emphasis on diagnostics and measurement abound in the company literature and pronouncements that I encountered, as well as being matched by 'tell-us-where-we start from' platitudes from the 'positioning school' [Mintzberg 1998] of traditional strategic management literature.

Secondly, a different ideology identifies the real with the natural, as realized in expressions of real feeling. Particularly in Castings and the Agency, empowerment rhetorics were used to appeal to certain emotive elements of work – comradeship, doing 'our'/'your' best, being proud of company/plant/office/team/self, wanting to win or survive.

Thirdly, the rhetoric of empowerment, as defined by Simons, identifying the 'real' with the powerful, was very useful for this Inquiry. Managers used this interpretation to further their own ends. Examples being the tangible rewards of inducements – the Castings' brown paper envelopes at Xmas – or

the captured order from a competitor, the 'preferred supplier' status to the

major car companies – coupled with the ultimate real punishments of

individuals or whole plants that 'could not cut it', the threat of the 'lost

order' or 'inefficiencies' leading to redundancy.

I contend that all three ideologies were employed at the companies that

participated in this PhD inquiry. As Simons [1989] argues:

> The rhetorical tradition serves as an inventional resource, a
> storehouse of codified ways of seeing, thinking and
> communicating that may be tested for their goodness of fit to
> the matter in hand, and which once applied to particular cases
> provide exemplars for subsequent analyses.
> [1989. p.5]

So, as my success with company initiatives accumulated so did my

'storehouse' of 'best-practice' examples that I could rhetorically rollout to

fresh assignments. However, doubts emerged the source of which it was

difficult to determine. I sensed though that this feeling I had, a

'restlessness' with my practice, had its roots in my emerging interest in

Gestalt in the mid-90's.

Part 2:

2.2.1.   Attracted by Gestalt: the 'itch' impacting on my practice

I became involved with the Gestalt Centre in London from the mid 1990s,

attending courses and developing relationships with its facilitators and

management. Gestalt, a German word, does not have a corresponding English

equivalent. Gaie Houston [2002] describes it as:

> 'meaning things like organising, making a pattern of... its field arranged
>
> so that there is Foreground and Background – a field of data arranged
>
> with value, in other words'.

At all times we are forming these 'arrangements', which can be termed as a

gestalt. This is based on the belief that at all times humans have a

continuining need to complete experiences in order to bring meaning to our

existence. The internal struggle to meet our needs, in the midst of the

relationships we have with our environment, produces adaptations that stifle

healthy functioning. For example, the following chapters highlighted the

personal needs of Agency managers, such as Paula or Alison, being 'out of

balance' with the needs of the organisation [see Chapter 7, section 7.1 and

7.2]. Awareness, choice and action are therefore critical Gestalt principles. These can be used to identify patterns that impact on 'healthy and unhealthy' functioning in organisations. By raising awareness of how these patterns are experienced then, it is contended, change will take place by itself.

A movement, which is philosophical, psychological and therapeutic, has grown out of this understanding, and this is what I refer to as Gestalt. It was developed primarily by Drs Fritz Perls and Laura Perls as a type of therapy with existential-phenomenological philosophical roots coupled with Kurt Lewin's field theory.

Parlett and Page [1990] have commented on the new emphasis 'on the importance of adequate training, and a scepticism towards those who claim to have grasped Gestalt ideas in the course of a few weekend workshops' [p.176]. I cannot claim to be a Gestalt practitioner, my involvement with the Centre, and subsequent engagement with its literature, served to provoke an 'itch'. What I mean by this is that, as I became more knowledgeable and worked experientially with practitioners, I began to feel uncomfortable with

my consultancy practice, as it existed at that point. Something about Gestalt

produced this effect. Houston [1982. p.4] remarks that she hopes her text

'..helps you to rediscover or discover and make more vivid, your own

meaning, as a function of you and your setting at any moment'.

It was this heightened sense of awareness, that made visible for me the

organisational fixation of my clients: the preeminence amongst managers for

'action', as described earlier in Castings, in planning the future through

analysing data of the past. A process that, as we have seen in the literature,

was a rational march towards continuous improvement, by empowering

everyone in furtherance of the cause. This was in stark contrast to what I

was experiencing in my consultancy practice: the 'here and now' immediacy of

Gestalt.

Moreover, Gestalt in practice encouraged dialogues to increase awareness

and to uncover the avoidance traits that shape what can be said or

experienced within the organisation [Merry and Brown [1990]. Gestalt

provided the stimulus to carry out for this PhD inquiry, centred on the

formation and encountering of empowerment rhetoric.

2.2.2. Gestalt Literature: new avenues for this PhD Inquiry.

The attraction of engaging with Gestalt literature together with the experiential immediacy of working with its concepts in workshops with other participants opened up new possibilities for this inquiry. Two fundamental questions arose: What was I doing? How was I going about it? Two insights emerged as a result of posing these questions:

First, 'the space between', an organisation which works with Gestalt in organisational settings, seems to go to the heart of these questions:

> 'A major risk is a consultant becoming the heart and soul, or the leaders conscience, rather than helping people find these things themselves. The consultant can then become the barrier to success, by holding the "emotional" or "caring" polarity in the system and prompting others to hold the "rational" or "bottom line" polarity'
>
> [www.thespacebetween.com]

The risk in the consultant role challenged me to explore the degree to which I had become the 'conscience' of my clients. I recognised that I was carrying the 'emotional polarity' in the system for a considerable length of time with

Castings and Brewing. However, rather than 'prompting others' to hold the 'rational' I feel that I was doing that as well by providing others with 'frameworks' for the successful 'implementation' of empowerment' that would benefit the single, commercial, 'bottom-line'.

Secondly, Gestalt opened up new possibilities for creativity in my practice, and critically, 'ways in' to viewing that practice now, and for the future.[*]

Zinker [1977] explains that:

> 'Gestalt therapy is really permission to be creative...our basic methodological tool is the experiment, a behaviourist approach to moving into novel functioning...its permission to be exuberant, to have gladness, to play with the nicest possibilities for ourselves within our short lives...to stand for all that is front of me, of all that promises completeness of experiencing...the awesome, frightening, tearful, unfamiliar, archetypal, growthful...the embrace of life – the savouring of all its subtle tastes.'
>
> [1978. p.19]

Houston [1999] highlighted for me the move away from the 'strategic straitjacket' that engaging with Gestalt promoted, thinking that had dominated my practice early in my consultancy career. She remarks that

'I'm much more interested in establishing what works, what is effective, than in establishing what ruddy provenance an idea or method has. It's strange, but in a way, Gestalt is in a position to assimilate the findings, the discoveries and successes of other therapies. The license to experiment is the license to use all those things.'

Where the TQM literature had centred on conformity in practices, the incorporation of Gestalt offered so much more. For it recognised the human experience that traditional management literature denied, in respect of the 'embrace of life' as encountered by consultants, senior managers, middle managers, employees, families and friends.

There are numerous examples of where the Gestalt focus on the embrace of life is represented in the narratives of the managers I worked with. From the views of Sarah, the Agency manager, towards her pregnancy, and attitudes of partners and relatives of Alison and Paula [fellow Agency managers], to religious faith impacting on attitudes to the pressures of work and the sense of community at the Castings Welsh plant, being shaped by the

---

* Examples of this shift towards greater creativity in my work can be seen in the use of metaphor and different forms of writing to enhance critical reflexivity that follow this chapter. Further evidence follows in later sections.

wider strength of community in its locality. Moreover, the embrace of life is

also represented in my reflections on my own inquiry that began at the

beginning of this PhD back in my hometown, through experience as a

consultant and then as a university lecturer and part-time PhD student. It is

Gestalt's sense of wholeness that is so evident here. Senge (1990) states

that:

> Tapping the potential of people... will require new understanding of the
> "subconscious mind", "willpower" and "action of the heart" ... a sincere
> desire to serve the world.
>
> [1990. p.140]

Gestalt is not solely focused on cognition, but also takes account of the

emotional, physical and spiritual levels of people's lives that are highlighted

in the client's stories, as detailed in later chapters.

Moreover, what I had 'become' was highlighted for me by one of Zinker's

'fifteen blocks to creativity' – that I had acceded to the tendency in the

consultant to 'tune in' to the client's practical, situational sphere rather than

on fantasy or dreams: 'He may neglect the latter in favour of "goal setting

and "making contracts" [1970. p.64]. Thus, such insights from the Gestalt literature powerfully shaped the nature of this inquiry.

2.2.3.   Limitations of Gestalt?

From the outset of this study I recognised the value of the experience of engaging with Gestalt, both in terms of literature and experientially. It threw new light on my practice and the understandings I was bringing to it. The 'itch', although an irritant, was generative. Some doubts remained though in respect of contact with my clients. Is 'freedom' at work and the opportunity for 'self-development' a universal desire?

Melnick [2000], in attempting to ascertain the applicability of Gestalt therapy to organisational intervention, paints a rather rosy picture of today's corporations and describes them as 'less hierarchical, participative, humanistic and interactive' [p.171]. This view did not always conform to my experience. Some of the managers that have vividly extolled the nature of their encounters with the rhetorics of empowerment have concluded that it is desirable. Adopting the empowerment discourse then it enables them to

become 'involved' to develop themselves and others, to take their office 'forward', to 'compete', to retain their job. However, this inquiry has also identified that by no means all share this sense-making around concepts such as 'participation' and 'interaction'.

Could not the use of Gestalt in organisations be seen as just another part of my 'toolkit' to be used alongside all of the other 'fixes' that oiled the machine alluded to earlier? That could be seen as ironic from a Gestalt perspective – with its emphasis on awareness- that I was becoming wedded to the very impersonal directive programmes of continuous improvement. Was this very instrumental form of consultancy relationship that clients were wanting in manufacturing and retail possibly causing me to leave behind my senses and only dwell in my head?

Just how 'empowering' was my involvement with such Gestalt literature? To what extent was it liberation from a 'repressive' consultancy style that served the senior management of my clients in 'getting more' from their workforce? How could it serve the individual managers acutely aware of the disjunctions in the 'official rhetorics', experiencing, as I observed at first

hand, the 'backwash' from such disjunctions in terms of mental and physical

health?

Collins[1994] states that:

> 'The function of "participation" as far as management is concerned, is
>
> to ensure a level of output at the requisite level of quality. This is
>
> perfectly understandable but it circumscribes what is to be achieved
>
> through participation. From this perspective the function of
>
> "participation" seems to be legitimation of a managerially controlled
>
> agenda, not the representation of worker interest within a fuller
>
> debate'.
>
> [2000. p.17]

My own contact with employees in Castings and Brewing, the first cycle of

my inquiry, had encouraged, and provided frameworks for "participation" but,

following Collins, this was within a controlled agenda of empowerment

rhetorics. At that point, I could not see how applying Gestalt to

organisations could challenge the power of such rhetoric. This dilemma is

present in the Gestalt literature by the exchange between Bentley [2000]

and Jackson and Bradshaw [2000]. Bentley describes the application of

Gestalt concepts such as 'heightening awareness' and 'boundaries' to the

context of a company boardroom. This, he contends, is a fertile arena for developing better relationships amongst members who undervalue such contact and he illustrates the positive outcomes that resulted from his intervention. Jackson and Bradshaw, however, are critical of this approach because they feel that not all company boards would give over the time to take part in the participative processes Bentley suggests. They also contend that control over strategic intent is still important in shaping a boards work. My own experience, however, with the boards of Castings and Brewing, [see the narratives of Steve and Patrick later] led me to be circumspect of Jackson and Bradshaw's view that boards of companies are less hierarchical.

In summary, therefore, the 'itch' was generative in terms of increasing my awareness of my own practice and how Gestalt, its literature and practice, offered an alternative, more holistic view of working with others. Moreover it offered a critique to the action orientation of my work with Brewing and Castings that was infused with a deterministic action agenda. Yet, concerns remained for me in terms of the literature's applicability to my client base. I was concerned that my interventions were still being enacted, as I viewed it, within the context of a controlled managerial agenda of empowerment.

2.2.4.   Beyond Power as Commodity: Empowerment as Commodification.

Dorothy Rowe [1991] has referred to a particular form of deception common amongst intellectuals, in that theories are separated from the place they were created and the people who created them. I have been conscious of the role of place: the time when I was encountering particular literature and how I found it strategically useful, initially, in persuading and cajoling clients. Involvement with a more critical management tradition led to revision of practice and to what this study terms the 'dislocation' - a shift in my orientation away from consultancy, back into University and the completion of this PhD.

This study sets out with the intent of locating 'empowerment' within those places and argues that the term has been colonized and commodified, resulting in the rhetorics that are explored in the later empirical chapters that discuss the three companies at the heart of this inquiry - Castings, Brewing and the Agency.

My intent is not to replace one Grand Theory with another for I believe

that, however seductive this is, it would not take into account what Lather

[1991] terms the 'explosion that has transformed the landscape of what we

do in the name of social inquiry'. Instead, my intention is to <u>represent</u>

'empowerment' as a 'site of disarray and conflict inscribed by multiple

contestatory discourses' [Lather: 5].

The way in which the term empowerment has been used, in the three

organisational contexts of this inquiry, had been mostly reductionist. It

bounded self-assertion and involvement within tight strategic confines of

intent. This was to be expected given the earlier discussion of TQM

literature. Such a 'limited' view of empowerment is far removed, I contend,

from the perspective of Lather who rejects the meaning of empowerment as

the 'current fashion of individual assertion, upward mobility and the

psychological experience of feeling powerful'. Her critique is so accurate in

relation to the management literature epitomised by Bill Byham's *Zapp!*

[1991] which, by means of a persuasive narrative, explores the ways in which

strong feelings of authority and ownership motivate employees to take

initiatives, risks and responsibilities. Byham, I would contend, is just one

example of the rash of 'management guru's' trading on individualism and the

promise of making others feel powerful.

Knights and Wilmott [1999], scathingly interpret the rash of 'guru guides'

being 'paraded in airport lounges', then 'laid to rest on the shelves of

company executives', as symptomatic of a need for 'guidance and reassurance

about how to make sense of and cope with', uncertainty and complexity. For

such executives, 'a remedy, [the guru's remedy], is at hand.' [p.13] The

meaning and practice of empowerment in these guides is presented as

unproblematic, not for debate and bereft of any contradiction.

Empowerment is something that is done *to* or *for* someone [Lather 1991];

empowerment seen as a commodity that is exchanged, supplied by one to

another, but there are strict rules on that exchange. Empowerment is

viewed in this sense as 'guided discovery' in that the manager assists their

employees in retaining ownership of a problem or idea whilst they work out a

solution together.

It is my contention however that this view of power, as a commodity being

given to another within guidelines, is far too limiting to make sense of the

empowerment rhetorics encountered in this inquiry. Different views on

power need to be explored to increase sensemaking.

2.2.5   Grasping Power: Multidimensions, puzzles and links to empowerment.

The literature discussed here focuses on the different ways in which power

works and their implications for empowerment. This is potentially a vast

area. This review, therefore, does not intend to broaden its sweep to include

the ontological and epistemological debates between the supporters of

varying approaches to making sense of 'power' per se. Rather it attempts to

evaluate the links between approaches to power, as represented in the

literature, and the concept of empowerment.

The 'guided discovery of empowerment' conforms to a view of power

described by, what Hardy et al [1998] call, 'mainstream management

literature'. This literature centres on a group of writers [Pettigrew 1973,

Salancik and Pfeffer 1974, Hickson et al., 1986,] who see power as being

exercised openly, in order to get others to do things that you want them to

do but which they may be opposed to. It is a functional, behavioural view of

power operated through formal decision-making arenas, 'a deliberate strategy to bring about intended outcomes' [Hardy 1998, p.457].

This can be contrasted with a different view of power: that it is not exercised to overcome opposition but to prevent it arising in the first place [Ranson et al., 1980, Hardy, 1985]. Hardy quotes Lukes [1974, p.24]:

> 'power is often used to shape people's perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, <u>either they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or they view it as natural and unchangeable</u>, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial'. [my underlining]

Within the 'naturalness' of the continuous improvement rhetoric that is described later in this inquiry, particularly in Castings, Lukes' view of power is apt. The way the rhetoric was shaped by the MD, who in turn had been at the receiving end of powerful customer rhetorics, promoted the view that this environment was both unchangeable and, with its associated working practices, very 'natural'. Yet, as Knights and Wilmott point out [1999], Lukes' analysis 'focuses on the powerful as if they are not themselves subject to its exercise'. [p.97] Therefore, the MD of Castings was shaping, <u>but was also</u>

68

being shaped by, the meanings attributed to such Continuous Improvement [CI] rhetorics. Moreover, the possession of such power is precarious. My Agency client, sitting in the lay-by near Nottingham, 'had power' in his role as senior manager, but he did not view this as necessarily bringing happiness and fulfillment to him.

Lukes' third dimension view of power is not bounded by the need to observe its target, be it resistance or opposition, as in the more mainstream behavioural stream of literature above. It is concerned with why opposition does not surface in the first place, how resistance gets 'muted', how power operates to prevent opposition even being realized. Such questions are at the heart of a body of management literature associated with critical theorists [Alvesson and Wilmott 1992, 1998; Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Knights and Wilmott 1999,]. Critical theorists are, according to Hardy and Shea-O'Sullivan:

> ..interested in exposing how power, concealed in the legitimate status-quo trappings of society's structures, rules, class mechanisms, and cultures, prevents conflict from arising.
>
> [1998. p.458]

Running through Lukes' analysis of power there is still a discernible sense that power is a property that some 'own' and others do not. That 'real interests' exist before 'exercising' power. Also that those who possess 'it' are benefiting from its possession. The stories of this inquiry indicate that a manager may be powerful but by no means does this offer a firm basis for happiness and fulfillment. Foucault offers an analysis that transcends the objectification of power. He sees 'interests' as not something 'real', or objective, outside of power relations that are then put into play in various organisational arenas' where some possess power and others do not. More that 'interests' come out of exercising power; they are a part of such relations as they are being performed and, as such, are the condition and a consequence of social inequalities.

A Foucaldian analysis departs from Lukes's position on power by contesting that interests emerge out of the <u>relations of power</u>, they are contestable and not a given [Knights and Wilmott 2000]. The way in which the MD of Castings urges his managers, through the rhetoric he employs, so that their focus should be purely towards enabling the continuous improvement initiatives that he has advocated so forcefully is a good practical example.

His view became the privileged one within Castings. Others were quick to see

the power that could be derived from adopting that rhetoric in other circles,

whether in discussions with suppliers or in senior management meetings. His

managers certainly respected him and, according to Lukes's analysis, power

thus became institutionalized. This is a helpful contribution to an

understanding of power. To take the next step in the discussion though, as

Lukes does, to suggest that this gathering of the powerful is against the

'real interests' of other employees, the less powerful, who are prevented now

from acting suggests that these interests are already preformed, thwarted

and silenced by the actions of the powerful. This assumption can be

contested. It suggests that power relations are separate from the

formation of interests in a Foucaldian sense. In Castings case the interests

of some managers were formed and came out of the <u>exercise</u> of power

relations. Power, therefore, can be utilised by particular people in different

situations, which may then produce different reactions, conformities and

resistances.

Knights and Wilmott [2000] contend that 'techniques' are adopted to ensure

that managers keep control in order to deliver profits. In my own inquiry it

could be argued that the empowerment rhetorics so encountered in the three companies were in place to control the employees, sustain a CI environment in the case of Castings or promote the 'TQM' culture in Brewing and the Agency, and in so doing secure greater profits for the companies and their shareholders. This was done through 'exploiting economic and psychological insecurities' in the name of empowerment. Through groups of managers being told at the Castings' six-weekly meetings of the threat of 'losing orders', or in the Agency through the prevailing 'development discourse' that produce a more 'robust' manager, like Paula, ready to face the internal and external pressures of Agency life.

However, in Knights and Wilmott's analysis power is still being represented as something someone possesses to exert or silence alternatives. Foucault rejects the idea of 'sovereign power': in respect of this PhD inquiry, managers or consultants as isolated agents possessing and mobilizing a battery of power sources [like my 'toolkit'] that can be used to produce particular outcomes.

Foucault sees power as a network of relations and discourses that capture advantaged and disadvantaged in its web [Deetz 1992]. This is not to deny intent towards specific outcomes where resources may be assembled to exercise power. The point is that utilizing these resources does not necessarily make things happen in a predictable way.

The commonly held view in mainstream literature of empowerment as a package, a commodity, to be exchanged between managers and subordinates is denied in Foucault's rejection of 'sovereign power'. He dismisses a view of power as established, held by autonomous agents, who then distribute it according to need. What makes greater sense is 'disciplinary power' – each perception, judgment and act creating a 'web' of power relations.

Foucault, argues Kearins [1996], is much more concerned with how power is exercised and to what general effect. She contends that 'there may be intentionality, but it does not follow.... that the broader consequences of actions are necessarily as intended'. This complexity and messiness of competing discourses and power relations was captured by Alison of the Agency [in Chapter 7, section 7.1], engaging with the varying discourses of being a manager 'managing', of an employee 'coping', a daughter in law/wife

'balancing'. These, I contend, infused her thinking and acting, both in terms of her attempts to make sense of her work, as well as acting with/against others, at her Manchester office of the Agency.

Townley [1998] contends that power, according to Foucauldian analysis, does not have a centre, an origin. By accepting this we move away from searching for explanations of the 'intentions of an organisational group or an identifiably coherent strategy on the part of a dominant class'. Power, therefore, needs to be explored in terms of concepts such as 'discourse, disciplines, governance, political rationalities and technologies'.

2.2.6.   Illuminating empowerment? Casting the disciplined shadow.

The following seeks to take the above Foucaldian concepts and demonstrate their aptness in making sense of - to illuminate - empowerment, as encountered in this PhD inquiry where empowerment discourses have been made part of the 'HRM medium'. Townley [1998] presents the employment relationship as a space 'between promise and delivery' [p.194], so HRM denotes one 'medium' by which this space is organized or disciplined.

Empowerment, for Townley, is a 'mechanism' for the construction of social order, the necessary prerequisite to coordinate the 'rational' and 'efficient' deployment of a population'. So, in the companies at the core of this PhD inquiry, I suggest that TQM [with empowerment as its 'drone', its driving mechanism], acted as a grid, a means to configure knowledge, which is then placed over a domain. Similarly, Scarborough [1998] describes the way in which the concept of 'management-for-itself', management as a 'touchstone of social practice', casts its shadow over society. So giving rise to terms such as 'managing' relationships, children, your garden, your social life, your health. The discourse of HRM casts it shadow over the organisation and management of the employment relationship: this is the context for empowerment [Foley, Maxwell and McGillivray 1999]. HRM practices, such as empowerment, <u>discipline</u> the core of the organisation, 'organising time, space and movement within it' [Townley 1998. p.195].

This analysis of power in terms of 'depth' attracted me as I engaged in my inquiry. It made sense in two ways. First, by shedding light on the complexity of what I was experiencing with the stories of Agency managers. Secondly, I was also able to reflect back on the Castings TQM programmes that I was an

integral part of and recognise the nature of the 'disciplinary power' that was

so pertinent to them. The discourses surrounding empowerment, both

'deadline' and 'developmental', were there to serve the need for

measurement of performance, for continuously improving against recognised

benchmarked targets, often imposed from customers. By rendering

empowerment as something to be managed guided and promoted, but within

the TQM nexus, a particular meaning was being formed, and knowledge being

constructed. As Townley [1998] argues helpfully, given the nature of this

inquiry, such constructions are:

> 'Disciplinary technologies, ordering a population and its activities,
> rendering them known in a particular way, thereby opening them to
> intervention and management....[by] incorporating subjective
> dimensions of empowerment [an] attempt is made to redefine the
> individual's understanding of their own subjectivity in production'.
> [1998, p.198]

What has been uncovered through this PhD research has been knowledge of

what is to be governed and, in particular, how this relates to the individual.

Empowerment can be seen, in its traditional sense, as total, encompassing all

in an organisation striving to 'deliver quality', but equally can be rendered as

an individual action, a striving to develop self to the full. They, the

organisational striving together with the individual aspirant, can be viewed *in relation*, one benefiting the other. Alternatively, there may be an inherent contradiction in that through empowerment the individual may secure a sense of identity, thus presenting a challenge to the organisational striving towards 'quality', as one body of employees. In Brewing Chris spoke of how engaging in dialogues around his redundancy had restored his values of how others should be treated – how it seemed to put an end to the compromises he was experiencing. However, ultimately it seemed as though he had seen through the 'HRM intent' of the company: of espousing values of fairness and support, while treating its own HR staff, he believed, with disdain.

Lee [1999] suggests that this dichotomy between the individual and the collective is more than taking 'objectified opposing sides' of organisation/individual; man/woman; order/disorder. She suggests that in the case of empowerment these 'oppositions' are more a 'dialectic within a single "body" ', and this switch is self-determined according to how the individual perceives the situation [p.252]. However, In contrast to Lee I maintain that these constructions, constantly switch in some cases, more than I feel she gives credit for. Chris, one of the managers from Brewing,

was very much a party to the collective view of the culture but switched later after experiencing the way in which the company handled redundancy contrary to their rhetoric. Lee offers a helpful analysis in respect of this inquiry where she cites Hopfl [1995] in distinguishing between the 'rhetoric' that is 'goal-oriented', utilizing the skills of manipulation, and the 'poetic', the individualistic expression of lived experience. According to Lee:

'The empowered manager would be someone who embraced the role willingly [of balancing the tensions between the poetic and the rhetoric]. It sounds good but it is said tongue-in-cheek. Such "empowerment" necessitates a coming together of the rhetorical and the poetic – a subsuming of the poetic within the rhetoric – a loss of self concurrent within the acceptance of a unitary identity'.
[1999, p.252]

I witnessed the struggle on the managers' part to come to terms between what was being asked of them corporately, and their own 'local centred, individualistic perception of the situation'. Lee believes that 'naturally' the poetic is associated with impotence. I am not so sure. Granted, the employees in this study were recognizing that ability to act was dominated by the rhetoric of the strategy – this constriction can be seen as a strategic

<u>straitjacket</u>. However, often out of disempowerment came considerable empowerment, to change the situation [e.g. Alison, section 7.1.]; to seek help [Neville, section 6.2.]; ratifying existing values of ways of dealing with others and considering self [Chris, Steve, section 5.2., Sarah section, 7.5], for their own benefit and others.

2.2.7.   Actor or Subject? : Revisiting Castings.

Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan [1998] contend, that Foucault's work makes us aware of how the subject is socially produced by the system of power which surrounds it:

> 'The individual is not a distinct, autonomous actor, a fixed, objective entity or a stable constellation of essential characteristics. Instead, the individual is a socially constituted, socially recognized, category of analysis that has multiple fragmented identities, identities that are salient only insofar as they are socially recognized'.
>
> [1998,p.461]

Therefore, the subject is not a "given" but produced historically, that is, constituted through correlative elements of power and knowledge (Townley,

1993). This corresponds with Knights and Wilmott's view of how

empowerment is conceptualized. They quote Hammer and Champy [1993]:

> '....it is no longer enough to look at prospective employees education,
> training and skills: their character becomes an issue as well. Are they
> self-starting..have self-discipline..motivated to please the customer?'
>
> [1993,p.71]

I contend that here the employee is being depicted as succumbing to the

rationalising logic of the change process, dedicating him or herself totally to

a programme whose goals have been established by others. Personal values

become subsumed to the 'perfection of means': character overwhelmed by

THE mission.

The MD of Castings, Patrick, offered a pertinent example of this

conceptualization of empowerment. This centred on his assumptions that as

long as he was a 'good' leader - visionary, a compelling communicator - others

in different parts of the organisation would act. However, he was continually

mystified why someone working on a machine all-day, and everyday, only saw

that as instrumental, to earn money to engage in other, what were

considered, more important pursuits in his/her life. Still, according to

Patrick, they were like this despite his rhetoric promising involvement and participation whilst threatening redundancy if they 'could not compete'.

Challenging the status of the subject necessarily challenges the status of the researcher. What is the relation of the researcher, to the research process, and "knowledge" produced? According to this analysis, objectivity is a misnomer [Denzin & Lincoln, 1994]. The researcher is positioned historically within specific intellectual frameworks and can only produce knowledge already rooted in the power of those frameworks. So, according to Foucault, knowledge does not remove the effects of power to uncover the "truth"; all that knowledge succeeds in doing is to represent new and different forms of power.

A further important perspective illustrated by more critical literature concerns resistance. Power, through producing identity, changes individuals 'into subjects who secure their sense of what it is to be worthy and competent human beings' (Knights & Morgan, 1991). They derive their meaning through this. If they choose to resist then this may come at a cost. For it questions their very sense of who they are. Alvesson & Willmott argue

that a 'critical questioning of one's beliefs may estrange the individual from the tradition that has formed his or her subjectivity' (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Further, established discourses are experienced as truth, so different discourses are hard to imagine, let alone act out. Resistance, according to this view, is more within the confines of the existing discourse, and takes the form of modification or amendment: for example, changes **within** the CI environment or a different way, at the outset of this inquiry, of **presenting** my beliefs on empowerment in the role of consultant.

Thus far the discussion of the literature has centred on empowerment being centred on the individual and challenged by a consideration of writing on power. If we accept that the pre-eminence of the individual actor in the empowerment 'process' is rejected, in what other ways can this process be examined? I contend that a consideration of a relational/social constructionist perspective is relevant.

2.2.8. Empowerment and the 'subject/object' depiction of relationship.

Patti Lather was quoted in the above analysis as depicting modern conceptions of empowerment as a process *done to others,* rather than a process one undertakes for oneself. The image that comes to mind is that of the empowerment training programmes or accompanying literature that *does empowerment* [Smith 2000]. An extreme example of the latter is the 'recipe approach' adopted by Robinson [1997] which he argues will bring about empowered teams to provide organisations with a capacity to 'leverage people as a competitive advantage'. Empowerment is reduced to a series of 'recipes' ['tools and 'interest topics'], which can then be customized as a 'menu' for particular work situations! Although the idea seems preposterous it is not so far removed from conventional thinking of organisational intervention, with its 'tools and 'techniques'.

In this rendition of empowerment the person having attended the course /programme, or followed the manual, is 'the knower'. To suggest that the person "knows" places the other as someone [object] who doesn't know. The assumption being that the relationship is bounded, distinct between the two

individuals. Earlier in this chapter, the nature of empowerment was described as a 'commodity' to be exchanged. One party is 'knowing' and active [the subject], the other is passive, with nothing positive to do. A social constructionist view by contrast is that these 'realities' are not talked about but created as individuals and groups relate.

The importance of relational processes is very much a feature of Foucault's work because of the centrality of discourse and inherent relational quality of language. However, Gergen [1995] has questioned the ability of Foucault's work to provide a full perspective; he contends that a singular discursive regime is not present in society but rather that 'language is in a continuous state of multiple transformations', that discursive regimes are 'multiple, fragmentary and partial', and that power relations are thus ever changing.

I contend that these relational processes have real implications for this inquiry in respect of rejecting the view of the passive 'object'. The linguistic construction of meaning, as for example in what is meant by empowerment, is based upon 'act-supplement' relations. Gergen [1995] contends that:

'Lone utterances begin to acquire communicative potential when another[or others] coordinate themselves to the utterance, that is when they add some form of supplementary action'.

[1995, p. 37.]

This has two consequences. The first is that meaning is granted a particular potential: it means *that*. Secondly, it negates alternative possibilities of meaning. Such terms come to form, when repeated on a regular basis, a local ontology, a form of localized reality, 'what the world is made of'.

This could be observed on a regular basis with terms like 'involvement and 'participation' that were commonly used in Castings, for example. They became associated with particular *practices* of teams and plants – presentations, review activities, team development programmes. Yet "involvement" in this sense concerned the shop-floor workers, predominantly male, as opposed to the administrative staff, consisting of practically all the females in a plant.

Such established meaning of activities also opens up the possibility for alternative meanings to emerge. For something to be the situation then the opposite situation must be an alternative. To say that someone is

'empowered' only has meaning if other outcomes are 'disempowering'. This

then raises the possibility for questions, for as Gergen writes, 'any

proclamation stands subject to question'. Thus, why are conditions like

'empowerment', as denoted by the traditional management so explored,

thought of as 'right' or 'best', and other ways of relating in the workplace,

'wrong' or 'inefficient'? This implies that participants in a relationship exist in

a state of continuous threat. 'Gathering around' a particular meaning is a

breeding ground for doubt. If doubts are articulated, in this inquiry through

empowerment rhetorics, then an emerging sense of power of one over the

other, Gergen's centrifugal power, becomes manifest. One form of acting,

'being empowered', is superior to not 'being empowered', muting and silencing

certain voices because they are not coming from the dominant contextual

narrative.

The importance of the social constructionist perspective, therefore, in the

context of this inquiry is that it denotes a "bracket", placed around the

'real'; what is considered 'right' has been suspended [Gergen 1999].

Empowerment as a given, unquestioned, to be _done to_, for others naturally to

act in accordance, is bracketed by insights from Foucaldian and critical management literature.

In summary, in this discussion of the concept of power different perspectives in relation to empowerment were presented. These were characterised in this section by:

- different 'layers' of power, from agents targeting foes or muting resistance, being replaced by the view of disciplinary power

- of disciplinary technologies, 'casting their shadow' and ordering a population and its activities, rendering the activity of empowerment in a particular subjective way.

- to follow Hardy's framework, the "individual," with a particular group of essential characteristics, to be 'given empowerment', is substituted by the 'subject', rooted in the dominant power relations and discourses like everyone else, including the researcher.

Importantly, what both Foucaldian analysis, social constructionists and critical management theorists share is a view of the individual *in relation to.*

This is a rejection of the autonomous individual, existing before, and more important than, the group. Therefore, the concluding chapter of this thesis seeks to embrace different forms of organisational relationships, based on different forms of conversation. Within these, I believe, lies the hope for the emergence of different forms of notions of empowerment.

2.2.9. Concluding on the first and second parts of this chapter:

The preceding two parts have sought to present the literature that underpinned my practice in organisational transformation, particularly in relation to TQM, and the three company settings of Castings, Brewing and the Agency. The 'dominant' change literature associated with TQM characterised empowerment as:

- the role of the individual, whether manager or consultant, 'administering' empowerment.

- Empowerment as a concept, a set of practices, providing a framework to 'unleash potential'.

- The Quality leader informed by the guru and the rhetoric of the roadshow. 'Transformation' towards the 'management of HRM', of 'leaders' being proactive in laying the foundations for empowerment, was a dominant management discourse of the early 1990's in the UK.

My practice was supported with reference to helping models, which led to the 'servicing of clients', administering the facilitative 'oil' for change programmes. The 'editorial line' of what was best for people supported these models.

This approach was challenged, in Part Two, with reference to Gestalt literature and practice emphasizing 'wholeness', immediacy, uncertainty, and the fostering of greater awareness. This challenged the certainty and action orientation of both TQM literature and the Egan model. Moreover, it provided the 'generative itch' for me to explore my own practices with clients. However, it was not I believe a totally uncritical rendering of Gestalt. Doubts were expressed concerning its applicability to the business setting.

Critical Management literature also provided new perspectives.

Challenging the reductionist view of individual empowerment and its

marketing as a strategic commodity. Such critics seeing the concept of

empowerment as being within the strict confines of the management

agenda. Central to the debate were different views on power drawing on

the contributions of both Lukes and Foucault. Hardy and Clegg's

classification of understandings of power leading to a belief in

empowerment as a critical part of the 'disciplined shadow' of HRM. Social

constructionists such as Gergen, not totally in the Foucauldian camp,

suggesting that dominant contextual narratives determine the meaning of

such terms like empowerment, muting opposition and preventing

alternative understandings.

These conclusions could be seen as a bleak picture but this is not

necessarily true of this inquiry. Further engagement with other areas of

reading, particularly in relation to the methodology of this inquiry,

excited, challenged, and seemed to open up new possibilities for inquiry

that mattered to me and to those who participated.

Cold Call

Doubt

Like the cold call salesman

who will not take no for an answer

pops up

A line

manipulating

and then summoning the past forward

until I hear again

what I thought was mute.

Doubt coaxes

cradles

The irrational

Without my doubt who would I be?

Chapter 3

Methodological Rationale and Design

Research has often been described as 'your life', something that you live and breathe. These poems concern the impact of my research on my storied life. The first in terms of how the research inquiry seemed to envelop aspects of my life, the second in respect of its complexity, depth and ability to uncover and reveal aspects of my own and participants' lives.

The Infatuation

I see you on the bus

I see you on the train

In a film

In the theatre

On the page of the newspaper

In conversations

At work

Are you following me around?

Or are we a couple

An item

What will I do when we part?

The Onion

Mulitlayered

it peels away

under scrutiny of sharpness

experience so whole

clasped in folds and cusps

of time capsuled hurt.

It's the Tardis

Seemingly small

Rich

yet extensive

Translucent

Once you delve

Unravel and split

It irritates and tears may flow

Summary

Due to the nature of this thesis, a study of empowerment, I have been conscious of designing a methodology that created an approach but at the same time for the co-inquirers to decide, guide and inform the research practice wherever possible. The following chapter is therefore in four main 'scenes':

First, the opening scenes [3.1-3.4. pp. 95-125] where I explore the reasons why the inquiry was carried out and first thoughts about how I was going to conduct it. In particular my understanding of terms such as 'inquiry' and learning are explored together with initial discussion of the implications of my changing role from consultant to researcher. Three components of action research – participation, critical reflection and cycles of inquiry -are explored through an explanation of the Critically Reflective Action Research [CRAR] framework. Reflections on how these worked out in practice follow.

Second, a further scene [3.5. pp. 125-146] explores where this inquiry is situated amongst the 'extended family' of action research methodology. In particular, an emphasis is placed on the flexible nature of my approach suited to the organisational circumstances of that time and the role of values. This is where I explore the reasons for applying action research to this inquiry and the way in which I endeavoured to utilise it throughout.

Thirdly, the scenes [3.6 – 3.11 pp.146-203] where reality set in as I began working with various co-inquirers and experienced the 'switchbacks of research'. In so doing, exploring ways to reflect upon and document my own and their experience of encountering empowerment rhetorics. Also, attempting to capture the voices of respondents and grappling with choices of how these can be represented to readers and other academics that does

justice to what they had to say and how it was said. In particular, I sought to experiment with different types of writing to illuminate the complexity of their working lives but also to involve those responsible for action in improving them. Section 3.10 in particular, emphasises the dynamic, non-linear aspects of this inquiry.

Finally, are the closing scenes [3.12-3.13 pp. 204-214] where I have revisited the problems of carrying out this research to emphasise two important themes that emerge from following chapters. In particular, difficulties encountered in respect of the different 'hats' of consultant and researcher, as well as the tensions between participants, gatekeepers, and the shaping of research questions.

3.1. Introduction: Making Sense of the 'Movie'

I will introduce this chapter with a story from my life, away from my research:

I sit in the cinema waiting for the movie to start. I know the actors and what has been said about it in the press but I have not actually seen it yet. It turns out to be a good movie. I felt engaged with the characters, the director not telling me what to see but through the drama the narrative sweeps me along, prompting me to guess what may happen and I revel in the settings of the action, the emotion of the character and how it all may end. The director speaks afterwards on a late night talk show of the immense amount of footage that his film had generated. He describes how difficult it

was to tailor the footage but it was necessary to meet the requirements of

his producers. Also, the public may not wish to sit through many long hours

of the director's pure indulgent fantasy of what he thinks the film should be

like.

Ely, Vinz, Anzul and Downing[1997:52] write of the 'movie-like' nature of

qualitative research:

> "....just as movie makers leave most of their film takes on the editing
> room floor, so researchers have often the gut-wrenching job of
> selecting far fewer insights pieces to write about, write with, and
> then leave out...all this while simultaneously working to create a final
> report that communicates the wholeness of their vision"

This thesis has often felt like such a movie with myself the director, with

immense footage, on the late night talk show described above. For I have

sought through time to capture the essence of the inquiry unfolding like the

onion described in the poem. A recurring question has been the main 'plot

feature' throughout its unravelling: how can I start to gain meaning of the

complexity of the 'plot' lines?

Each of the participants in this thesis seemed to have scripts that were 'presented' to me and to each other. Their own perspectives on rhetorics that they encountered were rich with great opportunities for sub-plots and I could see the opportunity for further sequels of inquiry. Yet there was also the danger of not being able to represent the 'messiness' of their encounters, the richness of the layers of narrative running through their stories. This all seemed so akin to the fractured thoughts and actions of the film director who forgets his cinema audience and ploughs on regardless with his filmmaking. Not a trap I wished to fall into when carrying out my inquiry!

So, to fully understand the complexity I will seek to present such a 'movie' - my inquiry as it unfolded. Am I in the traditional role of director or as the actor/director? The latter feels more comfortable. At a supervision session, Autumn 1999, Professor Michael Reynolds said:

> 'It would be ironic Brendon if you were seen to be too much interpreting what the participants spoke of and not allowing these voices to be heard through your work'.
>
> [taped supervision session noted in reflective journal, October 1999]

3.2. Why I carried out this Inquiry.

My consultative practice began in 1993 and was initially based in the manufacturing sector working alongside small and medium sized companies helping them to understand, and then come to terms with, the need for greater involvement in their companies by their workforces. By 1997 my client base had expanded and included the Brewing Company and the Advertising Agency that are also at the heart of this research. Chapter 1, 'Introduction and Scene Setting', gave an account of my extensive involvement with managers and their employees over a number of years. By the time I embarked on this PhD I already had four years of consultancy experience with Castings to draw on. Before I started the inquiry I began to puzzle over the ways in which managers encountered the rhetoric that both the companies and myself were promoting. How could I find a way to work with the tensions and conflicts that others and myself were experiencing in the locations? I wanted to work with tensions and conflicts as opposed to denying their existence or identifying them as 'resistors' to the changes being proposed.

3.3. 'The Movie Set': the formation of the inquiry towards action.

First of all I sought to emphasise action in my approach. Dickens and Watkins [1999] have identified a difference between the traditional scientific paradigm and action research as being in their approaches to action. They contend that:

> 'while the former collects or establishes information for the purpose of learning and usually ends with the purposes of discovery, the latter intends to use any information to guide new behaviour.'
>
> [Dickens and Watkins 1999, p.130]

Having been involved in consultancy for a number of years this approach seemed best suited to the questions I wished to pursue with managers I encountered in my work.

Inquiry in this initial sense means therefore:

I was curious to explore for myself how I could improve my practice, as well as enable others to achieve greater self-determination.

My therapy background led me to be attracted to research that involved others not as 'subjects' but as co-researchers, research _with_ and not _on_

others. Whitehead [1993, p. 2] has suggested that the very origins of action research come from reflecting on ' how do I live my values more fully in my practice'. Yet a problem remained [which I pursue in more depth later]:

How could I embrace this process of inquiry whilst in the guise of the 'consultant' being contracted by companies whose ideals seemed, at times, far removed from the emancipatory journey I wished to pursue with others?

I could have walked away from these clients and found more 'like-minded' collaborators, but I received supervisory advice encouraging me to stay with the heart of my practice and explore the management encounters that I had been part of, shaped and continued to access - this was my everyday experience. The focus therefore of the 'action' became not just with the participants, the managers, but also my own practice as a consultant *in conjunction with* the participants.

In effect, my understanding and working with action research was well suited to the nature of my work. For action research dovetailed with the relevant tensions, revisions and experiments that characterised my work. It was comforting to hear, through forums presented by both Stephen Kemmis

and Peter Reason, at University College Northampton in 1998, that research was not an orderly process but needed to be flexible and adaptable to the changing circumstances of clients and their individual managers over time.

The issue of time has real pertinence to this research. The inquiry was affected by shifting relationships caused by plants closing or key personnel leaving or moving to different positions in a company. However, such events became insights that I explored with others to illuminate the disjunctions between what was said, in terms of empowerment rhetoric, and the everyday lived experience of managers.

3.4. The Appeal and Puzzle of Critically Reflective Action Research [CRAR]

This research has at its heart the 'critically reflective' approach to action research, especially the CRAR model proposed by Weil [1998], but also by others [Lather 1991, Reason 1994, Reason and Rowan 1981]. [See Appendix 4.1 and 4.2]

Here, learning is seen as engaging with contradictions and dilemmas, through reflection in, and on, action.

The cyclical nature of the CRAR model was helpful in guiding me, and other participants, to inquire into my practice, as well as guiding managers in similar quests with significant others. Then to take these reflections of processes, knowledge, relationships and issues back into the particular informal encounters and inquiry groups of managers within the three companies - Castings, Brewing and the Agency. It is a practical process, which when engaged in rigorously leads participants into further cycles of inquiry. In my case there were three main cycles of the inquiry [**see Appendix 3** for a summary of the three main cycles].

The CRAR model highlights a series of steps [see Appendix 4]:

1. *Appreciating starting problems/dilemmas:*

- Initially, awareness of the contradictions and dilemmas experienced by myself and other participants from the three companies. These could include some of the starting assumptions of what employees

understood by 'empowerment'. For example, the inquiry may focus on

experiences of being so called 'empowered' or disempowered' within

work settings or outside of work, or could explore some of the

history of initiatives that had sought to develop such 'attitudes' or

'practices' /'competences' within the three companies of this study. It

was important to focus on the participants' own constructions so

these could be captured and then played back to highlight the

limitations and potential of existing understandings and processes.

2. *Focusing and/framing inquiry cycle in context:*

- The second step then is to focus and frame the inquiry cycle whilst

  engaged in it. I interpreted this step in my own inquiry as facilitating

  both individuals and groups to plan and enact more insightful choices.

  In a later chapter I describe working with Neville and challenge,

  through playing back the issues he identifies, particular recurring

  patterns and concerns. The intention being to focus on whether

  these are critical in his understanding of what is going wrong for him

  in his workplace, as well as recognise alternatives.

3. *Use of critical incidents and revealing stories:*

- The third step leads to an intended deepening of understanding of the key questions of the inquiry. This inquiry contains a number of revealing narratives where individuals relate critical incidents of redundancy, despair, detachment and disempowerment. My intent was to explore these with them, document and playback to participants my reactions and interpretations of what I had heard.

4. *Planning for insightful actions - individual, group, cross group, organisational.*

- Again, my intent was to enable the individuals and groups to put the conjunctions and disjunctions that had been brought to the surface into perspective. What different choices could be made in such circumstances? What actions might be generated as a result?

5. *Critical Reflection in/on action*

- Surrounding each of these is the 'cloak' of critical reflection. By this I mean that action, wherever present, is scrutinised and challenged. This is in both self and others. In particular I was respectful of the

difficulty of changing behaviour in so-called 'empowered

environments'. This became more evident as the differing cycles

progressed in Castings and I became more aware of the corrosive

effects of the continuous improvement environment that had been

nourished and embedded.

This particular model of conducting inquiry served me well. It constantly

focused on the analysis of the situations that were presented by

participants in the three companies and help them address better the issues

faced by them.

Moreover, when applied to myself moving through the three companies it also

served as a guide to how I could engage and then reengage with particular

issues that seemed to be reoccurring. Highlighting particular narratives that

spoke within and beyond context. There follows a piece of personal writing

that serves as an example of how CRAR was put into practice at the

beginning of the inquiry process as I fused biography, encounters with

clients and supervision sessions to make sense of the experiences of myself

and others.

The personal writing is in italics and was completed on 10th October 2001. It links the three methodological themes of critical reflection, participation and cycles of action in the following ways:

- **<u>Critical reflection</u>**:

as an example of how I documented critical reflection of my own biography, encounters with others, and the emergence of this inquiry. Throughout this piece there are a number of critical questions that aid the progress of the inquiry [these are underlined in the following text at the beginning of each stage of CRAR].

- **<u>Participation</u>**:

as an example of participating with others in both formal settings of meetings, through the sharing of such insights in particular work settings, as well as the basis of conversations with participants in more informal settings - the corridor, the coffee break or lunch venue.

- **<u>Cyclical Inquiry</u>:**

as well as cyclical inquiry with my supervision team and other SOLAR PhD group members, who also read such narratives, this formed the basis of further puzzling and questioning for myself. The headings correspond to different parts of the CRAR cycle of inquiry as documented in Appendix 4.

CRAR Stage 1: Appreciating starting problems/dilemmas

In 1968 Northampton was designated a New Town, awaiting massive development and a doubling of its size. In 1970, at my secondary school, I was about to choose my options that would determine which examinations I would sit in 1972. In the meantime, my father had been made redundant from two shoe factories, the number of jobs being available to him in the traditional industry of the town becoming less and less, as famous names disappeared from the industry. He was therefore keen to ensure that my future career choices would avoid the factory that he hated so much.

In the early months of 1970 I attended a careers fair at a local school......to meet local employers and gain some knowledge of opportunities that they would offer.....[and to].... inform our options choices for the coming years. Prior to this, I had always wanted to be journalist......... the local town library was scoured for books connected with reporters and their stories........ However, my father did not believe that this was 'a trade'.....[for him].... a trade meant security and status, so unlike the work he had experienced since he was fourteen years of age. At the careers meeting the hall was full of representatives of occupations and trades from engineering, building and construction, vehicle mechanics and printing. All the things that I thought I was not very good at. We walked over and were introduced to a local printing firm. My father was enthusiastic about the benefits of me joining this company at sixteen with qualifications that he little understood. I can remember leaving the careers meeting feeling very depressed... [at this prospect]. Once we returned home an unholy row erupted between my father and my sister. She worked for the local building society as an administrator and hated it. So she had left and decided to train

as a teacher at the John Clare annexe of the newly founded Nene College, Northampton.

She recognised that I was unhappy... with what my father seemed to be suggesting as a

suitable career path. Also, she was keen for me to further my education beyond the age of

sixteen and maybe go to College. With her further encouragement, I buckled down to study

and succeeded in gaining enough passes to transfer to the local grammar school for my A-

levels.

No one in my family had ever left home to go to College or University. I had never been

further than 50 miles north of Northampton. How could I break away? I decided therefore

to go to Newcastle-Upon Tyne...........my father was working, so my mother saw me off from

the station.

From that point on, after 1975, my life and the town that I had grown-up in changed

forever. I returned in the holidays to find familiar buildings disappearing and swathes of

open countryside that once surrounded our house becoming rapidly developed with new

housing estates. My father was no longer working in the shoe industry - what was left of it.

.... **CRAR Stage 2. Focusing and Framing**.....................

<u>*So why is all this so significant to this inquiry?*</u>

I now realise that my own empowerment came out of a set of relationships that were

complex, rooted in others' sense of self, their own beliefs about what was "good for me"

[this ownership by others of choices is a theme taken up in later chapters] In the midst of

all of this, what I wanted surfaced and then was submerged by more powerful voices.

Getting away from home as far as Newcastle was not a conscious decision because I was so

unhappy, but maybe, in retrospect, a response to the way in which I felt I had so little

freedom to make my own decisions and follow what I enjoyed. I did enjoy studying and, for

my parents, this was something that they admired but little understood. I am sure that this

is not a unique experience, taking into account that I was the first of my family to leave

home to go to University.

………….. CRAR Stage 3. Broadening/Deepening Understandings……………………

<u>What of the context of the periods of time that as a family we were experiencing?</u>

Here was a town whose staple industry of the boot and shoe trade was contracting; yet my

father's identity was so strongly linked to what he hated but also what he knew. He had

tried to get out of the factory and work in other environments, yet each time had been

drawn back into what he had been doing all his life, with the familiar people and their life

stories. He wanted me to avoid this but at the same time his knowledge of other options for

me were limited to a generalised belief that skilled men in a trade, who did not seem to have

to put up with such poor working conditions, were able to command high wages. My own

academic and personal development was beginning to stretch his understanding and it was

vital he made that decision for me. The options he could offer must have seemed so small.

He knew no other.

On the other hand my sister was on the rise……..training to be a teacher……….utilising her

love of literature and excellent communication skills. She was heavily into the contemporary debate and growth of Feminism and baulked at attempts to lead me down a narrow path to what I was expected 'to do'. Her support and knowledge at that time was invaluable and led to my decision to go away to University.

It seemed [to me] *that at this time I was at the fulcrum of family relationships and the growing decline of an industry and way of life that would be changed forever. These forces shaped my sense of my own development. My own decision-making came out of this web of understandings and meanings that each of these important people in my life brought to bear. ....I would return to Northampton just over twenty years later to embark on this inquiry based at the same college that my sister had attended all those years ago. Sadly, she was not able to witness this having suddenly passed away three years earlier.*

So how is Solar connected?

In 1997 I embarked on the PhD programme with SOLAR at Nene College. Now I was returning to a different Northampton as well as a changed family. My parents were now elderly and trying to cope with a major loss. At the time the decision was made to study at SOLAR for the sole reason that this programme seemed to offer something very different to traditional PhD programmes. The programme's intention was clear and seemed to be based on operating principles that were close to my own heart and ways of working: real questions worth asking through learning conversations and networks of relationships, allowing knowledge to be shared in a community committed to business and social value. I was intrigued to investigate with others how this could be achieved.

Little did I know that this contact with my hometown and connections with the past would prove so generative in respect of my unfolding inquiry.

By 1997 my own consultancy and training business, Aspects, was well established. For three years I had been working with a number of diverse organisations as an independent consultant in the broad field of organisational change and development. I had been at the centre of this activity as a resource for managers and employees leading initiatives and change programmes. I also carried out coaching and training of employees in line with these programmes, as well as acting as a third party with external and internal customer insights that were then fed back to clients in order for them to assess how well they were meeting customer requirements.

The nature of these corporate programmes had been very "top down", with senior managers making strategic decisions in the form of the "big initiatives". The careers of these managers [involved in such initiatives] *were shaped by their success and failure. My own involvement with these them, and their employees, became more and more complex as our relationships developed through time. My own work could be seen as a knowledge 'water carrier', providing process skills as well as academic expertise to satisfy the goals of change programmes. In retrospect, I colluded with this approach, ever eager to supply requirements and satisfy clients' need.*

............Documentation of reflection on experience............

At the beginning of 1998 I wrote the following in my journal:

"Recently, my activity has been centred on the development of managers together with a whole raft of initiatives that deal with 'up-stream' and 'down-stream' change initiatives. On the one hand, working at a strategic level, 'up-stream', with developing structures and

systems of relationships that can aid first tier suppliers to the motor industry deal with the increasing demands of customers. Whereas 'downstream' I am working with individuals who have to cope with increasing pressure in de-layered, cost conscious environments. I have begun to notice the effects of such environments on individuals and listened to their stories of increasing workload, detrimental effects on the sense of self, community at work and relationships in their home/social life."

................CRAR Stage 4. Reframing/Refocusing Inquiry.................

Within the quotes, from the above journal entry, can be seen the tensions that I was experiencing in my own way of working at this time. First, I was trying to enable the successful implementation of change programmes on behalf of senior managers... [but] ...... I was also working with individuals who were trying to deal at the sharp end with the consequences of such programmes. Constantly, these individuals, managers and employees, were talking of the rhetoric, the talk from senior figures and the catch phrases that they used... [nevertheless].... I was also conscious through these conversations of the personal costs to themselves... [of the consequences of such rhetorics]*... to others around them, both at work and their home.*

It became clear to me that the pressure to be 'successful' as a manager, a viable entity in these organisations, seemed so dependent upon action. This could take many forms: the ability to "do", to react to problems, to "empower", to lead". All of the senior managers I dealt with this time were male.

.... **documenting reflection on experience**................

On the fifth of March 1998 I wrote to my journal:

"the best way to describe these senior managers and the work culture is to think of "action

man". The stories I'm hearing are littered with managers who acted in a whole variety of

ways to get what they wanted. They speak of change as a rational, logical process which

confounds them when it does not seem to happen, or resistance (often personalised) seems

to get in the way of the vision. I sense that the source of their distress is centred on a

stubborn belief in this rational change model, as well as a male sense of self that is

reinforced by engaging in action to achieve their aims

. ...**CRAR Stage 5. Planning for insightful actions**................

This pondering on how managers were coping with uncertainty and seeming lack of control

led me to consider whether, alongside others, I could discover patterns that could be

identified across organisations where manager's were juggling with their work self, their

home self, and what they choose to project to others. Moreover, to illuminate the choices

they made as to what they reveal about themselves in the face of such uncertainty and lack

of control. For it seemed to me, at this stage of my inquiry, that I was discovering that

rational models, rooted in traditional strategic management theory, were not going to help

these managers deal with the issues that often arose when trying to implement policy.

Re-engage with others: start of a 2nd Cycle:

I wrote in my journal about a young manager I met after a meeting in Castings Company that
week:

'A manager who I was talking to appeared to be really stressed out. I knew that he had a fourth child on the way, his other three under eight-years old, so I checked out with him about the dilemmas he was facing in coping within this continuous improvement environment. He then said that work was getting on top of him but it was part and parcel of the sense that he was openly ' falling behind'. His partner was giving up work and so he was becoming the sole breadwinner. However, they wanted to maintain a decent standard of living.

I challenged him by suggesting that his family situation was possibly fuelling the sense of frustration that he was not progressing in the firm, as well as his observed behaviour of jumping backward and forward between different initiatives, hoping that success with them would bring him recognition.

He answered by saying he couldn't see situations in the 'widest sense' - he just operated 'day-to-day'. It led him to act and react without really considering what he was doing. As a consequence of this behaviour his relations with colleagues were suffering and he was constantly feeling 'tired and irritable.'

Later, I took this example from my journal to a supervision session. It seemed as though I had stumbled upon a complexity of gender issues, age and family factors, as well as economic issues of positioning in hierarchies, a heady mix being stirred into a company culture. I wanted to know whether consideration of these 'macro' features were relevant at this stage to my inquiry or was 'I running before I needed to walk'? It puzzled me whether I needed to first concentrate more on the individual level and notice the manager's constructions through interactions.

114

*I came away from this session with a new action agenda.... it seemed from the supervisory conversation that elements of employees' lives appeared to play a big role in their management 'make up'. Within these dilemmas, and with **subsequent conversation** with my supervisor, I began to recognise the value of making sharper the current dilemmas and inter relations between the meanings and understandings that individuals brought to certain situated activity within certain settings.*

This piece of personal writing is an illustration of working with CRAR in practice. It centres primarily on the three main methodological themes that guided this inquiry – participation, critical reflection and action - demonstrating the way in which the CRAR model was used to initiate critical inquiry starting with a an experience recounted, critically questioned to deepen understanding, which then led to the focusing of the inquiry. These documented insights were then taken to supervision sessions and meetings with individuals where they were shared and other perspectives offered. In this way the inquiry was both deepened but also moved forward into a further cycle of inquiry that opened up new possibilities of further insights and actions. **The nature of the research cycle** involved spiralling between participation of co-inquirers around a question, or a one-to one meeting with an individual, generating insights or new puzzles. The group or individual [as in the case of the young manager above] were encouraged to review their sense making and my own interpretations, where appropriate. The outcomes

115

were subsequently fedback. New perspectives were formed or realisations of new choices and ways of acting, and being, that had not arisen before started to emerge for participants.

This was not 'me the researcher', standing apart from the process and commenting on it. My interventions were a constituent part of the research and what emerged, for some, from it. I recognise that my use of language when exploring dilemmas with participants was in itself a form of action. Gergen [2001] has stated that 'language does not describe action, but is itself a form of action'. Sharing insights and ways in which their stories impacted on me led to powerful incidents between participants and myself.

3.4.1   Reflections on CRAR in practice

How could I be both 'knower' and 'inquirer'?

However, the interpretation of the model was not always so straightforward. As I became more aware of dilemmas I began to share them with participants. This was difficult at first. I did not feel on 'sure' ground in terms of disclosing doubts in the consultancy role. That role was

characterised as 'knowing'; in this sense within an 'accepted' frame of

determining a solution to an assumed problem, rather than inquiring.

How could I work with participants without becoming solution-orientated? In

practice this tension was partly resolved by 'listening with a different ear',

or creating a research environment whereby critical reflection on experience

and action can take place.

My understanding of critical reflection, in this context, is that I was

enabling listening with a 'different ear' to the empowerment rhetoric and

experiences of disempowerment.

What do I mean by 'listening with a different ear'?

It would have been ironic if my own explanations and encouragement to

inquirers were not to become merely a different form of rhetoric. I was

keen to enable different interpretations of experiences, as Judi

Marshall[1995] recounted when she spoke of:

> 'tell[ing] rich stories in some detail, to speak from the perspective of
> the people concerned. By expressing their meanings, I hoped partly to
> counter potentially devaluing interpretations of their experiences by
> other people'.
>
> [Marshall 1995, p.30]

I sought to do the same for the managers, many of them encountering

discrepancies - the disjunctions - of what was expected of them and how

they **should** act or just **be,** as opposed to their own interpretations of

experience that offered different choices and possibilities for action.

The Needs of the Company

The need of the companies was for a 'framework', a 'model', a solution, a

training 'plan' and 'programme' that could be rolled out. It was an endless

procession of proposals, discussion, a contract, the programme, some

evaluation [if the client could afford it or deemed it necessary], and then

onto the next job.

In 1999, when I decided to move out of consultancy and return to University

lecturing, I was able to engage as a researcher, from 'the University',

without the need to fulfil a consultancy 'brief'. This enabled me to become

more open in respect of the dilemmas of carrying out this inquiry.

Participation

So far this discussion of methodological rationale has centred on my

motivation for the research, the nature of inquiry, critical reflection, and,

briefly, the implications of changing position from consultant to University

researcher. Following on from personal motivation came concerns about the

nature and possibility of participation. The tensions of trying to obtain co-

operation of a type that ensured a participant's involvement were ever

present in this inquiry. I was keen to dispel participant's doubts about my

role and it was possibly naive to believe that the various initiatives that

formed this inquiry would not be seen as part of the political sphere of the

companies involved. My test on this issue of participation was to question my

motives constantly as I was engaging with groups and individuals, and those

of others when they expressed support or discouragement. Only through this

self-awareness was I able, to secure the intent of collaboration in line with

the essential conditions of action research practice. Predominantly this was

successful. However, a continuing problem was that of emotional ties.

Very often I felt that the outcome of the interactions that I had with

managers and other employees of the organisations I encountered were

laden with my own emotion and feeling. I had known and worked alongside

some of these people for many years in a consultative relationship. For some
I had facilitated their induction in the first days at their workplace as new
graduate employees. I had become sensitive to their shifting orientations
towards their company and their careers. In the case of one group, I had
witnessed the physical ageing process of young graduates after exposure to
a highly pressured business environment had taken its toll on them in the
space of just a few years.

**How could cycles of Inquiry be practiced within the context of the three
companies of the Inquiry?**

Hart and Bond [1995] contend that their 'organisational' action research type
is representative of the application of action research to organisational
problem solving, such as boosting output and creating more 'productive'
working relationships. However, a practical concern was how was I to work
with differing cycles, endeavouring to stay true to the assumptions of the
CRAR model, yet still within the organisational context of the three
companies – their assumptions about my role, the restrictions on

participation and the individual politics within them? The way in which this tension was worked with is demonstrated by considering each cycle in turn.

Cycle 1: Castings

Senior managers supported the inquiry group that formed in Castings because they felt that such a group would ultimately benefit the development of their staff towards establishing a more efficient continuous improvement environment. The client defined the area for inquiry, participants and myself then worked together towards action. Managers volunteered for this group in Castings but the senior management could have prevented them, I am sure, if they felt that it did not accord with their strategic aims. Also, in Castings I was being paid as a consultant to engage in this process: the client 'called the tune'. This was different for Brewing and the Agency where my primary 'status' had changed from consultant/researcher to University researcher. My reputation and trustworthiness was based on my previous consultancy work with the two companies. This allowed me as a researcher to work outside of a 'close brief' and therefore not be tied to specific pre-determined outcomes. However, my

change in status did not always enable a smooth passage for the inquiry

process, as the 'Agency' chapter later makes clear.

Cycles 2/3: with Brewing and the Agency.

These cycles also illustrate important points relating to participation.

The initial contacts came from individuals, the managers themselves, wishing

to engage around issues pertinent to them, often at odds with the rhetoric

of their respective senior managers, and much more closely allied to their

lives beyond the workplace. This contrasted with the first cycle, with

Castings, where the participation of the managers was focused on the

individual's ability to control the work situation. Collaboration in the sense of

the manager's constructing the dilemma/problem [Stage 1 of the CRAR

Cycle] was much more to the fore, outcomes that were negotiated and the

problems that were discussed came out of the inquiry process rather than

being predetermined.

The value of the 'cycles' cannot be stressed enough. My intervention through

one-to one meetings and 'spaces' that we had negotiated for discussion and

'story-telling', my feedback and challenge to responses to rhetoric and actions, enabled new perspectives to be formed.

Therefore, the CRAR model helped to shape this inquiry. I have also picked out practical issues that emerged out of trying to work with participants using the model. Other methodological literature was important because it seemed to focus on similar issues faced by an action researcher in an organisational setting. For example, illustrating the tension that I faced as 'consultant' – the 'knower' – as opposed to 'researcher –' the inquirer' alongside others. Also the emphasis I placed on participation, whilst at the same time realising the practicalities of working with individuals and groups as a paid consultant.

A further problem arose when using the differing cycles of inquiry. The stages of the CRAR framework fail to take into account the changing relationships that can affect an inquiry over time; for example, the way in which my research changed with my relationship as consultant then as researcher. The inquiry shifted when I became a researcher because I became more aware of the choice-making that managers were engaged in and

possible ways in which to bring about alternative perspectives and actions. The nature of the collaborative inquiry changing as I also changed my role, and others in relation to me.

Moreover, the formation of the research questions came out of a developing relationship with the participants over a number of years, and they changed significantly over time. The focus in Castings was much more on the development of awareness of the empowerment rhetoric as encountered by managers, not necessarily <u>what to do about it</u>. Whereas subsequent cycles highlighted more what managers choices were in situations and the impact on these decisions of other terrains of their lives.

Schratz and Walker [1995: p103] seem to me to describe this changing research landscape very accurately:

> 'The scenery provided by the literature is not static; just as a landscape changes constantly as patches of cloud and sunlight move across it, sudden storms, overnight snow, changing seasons, all change the way we see it, sometimes revealing some features and at other times obscuring them.'

Schratz and Walker presume that we will all see this landscape in the same way. What this inquiry was focusing on did not stay constant or the same shape, even within the same company.

3.5. Action Research: where does this inquiry 'fit'?

Grundy and Kemmis [1981, as cited by Grundy 1988] state that action research is concerned with both **improvement** and **involvement** and that three basic requirements need to be represented in any project. These are that:

1. The subject matter is a social practice, susceptible to improvement.

2. The project progresses through a series of cycles -planning, acting, observing and reflecting, - each of these activities being methodically and self-critically actioned and linked.

3. The project will involve those responsible in each of the stages of the activity, further widening participation.

[Grundy and Kemmis 1981, as cited by Grundy 1988:353].

These requirements encapsulate many different definitions that are found in the literature. For example, McCutcheon and Jung [1990:148] state that action research is **systemic inquiry** that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants. Rapoport [1970: 499 as cited by McKernan 1991] claims that action research is concerned with the **practical concerns** of people in immediate problem situations and to the goals of social science by **joint collaboration** within a mutually acceptable ethical framework' [my emphasis].

Initially I struggled to make sense of the different 'types' of action research. Kemmis and McTaggart [2000] emphasise the field of 'participatory action research' that encompasses a number of approaches: 'participatory research' often carried out in developed countries to bring about social transformation; 'critical action research' with its roots in the relationship between education and social change, committed to participation and studying the disempowerment created in industrialized societies; 'action learning' bringing people together to learn from each others experience; 'action science' identifying practice in organisational settings and developing the 'reflective practitioner' [Reason 1988, Schon 1983] as well as 'soft-

systems methodologies' characterised by a researcher, who is often an

outside consultant, who 'facilitates' discussion of participants 'problem

situations, generates systemic models of the situation and then uses these

to move towards a solution to the problem.

3.5.1. The Extended Family

My conclusion from the literature is that action research is best

characterised as an <u>extended family</u> of research methodologies, concerned

with ways of doing research and acting to bring about change at the same

time.

McKernan [1991: 16-27] helpfully grouped the several forms of action

research into three categories :

Type 1: the scientific-technical view of problem solving;

Type 2: practical-deliberative action research; and

Type 3: critical-emancipatory action research.

McCutcheon and Jurg [1990: 145-147] identified three similar categories of action research: positivist, interpretivist and critical science. In both classificatory systems the different perspectives are distinguished by the role of researcher and the nature of how the problem is defined. The following examples demonstrate this:

Type 1 - the scientific technical view - sees action research as testing a particular intervention used by a practitioner in the field. The theoretical framework is pre-specified, the researcher identifies the problem, determines the intervention, then the practitioner implements the solution or treatment. The technical aspect of this approach is in the nature of collaboration between researcher and practitioner. In this case, they are collaborating in order to bring about the pre-determined research goals. The flow of communication is between facilitator and the group [Grundy 1987]. It is argued by McKernan that this research is similar to that carried out by early advocates of action research such as Lewin, Corey and Taba and Noel.

Type 2 - Practical Deliberative: this type of action research is different to the 'scientific-technical' in that the researcher and practitioners come

together to identify the problems, why they are occurring and then decide

on the nature of the intervention. The emphasis is both on the practical as

well as flexibility. McCutcheon and Jurg [1990:146] argue that flexibility in

this case is understood as being about the interpretations of participants,

how they view the situation and causes, together with possible interventions.

The resulting dialogue from mutual collaboration, it is argued, brings about

new understandings for participant practice and changes may be longer

lasting. However, the changes tend to be centred on those who took part; if

they leave the organisation then the worth of the change goes with them.

Grundy [1987:154] however believes that this type of action research results

in praxis – 'autonomous deliberate action'.

Type 3 - Critical-Emancipatory research moves beyond the practical to

embrace the political. The aim being for the participants to develop a

'critical consciousness': to free themselves from the traditions, self-

deception and coercion that they experience. Grundy [1987: 154] recognises

two goals for the researcher using this approach. The first is for the

participants to become close to the problem in the particular setting and the

theory that is used to explain the problem. The second goal, which separates

out this type from the other two, is to critique and transform the social practices and organisation in which they are entangled. In other words, moving beyond the constraints of ethical and value frameworks by calling these into question.

For me the purpose of the research differs according to the classification or 'Type'. In the scientific technical action research form, Type 1, then the purpose of research is to discover the laws underlying reality whereas in Type 2, Practical - Deliberative research, activity is centred on what is occurring but importantly the meaning that people make of phenomena. In Type 3 critical emancipatory research what needs to be uncovered, and made sense of, is equity and what reinforces existing power structures so fuelling inequality. Participants are thus to be free of false consciousness and move towards greater equality.

McTaggart [1992:2] makes clear that collective reflection by participants on efforts to change the ways they work - such ways being shaped by certain discourses, organisations, power relations and practices - is the essential feature of participatory action research. Hughes [1997] also argues that if

research fails to problematise such current values, knowledge's and

practices, then it cannot call itself participatory action research. Moreover,

if it is classified as such then a powerful way of reconstructing social

practices and discourses has been devalued.

Each of McKernan's three variants of action research also differs not only in

the purpose of the research but also the relationship between the

participants and the source and scale of their guiding notion. This

relationship is determined by where power resides and so, due to the subject

of this research on empowerment, is particularly pertinent. Thus for Type 1

research, power lies in the facilitator's understanding of the problem - they

have power over the project. Type 2 research has greater equality of

participation but power tends to lie with those individuals capable of acting.

Type 3 research emphasises that power is between, and within, the group

and does not reside in individuals. The first person 'us', as described by

Kemmis and McTaggart [2000:585]:

> '...the researcher treats the others involved in the setting
> as coparticipants, who, through their participation in the
> practices that daily constitute and reconstitute the setting,
> can work together collaboratively to change the ways they

constitute it.

The place of power in the relationship between participants emphasises, particularly at the 'technical-scientific' level of research identified above, the strength of the positivist notion that natural causal laws exist, the researcher only has to deduce their separate parts and how they operate by standing outside and researching a group as separate objects, a work team, an organisation.

This discussion is not merely one of methods and techniques, but is also concerned with my own role in the research process, particularly where I situated myself in respect of participants linked to the purpose of our inquiry. Was my role merely there to illuminate empowerment rhetorics and individuals' choices in the face of them, or was it seeking a more emancipatory stance that would change the nature of workplaces and the values and ethics that were situated there? My belief at the beginning was that this inquiry was rooted more in the former than in the latter. However, as the inquiry progressed my sense was that the methodology became rooted more in the Type 2 classification, the mutual-collaborative type outlined earlier. This shift is worth further exploration.

132

3.5.2. From values to purpose

As Bud Hall [2001: 173] states 'it is my experience that the best way to think of working with others **around** [my emphases] the practices of participatory research is to approach participatory research as a political and philosophical phenomena'. If this inquiry is looked at in these terms then the stance taken towards action research for this PhD inquiry is rooted in values, continuity and engagement.

The importance of values

- The inquiry is rooted in the values context of respect and fairness. This inquiry endeavoured to illuminate those choices that participants were faced with when shaping, or being shaped by such values, or by differing values to their own, within their workplaces. This inquiry sought to register the particular 'scars' from working in so-called empowered environments, in the organisations that I worked with as consultant and then researcher. Within the company rhetoric empowerment is spoken of as a value. Following Lincoln and Guba [1985] this inquiry sees the role of values as opposed to a positivist paradigm. It is does not seek to be value

free, or to guarantee value-freedom by virtue of an objective methodology. Rather it accords to a post-positivist approach that sees this inquiry as value bound in respect of a number of declared positions:

1. By my own values.

2. By my choice of research paradigm.

3. By my choice of the substantive theory that guides the collection and subsequent analysis of insights.

4. By values that lie within the context of investigator and investigated.

The methods are not value neutral. Rather, through action research, they explicitly recognise and develop social systems and release human potential.

Place and Time

- This inquiry has a sense of continuity of place and time.

Of engaging with participants within and between organisations and differing sectors; encountering individuals over a number of years and trying to make sense of shifting relationships.

Engagement

- The inquiry has a context of engagement [Hall 2001: 174].

In that I sought to work **with** rather than **on** groups and individuals that form the participants of this Inquiry. These were important elements of my work that have roots in my training and practice as a counsellor.

These first tentative steps were framed within the context of my practice as counsellor and consultant, my work context at the beginning of this research.

My own practice as a consultant was very much influenced by the work of Carl Rogers[1961, 1980] and the practical ways of working with clients encapsulated in the work of Gerald Egan[1977, 1986]. This was further consolidated and deepened by involvement with the Gestalt Centre in London and the work of Fritz Perls [1969b: 49] in terms of awareness; and Herman and Koenich [1977], Zinker [1977], Merry and Brown[1990], in respect of extending Gestalt thinking and methodology into organisational development and management training.

On starting this PhD programme I could see clearly the links between the

influences on my consultancy practice and critically reflexive and

collaborative action inquiry. Moreover, this critical emancipatory action has

earlier roots in a PGCE at Leeds University in 1977. The work of Paulo Freire

was an important influence on my teacher training and my MA in Education

1978-80. His work impacted on my practice as part of the student-centred

pedagogical movement, forming the background to curriculum initiatives in

schools I taught in during the late 1970's and early 1980's. I sought to bring

the values associated with his work within my own teaching and subsequent

consultancy contexts.

Paulo Freire died earlier in the year that this PhD programme began. As

homage to him a research course at Curtin in Australia discussed his impact

in the following way:

> "Why did Paulo Freire's pedagogy have such success?
> Because his 'pedagogy of dialogue' did not humiliate the student or
> anyone else. A conservative pedagogy humiliates students and the
> pedagogy of Paulo Freire gave students dignity. It placed the teacher
> at their side, with the task of orienting and directing the educational
> process but as a being that, like the student, was also in the act of

searching. The teacher was also the learner-that is also in the legacy

of Paulo Freire....his life taught us the meaning of honesty, decency,

creativity and struggle...."

Moacir Gadotti, General director, Paulo Freire Institute, University of San

Paulo, Brazil and Carlos Alberto Torres, Director Paulo Friere Institute,

Latin America Centre, UCLA, May, 1997.

I contend that Freire's views align with the beliefs of 'person centred'

theory. This is evident in a comparison of Rogers with Gadotti on Freire:

'the individual has within himself vast resources for self-

understanding, for altering his self-concept, his attitudes and his self-

directed behaviour – and that these resources can be tapped if only a

definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be

provided'.

Rogers 1974: p.116.

There is a shift in the view of 'learner' and 'educator' in Friere's case, and

the 'patient' and 'therapist' in Roger's case. Patients become 'clients' with the

inference that they are self-responsible human beings, not objects for

treatment [Thorne 1990]. In Friere's case the educator comes 'alongside' the

learner developing, searching for meaning and engaging in the process of

learning. Oatley has also traced back influences on Rogers to that:

'distinguished American tradition exemplified by John Dewey: the tradition of no-nonsense, of vigorous self-reliance, of exposing oneself thoughtfully to experience, practical innovation, and of careful concern for others.'

Oatley 1981: 192.

Action research has many guises, and to the new researcher it can be totally confusing, offering much but raising the question of "which 'camp' do I choose to reside in?" However, my sense is that Reason and Bradbury [2001] offer real insight, when they state that action research is a

'participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the process of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview...emerging at this historical moment.'[p.1]

When used as a **working** definition the researcher can resolve Reason and Bradbury's description into four characteristics [underlined]:

That action research is rooted in <u>practical issues</u> and in <u>creating new forms of understanding</u> through <u>working with people</u> in their everyday lives that may contribute to <u>human flourishing.</u>

These practical characteristics were integral to this inquiry and how I went about my practice, aiding me and other participants to explore real practical issues within their organisations. In this way, new forms of understanding emerged that helped the managers deal more ably with practical issues. Above all it attempted to work in a way that emphasised working *with them*, as opposed to doing it *to them*.

[Yet I must admit that dealing with the various sources of debate surrounding methodological issues was like coming across an argument at a party when you arrive slightly late. The discussion is in full swing and you are swiftly trying to come to terms with who the combatants are and what they are arguing for!]

It is one thing as a researcher to understand a definition, quite another to follow it through in practice. Therefore, what became a crucial factor in this research was **an importance in how the research was enacted,** how the Inquiry progressed, as much as the outcome.

I would contend that coming to know, in this sense how to proceed with the research, is a 'verb' not a programme: it is a <u>'living evolving process'</u>. It is important to demonstrate how this 'living process' evolved in terms of my own research methodology.

3.5.3. Two 'Ways In' to understanding my research process

I did not adhere to a particular model of participative action research, such as those described by Kemmis and McTaggart [2000]. A reflexive approach led me to adhere to the 'basics' - participation, critical reflection and cycles of inquiry - by returning continuously to an examination of the principles of the inquiry. This raise fundamental questions:

Was it participative and rooted in the practical day-to-day issues of the managers in the companies, and was I keeping a close eye on my own role in shaping or being shaped by the Inquiry?

Nevertheless, I was heavily influenced by the cyclical process of the critically reflexive action research model developed by Weil [1998]. At first I felt I needed something to 'hang onto'. Its emphasis on 'on-site and 'off-

site' reflexive processes was rooted, I felt, more in the mutual collaborative,

Type 2, form of action research outlined earlier.

Hart and Bond's action research typology [1995, table 3.1] also contributed

to my understanding of my own practice with participants. This typology

strongly resembles McKernan's [1991] 'Type 1' to 'Type 3' classification. Hart

and Bond distinguish four action research types from the broad parameters

of action research: 'experimental', 'organisational', 'professionalizing' and

'empowering'. The 'experimental' is claimed by Hart and Bond to represent

the more scientific approach to social problems that characterised the early

days of action research, for instance, Lewin's change experiments and the

quest for general laws of social life to inform policy. The organisational type

encapsulates more the study of organisational problem-solving and working

with so-called 'resistance' to change. The professionalising type, Hart and

Bond contend, is a result of the quest of the 'new professions' – teaching,

nursing and social work – to present their work as being founded on

research-based practice. Finally, the empowering type, most strongly linked

to 'community development approaches' rejects the 'anti-oppressive stance'

of working with 'vulnerable groups' in society. My own practice, I believe,

was a hybrid of both the 'organisational' and 'professionalising' action

research type [see Table 3.1 below].

Organisational	Professionalising/Empowering
• Action / research components in tension: action dominating [1] • Client pays an outside consultant – 'they who pays the piper calls the tune'. [1]	• Practioner or researcher/collaborators [2] • Towards negotiated outcomes and pluralist definitions of improvement: account taken of vested interests. [2]
• Problem defined by most powerful group: 'client'/gatekeeper [1]	• Problem defined by professional group also: managers/researcher. [2]

Table 3.1. Adaption from Hart and Bond [1995] Action research typology

When first encountering this typology it made real sense because it seemed

to offer a way forward to be participative within the organisational setting.

142

In the above table I have picked out six criteria from Hart and Bonds 'distinguishing criteria for action research type ' which illustrated particular features of this research inquiry.

3.5.4. Myself In Relation to the Inquiry

I had no intention to *generalise* or to *prove.* **This PhD seeks to** *illuminate* **conflicts and behaviours that characterise employees' attempts to find new ways of working.** In so doing they are seeking to relate to others in, and beyond, their organisational contexts. As I worked with participants, I was guided by the belief that any ideas that emerged were the result of <u>a generative process</u>.

Marshall [1995] has spoken of research being 'experiential, action-related and collaborative in intent'. It was her work, her research 'character', which was a formative influence on the shape of this PhD. This was firmly rooted in the rejection of seeing research as the discovery of objective knowledge [Reason and Rowan, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985], leaving the researcher firmly at a distance from issues and participants. Moreover, she seeks to

bring together the various threads of a participatory paradigm [Reason and

Rowan, 1997] that made sense for me in order to move forward with a

number of different participants.

In particular, I became aware of my self *in relation to* the participants in

this research. In particular how this relationship may be influencing and

shaping my own and others understanding of the stories and experiences of

rhetoric the managers encountered. Thus I sensed I was seizing the

opportunity to become more reflexive in my practice through 'the self

conscious reference to the author by the author with the intention of

disrupting the notion that texts are transparent carriers of objective truth'

[Perriton 2000]. This interpretation of reflexivity, and discussion around it,

will be covered in section 3.8.

Moreover, this reflective practice highlighted also a number of positions or

'ways in' to the research process. These were both the differing ways of

seeing that I brought to the beginning of my inquiry and the attendant

anxieties that accompanied them!

First, is <u>the position of 'me'</u>: I was excited by the research questions that were beginning to form out of the work I was engaged in and by what I was noticing amongst the clients I was coming into contact with. This can be understood in terms of the Torbert 'territories of experience' where he sees action inquiry as having 'visioning', the 'attentional/spiritual territory of inquiry towards the origin/purpose', as well as the strategising territory of 'theory, dreams and passions' producing an integration, a focus of the inquiry [Torbert 2001, p.251]. It also has similarities with the 'first person' research as identified by Torbert [2001] and the position of 'critical subjectivity' of Marshall and Reason [1997 pp. 235-236]

Second, is <u>us': the participants and myself</u> exploring something together. Would it 'work'? Thirdly, <u>'them': the wider groups of people, scholars or other managers in other companies and sectors</u>. Would they 'make sense' of 'me', my work, and of 'our' work together? Would it therefore have any relevance? [Reflective Journal, Peter Reason SOLAR seminar March 1998, Torbert, 2001]. I was particularly conscious of wanting to produce a written account that was different to the bulk of management literature on the subjects of change and empowerment.

In order to ground the research and ensure validity I was careful in selecting the key components of my 'set', to follow the earlier movie analogy, particularly the participant's explored experiences, identified disjunctions and conjunctions, and choices for action and influence.

In summary, it would be wrong to claim that I followed one of the 'six action strategies' closely [Raelin 1999]. My practice evolved and adapted to context and my changing relationship with companies and their managers. However, at the heart of this inquiry and what proved its 'guide' rather than its 'prescription' was the 'Critically Reflexive Action Research processes' engendering the 'transformative journey' [Weil 1998].

3.6.   So Where I Started

3.6.1   First Engagement with Inquiring

A vital aspect of this research design was where to start. In this case it is possible to identify several alternatives. My consultancy work meant that at

the outset of the Inquiry I had contracts in two different companies -

Castings and Brewing. This work brought me into individual one-to one

coaching with senior and middle managers as well as particular groups of

workers, teams seeking improvement in their functioning or new team

development. Therefore, it seemed that my starting point could be the

"inter-group level", focusing on different groups in a given scenario, and how

their encounters with empowerment rhetoric could be made sense of. This

was modified to include all of the teams I had contact with and the research

inquiry centred on how I was working with them as a facilitator of groups as

well the in-depth coaching. As I noticed reactions and became curious of

their origins I asked questions of the groups and noted using field journals,

their reactions, statements, and discussions around my initial research

question.

At the intra-group level, the inquiry was narrowed down to the interaction

between the managers and their workplaces at the detailed level of

discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, Potter 1997,Watson and Harris, 1999).

Here the focus was to be at the individual level: just how important the

empowerment rhetorics were in the choices that individuals made, and how

the dynamics of their personal situations influenced such sense-making and subsequent choices, thus emphasizing the dynamic characteristics in the process. Conversations were on a one-to one basis rather than in a group setting.

3.6.2. Asking Questions

The starting point for the inquiry was centred around one tentative research question:

How do managers encounter empowerment rhetorics?

Later in the inquiry the focus was narrowed down and directed towards some aspects of the way the managers from the three companies of the inquiry made choices in respect of so-called empowered environments. It became possible to identify more precise questions, such as:

- what processes of sense making around notions of empowerment characterise this experience?

- what disjunctions are apparent that create tensions for employees carrying out their role's?

3.6.3. Confidentiality

My training and practice as a therapist heightened my awareness of ethical issues such as confidentiality. In my privileged position of moving between senior managers and their staff, and between different companies, I was party to others' information, thoughts and feelings. This was the lifeblood of the Inquiry. At the same time it was vital to maintain confidences, to ensure trust, both between participants and myself, and within our group meetings. I therefore carried out the following practice.

All sessions where I came into contact with individuals were opened with the assurance that what transpired between us would be for us alone and the supervisors of my PhD who were also bound by confidentiality. As already mentioned, all the group meetings opened by establishing ground rules that were offered to the group, discussed and then agreed upon. These consisted of:

- It is ok to say 'no'..be nervous..be ignorant..to make mistakes..ask for help.

149

- To contribute towards a supportive environment.

- Being in a confidential workspace.

- Offer support when you feel it is helpful.

An explicit assurance was given that when writing up the research all names would be changed. As becomes clear later, potential conflicts arose; I could be suspected by participants of 'leaking' thoughts they had expressed in relation to the company to senior managers- particularly in cycle 1, with Castings, where I was required to feedback progress of the group to the MD. I ensured that at the end of the group sessions that I checked out with participants what I was going to feedback to gain their approval. In later work with the Agency I carried this practice forward. [see documentation Appendix 2]. By conducting myself in this way I also trusted others to do the same.

Yet with collaboration came a lack of control from my perspective as the 'facilitator'. I was not able to police assurances of confidentiality from participants when they returned to their day-to-day working. However, I assumed that it was my responsibility. The practice has resonance with the McKernan's [1991] Type 3 form of action research, in that the responsibility

for confidentiality was not mine or any individuals, but the group's. Once this form of working collaboratively had been explored in terms of its ramifications then confidentiality became a 'group contract' and was agreed as such.

3.7. Research through Interaction

I have been conscious of slipping into a common narrative of thinking of inquiry as a 'story', of how the research unfolded. However, this does not take into account the cyclical and non-linear aspects of the inquiry.

 The inquiry can be 'read' from a number of perspectives - these illustrate a various dimensions of the research. First, a <u>time</u> dimension: the sense of a passage through time with each episode in the inquiry – meeting, observing, reflecting upon - being distinct or merging into another period of questions, answers and puzzles. However, it can be represented as a number of distinct chronological phases from 1997 – 2000.

Secondly, linked to this sense of 'unfolding time' is <u>biography</u>. At the centre of inquiry have been individuals who have been instrumental in its passage; as

active participants in their own search for questions around the

empowerment of themselves and others. They were my initial links and I

formed close working relationships with the managers and others in the

three companies in this study. In cycle 1, it was Jack and Patrick of Castings;

in Cycle 2, Carl and Steve of Brewing; and in Cycle 3, Neville of the Agency.

Time and biography leads to cycles of wondering and acting through **cycles**

of inquiry[*]. These are not clearly defined or logically placed one after

another. Rather I have sought to depict them as multilayered [see diagram

p.178]. For example, the shape of the 'cycle 1' indicates how this particular

part of the inquiry persisted as the other two cycles emerged. Starting

points for fresh inquiry reflecting the encountering of new

themes/stories/reflections/insight through the processes of critically

reflexive action research. My research cycles could be much better

represented as spiralling through particular activity/inactivity, or action and

reflection, rather than as neat distinct cycles. Cycle 1 has a finite end as

Castings Company became the victim of its parent company demise and went

out of business in 2000. Cycle 2, the Brewing Company, is quite distinct and

---

[*] For details of the three cycles see pp. 154-155.

generative but was relatively short-lived compared with Cycle 1, at Castings and Cycle 3, at the Agency.

Although each cycle is associated with a different company the boundaries were permeable. As can be seen from Diagram 1. research activity overlapped and informed further inquiry. For instance, Cycle Two starting with the one-to one meetings with Carl and Steve of Brewing, and Jack of Castings. The main themes and insights gained from these were written up in the form of a draft chapter. This was sent to the three managers and they responded using a feedback sheet. I analysed their responses and discussed these with them in a phone conversation. This process generated a particular theme, of my own assumptions being challenged. This was built into the 'Hidden Voice' chapter. Insights and potential themes were carried forward into my working with Neville of the Agency. This then formed the start of Cycle Three where the inquiry process continued - a similar reflective cycle of contact, reflection, writing, and feedback, informing further understanding and then onto the next contact.

Diagram 1: Working with Two Cycles 1999

Cycle 2:
'3 Managers' [2 Brewing/1 Castings]

Steve, Carl and Jack One-to one meetings

Collated main themes
and insights in 'Hidden Voice'
draft chapter.

Fedback writing to 3 managers
And requested response using a format
I drew up...........they all reply back.
Analysed responses...theme
identified of my own assumptions
being challenged.

Cycle3:
Agency Group

Working with Neville, then..........

Led a 2-day workshop with two
groups[London=regional] exploring key
features of pressured work environment and
how individuals acted/reacted. They
requested follow-up day.

Training budget cut. Reflected on choices

Made contact with six managers of original
group. Outlined research Q's. Agreed to meet
me Feb 1999 individually on site.
Met with one manager at Manchester office
Feb 8 using research Q's as guide. Recorded
on tape and picked out themes in journal.
Need now to analyse tape, identify
conjunctions/disjunctions or other emerging
themes. Feedback to managers. Work with
response. Onto 2nd One-to one meeting.

Diagram 2. The Unfolding Inquiry:

TIME: 1996   1997   1998   1999   2000

PEOPLE:

Jack/Patrick   Castings Company | CYCLE 1 |

[Jack]Steve/Carl   Brewing | CYCLE 2 |

Neville   The Agency | CYCLE 3 |

ME

1   2   3

ME

CYCLES OF INQUIRY
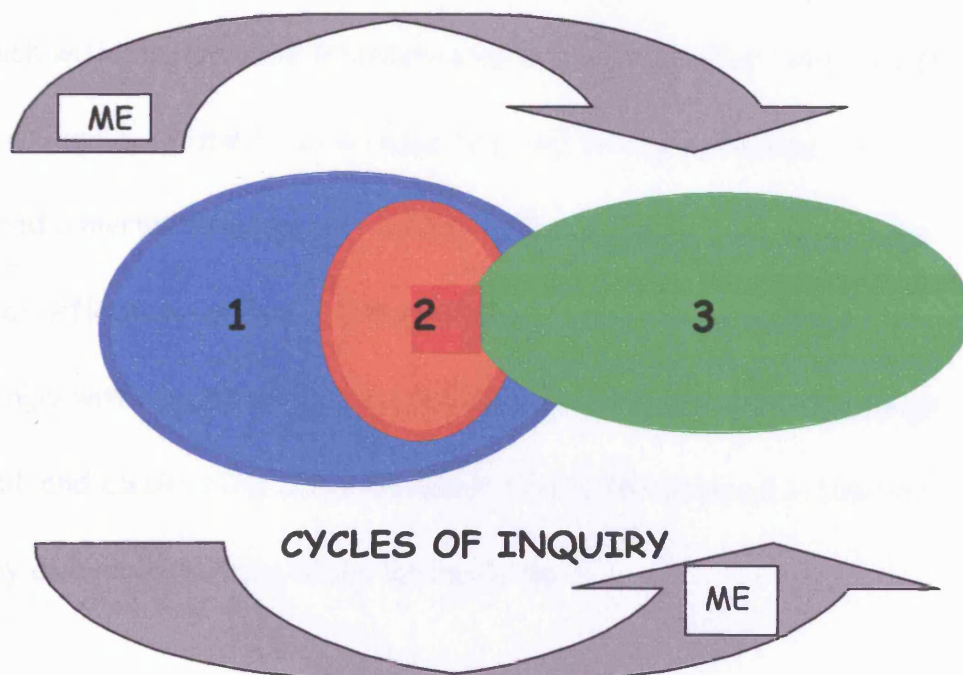
I have sought to highlight the three dimensions to the inquiry but one

important component is missing...**myself**. My own critical reflection on

what I was encountering, noticing and acting upon envelops these cycles

[see Diagrams 1. and 2]. At times this was highly generative -

recognising links to my own life issues around empowerment at work,

connection with 'home', and recollections of critical incidents from my

past.

My own development formed a springboard for further insight and

'ways of seeing' insights. Utilising my interest in the arts and welding

this to a search for new ways to engage with emerging insights through

exploring different forms of writing most vividly illustrate this. Getting

in touch with my own wide interests and testing these for value has also

been an inquiry in itself! Sometimes they led to new pathways that

spawned a myriad of ideas, for example, the writing of poems and the

critical reflection on these. Other times they led to cul-de-sacs

seemingly without value. As for example, a link I made with the Design

Council, and connections I saw between their 1999 Bauhaus exhibition

and my own research questions during Cycle 3.

3.7.1. Use of Voice

Voice can have different meanings. Lather argues that in research this has traditionally been the authorial voice, that which offers the 'pure presence of representation'. Of course, if 'reality' is taken as given then voice is not so much an issue. However, if we believe that reality is more abstract it becomes vital, I would argue, to 'hear' the informants and 'locate' them in their own words. In this sense the research inquiry 'voice' is more akin to Hertz's multiple dimensions of author, the respondents 'voice' in the text, as well as representing my own self as a subject of the inquiry [1997: xi-xii].

Therefore, in the empirical chapters I have sought to capture these different 'voices'. Boje and Dennehy's [1994] description of voice rang true for the rhetorics experienced in this study and the muting of managers' voices when experiencing such rhetorics:

> 'When you have a voice you speak and get heard. When you are voiceless, you are mute and silent. Even when you speak, without voice you have no impact. To be voiceless is a deprivation of your ability to speak from your own person. In every social structure, some voices are heard, others speak but are not heard, and some do not speak at all. The exploitation is when you lose your voice and others begin to speak for you or even through you. Can you

voice your opinions openly and honestly? When do you speak what the organization prefers you speak?

I have carried this further by differentiating between the different voices, 'openly speaking from the person', that are used in this PhD inquiry:

First Voice: The text represents my thoughts and ideas as I compiled them at various points in the inquiry, engaging with the insights so making sense of my own and other participant encounters with empowerment rhetorics.

Second Voice: this is italicised text detailed in a text box, as depicted here. This 'voice' is the critical reflexive one, as I worked with the writing again, looking back and reacting with further insight gained from further reflection.

Therefore, just as a ball of wool may be made up of separate strands but when laid end to end the ball is no more, so this unfolding inquiry needs intertwined time, biography, cycles and myself, in order to see the whole of the research project.

3.8. Working with Text

Diagram 3: Puzzling about Research Questions

Research through….	Comments in respect of this PhD
Observations/ Informal contact	Informal interaction, through gaining widespread access to the companies involved
Group meetings	Inquiry groups formed
One-to one meetings	In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended, individual
Personal Journal	A critically reflective journal of the inquiry

Each encounter provided me and other participants with different opportunities to interact, reflect and create. These require further explanation.

3.8.1. Observations/informal contact

Involvement, over many years of contact, with the three companies of this inquiry - Castings, Brewing and the Agency - provided the opportunity to observe individuals, groupings of managers and the impact of company rhetorics at first hand. The main focus of the study is on middle managers, as well as myself, liasing and working alongside senior managers. The nature of the contact was both formal - as part of scheduled meetings of inquiry groups or individual coaching sessions-

and informal. Around the fringes of the activities were many conversations overheard and actions witnessed. My own status of consultant led me to be seen as a confidante by some. Therefore, the insights were not purely generated within a 'formal' context but also from other rich informal sources.

I was careful not to follow a positivist assumption about 'observation' as a method [Usher 1989]. The world does not exist independently of knowers who by their systematic observation, their objectivity, can explain events and control phenomena. Rather the assumption is that there are no set rules of what is to count as constituting knowledge. The rules that are used are related to the interpretation that others bring to phenomena, the meanings and ways by which these are illuminated.

Consequently, by turning to observation, the form I adopted was akin to what Marshall [2001: 434] describes as 'pursuing outer arcs of attention'. My note-taking, representing what I became aware of in the context, developed from being more receptive, a heightening of my inquiring radar, to what was going on around me and/or what was being said by those I came into contact with. I reflected on what had

occurred to determine what I was to do next. Much of the writing on this flow between action and reflection does, as Marshall admits, tend to separate out action and reflection into clearly defined states. The separation is necessary I concur, but wonder if I could identify clearly when one began and the other stopped. Also, I wondered if my need to reflect was sometimes avoidance of doing something! At times maybe this was necessary, for instance after a particularly emotional one-to one meeting or challenging supervision session.

3.8.2. Research with Groups

Group Meetings

The format and reasoning behind the process of working with groups was not something I deliberately set up at the beginning of this PhD. It grew out of my existing practice as a consultant. However, I was conscious of the need to ensure that the meetings of groups followed the essential elements stressed above: participative, cyclical, rooted in the practical day to day issues of the managers in the companies, and that I kept a close eye on my own role in shaping or being shaped by the Inquiry. To that end meetings generally followed the same format. The

approach I adopted is closely allied to that described by Heron and

Reason [2001, p. 186]:

- welcome and introductions: name, work role/location.
- An explanation of the background to this meeting and negotiating ground rules.
- Participants expectations and possible concerns: pairs, feedback to larger group
- Recording of these and matching my own expectations or concerns.
- Some tentative research questions
- How these match own managers experiences
- Similarities /differences. How something practical can result?
- Ways we could take this forward?
- Group agreement?
- Do we need a group? What its purpose might be?
- Other possible ways to explore the inquiry?
- Practical admin for the group, keeping a record of its progress, who looks after this, notifies for next meeting, how?

This was the format used for a first meeting in both Castings and the

Agency. For the latter I also e-mailed all participants beforehand to

introduce myself, and present some of the questions that I was working

with from previous cycles with Castings and Brewing.

I recognise that in this approach there was a danger of leading the group to a particular way of thinking before we had met. However, it was my response to the contextual need from the group to make the meetings as 'workmanlike' as possible. From my experience of research cycles in other settings I felt, through this prior contact, time was saved at the beginning of meetings. However, this may have been more my need, as the researcher, than the participants. Nevertheless, these preparatory comments did illicit responses such as ' it is nice to know we are not the only ones who face these dilemma's'.

Forming groups and getting started.

<u>Cycle 1-Castings</u>: This research cycle comprised both detailed observations of working alongside senior managers at Castings over a four-year period, as well as involvement in a particular inquiry group. Throughout, this relationship was dominated by contact with two senior managers: Jack, the Training Manager and his direct-line manager, Patrick, the Managing Director of Castings. Together they commissioned the various projects that I carried out. By this I mean that they gave permission for venues to be booked, participants to be released from their everyday tasks, and my time to be paid for. The

question of release was a difficult one for Castings. Both managers

wanted others to be involved but agonised over the practical

implications to a site for 350 staff if a number of managers were not

there. This point needs to be seen within the perspective of the action

discourse, what meanings were attached to 'doing', that was dominant in

this company - aspects discussed fully in later chapters. However, it

also demonstrates some of the practical difficulties in SME's

associated with participation.

The inquiry group formed in Castings consisted of five junior managers

from five plants, as well as Jack, the Training manager. The MD [in

consultation with myself] invited participants [see 4.2.] This again was a

practical consideration. The MD was intent on keeping a close eye on

proceedings. He was of the opinion that in order to get any degree of

involvement it was necessary for him to sanction the meeting. Although

participants were invited they would have found it difficult to turn

down this invitation for fear of incurring his legendary wrath. This did

not sit comfortably with me because I would liked to have had a more

democratic process for involvement. However, in the circumstances I

chose to be pragmatic.

My aim was to try and pursue a more collaborative mission once the group was assembled. At the inception of the inquiry I worked with a group in Castings that had been formed to take more responsibility for the training of others. The group members were invited to take part by a letter from the training manager, citing the MD's support, or by phone. Again, this raised the question of their willingness as volunteers? I was not party to the discussions about the invitation.

The thrust of the formation of this group in Castings was to explore the issue of empowerment in respect of being more 'involved', taking the 'initiative' and seeking to follow the continuous improvement rhetoric set out in briefings and documentation. My involvement was to facilitate this group with the intention of enabling the managers to explore the ramifications of such an initiative within the context of their present working practices. Participation was vital for this inquiry for the managers were intent on bringing about change; I was keen to observe and monitor their commitment towards that change.

Cycle 2: Brewing. The 'group' consisted of two managers, Steve and Carl, and participation came out of more informal settings, compared with Castings, during a period when Brewing was initiating a redundancy

programme. Our discussions took place outside of the formal work of my contracts with the company and were often away from the office in the canteen or at a local pub. It was more spontaneous and open ended without any real firm agreement on meeting regularly or the process that was to be undergone. Others could have taken part if they wished but the nature of the workplace at that time, with departments being broken up, led to a more conspiratorial mode and my sense was that the two managers trusted each other implicitly and would have been resistant to others taking part at that time [see Chapter 5 Hidden Voice: redundancy and isolation]. The conversations in Brewing were different. I took my thoughts and emerging themes from the first Castings group into this new and different setting. Here the issues around empowerment were more about the impending change programme that threatened the managers' jobs, and how what they were experiencing was in sharp contrast to company rhetoric. Making sense of this was proving difficult for them. I was still contracted to the company through my own consultancy business and worked with the managers on different change 'projects'. The nature of the meetings took the form of spaces we set aside to discuss their situations during the period of uncertainty and to share my own learning with them from working with Castings.

Cycle 3 The Agency: This cycle initially began through contact with

Neville, a senior manager of the Agency, who had been a personal client

of mine. Due to the success that he recognised from our work together

he introduced me into the company and was the main supporter of an

inquiry group within the Agency.

Two groups were formed, participants coming from both the regional

and London offices of the Agency. Six managers, representing the

regional offices, met off-site for two one-day meetings in a Birmingham

hotel in August 1998. Ten managers from the London office met in

September 1998 at a similar off-site venue in London. Again, this group

had two one-day meetings at a hotel.

In the case of the regional group the HR Director circulated a

tentative email to all offices inviting a representative to attend the

initial meeting. For the London office employees were 'encouraged' to

take part by Neville who, in an office managers' meeting, described the

work that we had carried out together and the practical benefits this

had brought him. I received the names of those who wanted to take

part and then e-mailed each prospective group member before the first

meeting. This contained a brief biography of myself, as well as potential questions for our work together that I had developed from the two cycles in Castings and Brewing. Further contact ensued [see Appendix 5 for a copy of a letter sent to HR Director of the Agency] setting out the participants needs for a follow-up meeting to progress the issues and actions from the first meeting.

This third cycle, detailed in 'The Agency' and 'Eye of the Hurricane' chapters generated the bulk of the insights for this stage of the inquiry. This was both informed by, and grounded in, the themes and idiosyncrasies generated by the earlier groupings of Castings and Brewing. In this respect insights are supplemented, made richer and so increases in complexity. My own critical reflection on how my own changing circumstances at this time, from consultant to University lecturer 'undertaking research', shaped and determined my own, and others', sense-making in relation to the research questions that are at the heart of this inquiry.

3.8.3.   Research with Individuals

As mentioned earlier, this PhD inquiry emerged out of my consultancy

contact with three main clients. Within these companies I formed close

relationships over a considerable number of years with three groups of

senior managers. First, in Castings with Patrick, the Managing Director

of the company, and his training manager, Jack. Secondly, in Brewing,

with Steve, responsible for management development and his colleague

Carl, who acted as coordinator of the company counselling services for

staff. Thirdly, in the Agency, with Neville, a senior regional manager

[he gained promotion to head the London office during our work

together] who I was recommended to by Steve. The Agency handled all

of Brewings advertising. These three groups of individuals formed the

'spine' of the inquiry.

I initially gained verbal consent from each individual to involve them in

this study through my consultancy role. They were first-contacts in the

companies and commissioned particular projects that I was engaged in.

Through successive projects, over a number of years, I had gained a

level of trust with each one of them that had resulted in further work

for me within their businesses. I also judged, in that they all brought to

their roles an enquiring mind as to how to work in different ways, and a

sense that this was not always supported by the company rhetoric,

some of which they were party to. I did not, therefore, have to

persuade them to engage with the research. However, I could not

foresee at the outset some of the dilemmas that this would bring in

terms of our relationship, or how our research process would lead to

painful evaluation of their role in promoting rhetoric that could prove

so destructive.

One-to one meetings

One-to one meetings were formally carried out in the Agency research

cycle during February 1999 – July 1999. The insights generated by

group activity were plentiful and generally helpful, I would argue, for

those taking part. This was supported by:

- participant feedback taken at the end of the meetings

- and at subsequent one-to one meetings.

- To further explore the richness of the insights generated

  by group activity some group members were keen to meet

  again and continue our work together [see Annette email

  response Appendix 2].

Problems of Participation

Opportunities for further meetings in the Agency were limited by the reluctance of the company to fund further time for the groups, even though participants were calling for them to continue. One-to one meetings in the Agency included representatives from each of the offices involved in the group meetings – Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and London. If I could have accessed more managers from the group meetings then this would have increased my number of one-to one meetings and possibly developed further many of the issues that the group participants felt were in need of exploration.

Snippets of dialogue were generated by our group inquiry that I felt could be explored to a greater extent to derive further meaning. So I decided to 'go with' participants' request to continue meeting. I gave my time free of charge to meet participants in their workplaces.

Practical problems:

- <u>time to participate in this process</u>. Importantly, the HR Director of the Agency felt that it was 'expedient' that managers would not be out of the office for any length of time. With the consent of the participants I set up individual one-to one

meetings with those who wanted to pursue our dialogue and wished to explore their choice making; in particular, in respect of encountering the empowerment rhetoric of the Agency and their subsequent choice making in respect of action.

- Political issues. A further motivation for the one-to one meetings was the sense that I had that the 'political' nature of the group meetings may have 'muted' discussion of empowerment issues. A considerable degree of animosity and suspicion existed particularly between different offices and their respective line-managers. These are more fully explored in the Agency chapters that follow but suffice to say I was fully aware of the possible complexity of their responses to others and myself in such a setting. [I recognise that such interpersonal dynamics are also present in a one-to-one meeting]. Not withstanding the agreed ground rules on confidentiality it was clear from the follow-up one-to-one meetings that suspicion and self-censorship were in evidence during the two Agency group sessions. Meeting with the individuals in their work setting proved highly generative for this PhD, as well as informing further reflection and action on their own part, as well as mine.

Emphasis on Actions

- All of the Agency one-to one meetings were semi-structured,
  taped and transcribed. Participants were sent an e-mail
  beforehand setting out what I saw as possible areas to explore,
  based on themes that had come out of the group sessions.

- These then formed the starting point for the one-to one
  meeting. Particular attention was paid to actions, if any, which
  had arisen since the group meeting. In practice, this structure
  worked well, with some managers replying and raising particular
  points they wished to pursue. My intent was to negotiate this
  format rather than impose it on them.

The one-to one meetings were directed by broad questions:

1. How do you now view your learning that came out of our group
   sessions?

2. What things have enabled you to put new thinking/doing into practice?

3. What has stopped any of this?

4. Has the group experience of new practices [those we determined out of the group meetings] been inhibited through business imperatives, or was the group the catalyst for future actions by you?

Silverman [2001] in summarising the literature concerning one-to one meetings concluded that there were three different models relevant to one-to one meeting insights – positivist, emotionalism and constructionism. The first, Silverman contends is in the pursuit of the truth. Positivism therefore gives access to 'facts'. This inquiry rejected the view of an objective form of knowledge ready to be uncovered so this approach to one-to one meetings was redundant. The second form, 'emotionalism' was appealing because it seeks an insight into people's experiences. However, it still tends to speak of experience as though it is a 'thing', a one off event as opposed to the continuous construction of meaning. This inquiry endeavoured to pursue a

constructionist approach where researchers engage in constructing

meaning through the process of research, at that moment in time

[Marshall 1995: 24]. The intent in the one-to one meetings, therefore,

was to explore collaboratively 'the participant's in-depth, critical and

practical experience of the *situation* to be understood and acted in'

[Reason 2002]. In this sense I was trusting the constructionist position

in that I was not saying anything goes, all is relevant, but that I was

prepared to talk about issues in a discursive relationship.

I need not have followed this route; I could have followed a positivist

tradition given my aim, which was to help people change. The research

would then be a quest to determine the conditions by which this

happens, and then help others to introduce these conditions – <u>they will</u>

<u>make change</u>. However, this suggests that conditions are simple and

that contexts are constant and definable, the researcher's definition

of such being unquestioned. Yet this ignores a fundamental point that

what <u>we call</u> this research – action research, positivist, post-positivist –

is not the issue. It is more about a way of being *in relation to*. How

participants, including myself, talk about 'managing', 'organising' and

'change'. How such ideas seep into our assumptions about what is a valid

way of approaching change. It is this wider frame that is the core of this inquiry.

3.8.4. Personal Journal

It is without doubt that the final form of this PhD could not have been achieved without my use of the reflective research journal. I needed a way of capturing 'the reflections of experience/process of learning' [Weil 1998]. Moreover, it was a testing ground for playing with ideas and capturing fractured thoughts and feelings both within and about my research.

<u>**My research journal enabled me to**</u>:

- Record the history of my ideas from first tentative thoughts, persuasive reading or intended actions. The act of recording drew attention to common themes or disjunctions in respect of the inquiry, and took me forward with different perspectives on my original questions.

- Make notes immediately after SOLAR 1 group sessions [programmed meetings of our PhD group], or during SOLAR PhD forum sessions [open forums with invited presenters], on how

what I had been engaged in related, or not, to my research questions. Had they been advanced in terms of making more sense, or thrown into confusion?

- Record, during sessions with company managers, field notes, snatches of conversations, observations alongside taped conversations to compare what I thought had been said to what I heard later on the tape. The on-going 'dialogues' I had between the insights I recorded at the time, and then additional reflection later, proved invaluable when it came to writing up chapters that discussed events of many months past. Observational notes became critical to this research as I noticed behaviour, both my own and others, or I happened upon a chance encounter. I could then use these as firm feedback to share with participants and engender further reflection for us both. This process linked into my other forms of representing my experience such as poetry; as for example when I sat in reception of the Agency noticing reactions and behaviour of senior executives of the company interacting with reception staff.

- explore my own research 'stuckness', when the inquiry seemed to be bogged down through lack of direction, just 'not knowing', or trying to counteract the frustrations caused by 'outside' interests and distractions -family issues, ill-health and work problems. Often the very act of just writing about it freed up a different pathway and got me going again. This links into the 'methodological noting' [Hughes 2002] I engaged in as I reflected on one-to one meetings and how I had carried them out, how others had reacted, and possibly what my part in this had been. Again evidence for this can be seen in later chapters, for example the self questioning of my role after the one-to-one meeting with Alison of the Agency [see 'Eye of the Hurricane' chapter].

Above all my reflective journal was the repository for all the thoughts about me involved in, and being an intrinsic part of, the research inquiry. However, I recognise that the keeping of such a journal and the role of reflexivity in the research process can be problematic. It is to this debate which I now wish to turn.

3.9. Reflexivity

What I mean by reflexivity is 'the self conscious reference to the author by the author with the intention of disrupting the notion that texts are transparent carriers of objective truth' [Perriton 2000]. Or what Lincoln and Guba [1981] term the 'human as instrument'. By emphasising the reflexive practice of using a reflective journal my intention is to stress how I placed myself at the centre of an analysis of knowledge produced through this inquiry [Hughes 1999].

Argyris and Schon [1974:157] have applied reflexivity to workbased practice and argued that it was key to practitioner success by 'developing one's own continuing theory of practice under real-time conditions'. Reeves has a word of caution however, in that our own 'surreptitious agenda', meaning those often unconscious forces that impel us to act on behalf of our ego rather than the needs of the circumstances, may not always be detectable. Is it possible to pick up all these nuances, be conscious of how they may influence motive?

Reasserting the importance of reflexivity but recognising potential problems, I would like to highlight the nature of reflexivity, and how it

is interpreted in respect of this inquiry because my sense is that it has been described so far as a natural act and unproblematic.

Kemmis and McTaggart [2000:595] have argued that:

> 'the criterion of success [of participatory action research] is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice'.

This inquiry has from the start had a strong biographical element. Its inception came from a nagging feeling that I needed to explore what part myself and others were playing in determining empowerment rhetoric in the companies where I was a consultant. These questions became more complex and multi-stranded during the research. These strands of the inquiry were located:

- in the managers experience inside and outside of work, the community they were part of;

- in time, as the situations in the workplaces developed for the good or bad, the company flourishing but the pressure increasing on managers;

- <u>of place</u>, as different locations exhibited differing relations between managers and the managed;

I found myself shifting between 'standing apart' and observing what seemed to be my encounters with all of this, or then being challenged to recognise that possibly I was the 'imperialist powerbroker' marshalling my own insights in a way to suit the inquiry and colonising the researched with my analysis and power [Scheurich 1997]. I endeavoured to prevent this issue arising by sharing my thoughts and interpretations, whenever possible, with co-inquirers and getting their validation or otherwise [see Appendix 1 for an example of this from Brewing and Castings]. This for me was recognition of the many levels of meaning that the research process was creating.

How the process I was engaged in was also starting to shape my sense of myself as a consultant and researcher was of real interest to me. Much of what has gone before has been about how I influenced what occurred in terms of the nature of this inquiry. Yet the research act also constituted me. Coffey[1999] contends that researchers need to be well aware of how fieldwork research and writing determines selves, relationships and personalities. I was conscious of how in Castings, for

example, a tension existed between the requirements/expectations of myself as a consultant, and the endeavour to be more participative and open-ended in my approach to working with others around dilemmas.

As I pursued further cycles with other groups and individuals in other companies I began to focus more heavily through my journal and experimental writing on myself, <u>in relation to participants,</u> and how my positioning as a consultant may influence these relationships, and how compatible this was with the form of participation I was hoping to promote. The more I composed this story, the more I began to be aware of these tensions concerning my sense of self.

The point has already been made that identities are complex, multiple and subject to change and so experience should not be conflated with simplistic and essentialist notions of experience or identity [Truman 1998]. By implication I also recognise that myself, as a researcher, is not immune to such ambiguities and tensions. For instance, in constructing this thesis I draw on a range of literary forms to set the scene and introduce the characters at the heart of the inquiry. Moreover, I also use a descriptive language to involve the reader in comprehending the 'episodes' that form the inquiry, each of which has

been selected. Richardson [1992: 131] rightly states that 'no matter how we stage the text, we – the authors - are doing the staging'.

I dealt with the dilemmas stemming from complex identities, relationships and my part in the unavoidable process of selection by:

- writing myself into this thesis by utilising extracts from the journals I have accumulated throughout. These are positioned at intervals to give the reader a snapshot of my reflexive self at points throughout the inquiry. I have also utilised a second voice: this is me carrying out retrospective reflection – where I have looked back at myself participating and commented on particular revaluations or recapturing experiences, from the position of the time of writing. In all I would echo Richardson's [2000] sentiments that:

  > 'writing is not merely the transcribing of reality but rather writing – of all the texts, notes, presentations, and possibilities – is also a process of discovery: discovery of the subject and discovery of the self'
  >
  > [Richardson cited in Lincoln and Guba 2000: 184]

- seeking, wherever possible, to explore the messiness of power relations that existed between participants and myself. I made a

deliberate decision in this chapter not to have a separate section

purely about this because it impacts on most sections of this

chapter - one-to one meetings, group participation,

confidentiality, access issues. Such messiness is interwoven into

the narrative rather than considered as a separate entity. What

is being discussed is not simply respondent validation but more

the recognition that different research acts may generate many

levels of meaning.

- From the outset, I wanted this thesis to embody different

  narrative devices and take risks in experimental forms of writing.

  The poetry, literary reviews, metaphors, developed throughout

  this work serve to illustrate how someone may wish to identify

  with the managers, settings, and contexts of this inquiry. Barone

  [1995] and Ellis and Bochner [1996] have commented on how

  creative forms can evoke participatory experiences through

  imagination and storytelling:

  > 'readers who identify with a group may achieve a
  > unique outcome through reading about rhetorical
  > figures who are metaphors for themselves. Self-
  > recognition may result in an imaginative naming of
  > ones condition' [Barone 1995: 69]

Yet the reactions I have had to readers of the poetry has been that it is not only the characters within the verse that resonate but also the settings they seem to inhabit - the 'Business Park' described in a later poem, for example.

Getting the balance right between my work, my place in it and the research itself was problematic. Hatch and Wisniewski [1995: 131] comment that ' despite the espoused goal of encouraging other voices to be heard, the loudest voice is that of the author'. However, this seems to be intrinsic to participatory action research in that some supporters seem to present an ideal, of constantly being on the reflexive throttle – this notion of 'Living Life as an Inquiry' [Marshall 1999] did not sit easy with me. I experienced this inquiry much more in phases during which the issues of myself as the researcher 'testing out' and 'generating' ideas throughout my 'life space' occurred episodically. My time was also spent on practical issues of organising, finding time, managing that time, dealing with other important aspects of my life beyond this research which were there before I began, and remain after it has been completed.

The sense of my own participation in the reflexive process was also an

issue for the managers in this study. I witnessed them engaging with

the inquiry before or after meetings/one-to one meetings/appraisals,

etc. but the nature of their workplace lives, and other lives outside,

meant that it was not always high on their agenda. For some it may have

been but it was a fallacy to believe that all were engaged in its

reflective process in the same way, or intensity, as I was. There is also

an assumption that the managers had the knowledge of **how** to engage in

this way. This disjunction is a fundamental criticism of the

participatory action research group ethos as portrayed by Reason and

Heron [1997], and Marshall and Reason [1993], in that they paint a

picture of reflective process being constant and common across group

members: 'all those involved act together as "co-researchers" and as

"co-subjects" ' [Reason and Heron]. My experience suggests otherwise.

Despite apparently fundamental criticisms, I recognise the worth of

inquiring into the way in which I was <u>in relation to</u> the contexts that I

was studying, and how I feel this critical reflexivity contributed to

further sense-making on the nature of the impact of empowerment

rhetoric in organisations. Fine [1998] calls such inquiry 'working the

hyphen'. In other words how the study of the <u>relations between</u>

<u>researcher-context-informants</u> generates 'better' insights whilst at the same time offers the potential for expanding a shared vision yet constricts our ability to express it. This, Fine contends, is a negotiated story, one that is chosen to be told as opposed to others that are marginalized, with particular consequences. For example, in this thesis are the stories of Annette and Sarah of the Agency but not Paula, who also attended the group meetings for the London office. Paula's reaction after the first group meeting was negative and suspicious, and she was critical of the time that had been taken to explore issues pertinent to others. After a tentative approach to pursue her reservations further I chose not to inquire into her reaction or engage with Paula again. Such contact might have had shed further light on the context of her encounters with empowerment rhetoric and working at the London office at that time.

Summing Up So Far:

Thus far I have explored the reasons why the cycles of this inquiry were carried out and the appeal of action research. The latter has been explored and, through its literature, I have sought to locate where this inquiry stands in relation to what I understand to be the key concepts of the 'extended family' of action research.

Moreover, I have explored the complexity of this research in terms of

myself in relation to it and identified three levels of analysis within

organisations. The framework for how I then carried out the research

was then discussed: research through interaction, with groups, with

individuals. Finally, a critical assessment of the vital role of reflexivity

in respect of the process of this research was made. The following

therefore explores how I dealt systematically with engaging with such

encounters and the shaping of my original research questions.

3.10. What to keep and what to eliminate.

I had journal entries, taped conversations and initial writings from

observation, resulting from interaction with managers and their

employees, as well as my own reflections on 'my story' of leaving and

returning to a hometown. The insights was rich and I faced the

dilemma of what to use and what to discard. I found my original

questions contained in the PhD proposal really helpful. They acted as

'magnets', drawing me in to focus on my own interpretations.

I recognised a puzzle of what to explore, or through these choices what I might be missing. There was a tendency to continue looking for connections, keeping focused on questions, in so doing missing out on interesting passages and spaces for a different type of inquiry. The following poem engages with this sense of moving between different sorts of spaces for inquiry...................

the brightly lit street left behind
I enter the alley
dark and close walls cramping sight
fractured flagstones glinting
with the amber light of lamps

At the end the expected market place
stretching with shops
I was taken to by my Nan
but I come out of the alley to find
a desolate space
the cobbles ripped up
familiar jousting stallman cries
now silent
All familiar ripped away
like the cinema transformed into the theme bar
Saturday afternoon kids parties
replaced by 'two-for-one'
happy hour

male gazes frozen to

wide-screen viewing

of a match in Rome.

The image of the 'alley' and the space of the 'square' had been with

me for a while. It acted as a metaphor for the inquiry that I engaged

in. For me, it emphasised the unfamiliar and so-called familiar. Of how I

started to second-guess what I expected to happen as I watched,

heard, questioned participants. Also, that the context did not stay the

same - an office member left, a boss moved on, a redundancy was

announced. Of so much of the 'new' context not being an improvement

but a disappointment. That the reasoning offered was couched in

rhetoric that offered something different, 'in the best interests of

the business', 'what our customers wanted', 'save us from closure'. My

own thinking across the three contexts of manufacturing, pub retailing,

and advertising, becoming more resigned to a recognition of the power

of these forces and the ways in which individuals lost footing, being

swept up and under by powerful tides of local and global interest.

I sensed I needed to be more organized if I was to really make

sense of all these forms of writing that I had accumulated –

transcripts, interpretations of observations, snatches of conversations

in note form, etc. Ely et al [1997] comment that we need to take a hard look at the kinds of narrative material we have composed and decide how these serve the overall purpose. A six-stage process was utilized involving myself and participants [Bellavita, in Ely et al, 1997: p.181].

The following highlights the way in which I used Bellavita's stages as a guide for my own analysis together with participants. Bellavita's suggestions appear as italicised headings and my resulting actions as bullet-points:

1. *allow myself to play around with the content initially, noting ideas.*

   - throughout I endeavoured to stay critically reflexive by using my journal to note ideas, my reactions to ideas, how these link with current reading, how it might fit/or not with what's gone before.

2. *go back over the transcript and try to create basic topic names for chunks of insights...these are open to revision and renaming.*

   - as I read notes of transcripts I noted alongside the text what it seemed to be saying at significant times. I was conscious of a

self-censorship of doubting whether I had got this 'right' but at the same time an opposing voice advising me to move forward with it, noting that this was not final or 'clean' but represented so much of the 'mess' of the inquiry.

3. *list the topic names and group them meaningfully. Note connections and interesting exceptions and topics that are left hanging alone....think about them and what they may mean...write down any new brainstorming.*

- each of my questions I put in the centre of A4 sheets of paper. As I looked back at my insights I slotted particular topics/connecting thoughts to the question in the form of 'mind maps'. Some areas physically looked denser and visually I could see the increasing complexity of this topic 'chunk'. Others were literally out on a 'limb'. Standing proud, or maybe not so vital ready to be lopped and discarded.

4. *Make contents containing the content of binned categories and write analytic memos about them....add or change anything that is*

relevant.

- I found this was an activity that differed according to the
  degree of reflection that had taken place. One particular
  category really did impress on me. I thought long and hard about
  its relevance and how/why it had affected me so much. Others
  waited to be written about. It is almost as though further
  insights/reflection was needed to 'ignite' them and generate the
  energy to write.

5. *go back over the transcript and play with it by looking at things I
may have missed...whatever will help me look at it in a fresh way.*

- This is where time can be so productive. Moving away from the
  insights for a while, even starting on a completely different type
  of activity, a new journal or recommended text, threw new light
  on original insights interpretation. My participants were critical
  to this activity, for I endeavoured to feedback interpretations
  to them. An example of the feedback sheet is contained in the
  Appendix 1. This part of the cycle generated further insight for

participants and myself and I was then able to revise the original writing. My supervisory team and colleagues were also able to share their own insights or challenge my own interpretations. Little is written of this critical aspect of sharing insights with colleagues or others outside of co-inquirers yet, at times, it is a source of really valuable insights.

Too often the literature loses the 'dynamics' of research, depicting the research process as though it is a rational, individual movement towards certainty. This was not the case here. My own experience has been the story of my poem, moving from the familiar into something that confronts old interpretations and knowledge. Then maybe coming back towards certainty, like a window fogging and then being cleared before returning to its misty state again!

6. *now would be a good time to try and write a little more creatively:*

a poem, vignette.....hopefully I might feel like doing this even at the document making stage.

- my own work has been enhanced through lifting the constrictions of traditional academic writing . Throughout I have been fascinated by the ironies of the subject matter of this research and my own methods of representing it. Utilising my own creativity, which possibly is frustrated by my work situation, has freed a new form of expression, of exploring thoughts, reactions and sense-making of situations as I worked with others, or of my own encounters with my own story in respect of empowerment.

Finally, I tried to keep the literature on the subject in the background as I engaged with the insights itself and its collection. Supervisory advice was followed [contrary to my 'academic urge'] which was to immerse myself in the insights and not allow others' thoughts and sense making to get in the way of my own formulations. This was difficult because I felt I needed some possible destinations even if I eventually chose others. In the end I did not let this become an issue, rather recognising it as a tension and that I should just go with it. Consequently, I dipped into the literature on empowerment when I felt it helped me. A pragmatic stance, but one that recognised some of the dilemmas of how certain standpoints clouded my interpretations and crucially caused me to ignore alternative arguments.

3.11. Using different forms of writing: working with ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning

Ely et al [1997: 37] talk of 'shaping the field' when writing. By this they mean the way in which writers and researchers individually perceive insights and show meaning through use of language. The following discusses the way in which I chose to experiment with different forms of writing in order to meet explicit outcomes of the research set out in my original proposal.

Two events served to help me overcome my dilemma of how I could represent ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning that was at the heart of what I was encountering with managers and their employees. As they spoke either individually or within groups I became conscious of the richness of the insights. Here I was encountering multiple voices. These included the individual manager, the rhetoric of the organisation in official settings of the meeting or pronouncement, and employees of the managers responding to their understanding of managers' actions as changes happened or were proposed. Yet, underpinning all of this, I was also aware of my own voice, acting and reacting within these settings,

as I inquired into how participants were encountering such rhetoric and the choices they then were considering and making.

First, a practical problem arose of working with my reflective journal. I carried out a one-to one meeting with a senior manager. He had been part of an inquiry group and I was now following up, in more depth, themes that had emerged out of our work together. It was a very emotional session. His talk had been of all the pressures he felt under to perform and to be effective. He was a 'good' manager but the company had been placing even more demands on him. He felt incumbent to respond. His fears were of showing signs of not knowing what to do, of not coping, being emotional in front of his staff, vulnerable and exposed in a culture that sought to cut staff in order to cut costs. I listened, fed back my understanding and jotted down notes. As I left his building and emerged out into a busy road full of taxis and usual mayhem my head was swimming with lots of fractured thoughts of my feelings about what I had just heard:

- How could I capture the 'richness' of this?

- How could I do him justice?

- How did it fit into what I had heard before?

- What was different?

As I sat on the train to return home I started to try and write up, in rough form, the one-to one meeting notes. However, by assembling them into neat tidy sentences it seemed I was sanitising the encounter. Here it was being put back into a neat rational package that did not represent what had gone on at all. I also realised that in the very nature of my reaction to his story my own feelings were valuable insights too. By attempting to construct these neat explanations I was hardly representing what had really gone on. The journey passed with very little being put on paper. I then started to just put down what I thought I had experienced. These were more fractured thoughts, phrases, jottings, his actual words, and the company rhetoric he had related so vividly to me. On the page emerged the following poem:

"Here One Minute…………."

Go for it!	not coping
Capture the moment!	live the lie
Be strong!	keep stum
Take no prisoners!	bite tongue
Do the business!	doing just enough
Prove yourself!	as become pissed off
Prioritise!	distressed
Manage it!	deskilled
Be empowered !	delayered
Feel the Fear!	gone.

The poem just came out. It did not take long to write the two strands

of the company phrases he had related to me, and his own reactions to

these. I recognised that at this point the writing represented the

'adversarial' nature of his talk and also the way in which he had reacted

to it. I realised that I could not have written that in another form and

captured the same sense of resignation that had pervaded the one-to

one meeting. Also, I recognised, that the 'official' talk was so far out of

touch with the reactions of the employees and spoke in generalisations

but he saw it through a personal gaze. Moreover, it set out to inspire

and mobilise, yet for this manager it was deflating and dispiriting.

Through this writing I seemed to gain so much more than if I had

reverted to the normal form of writing up the one-to one meeting. The

poem became a further vehicle for deconstruction. It prompted

questions for me:

- how accurate was this ?

- how fair had I been in representing what I had experienced?

The starkness and bluntness of his delivery, the raw emotion of his

talk of the culture he found himself part of [and colluding with

sometimes] I felt had been represented through this form of writing.

As Ely et al remark:

'the big job for qualitative researchers is not to make a slick

piece but to strive for writing a report that gets as close to the

essence - the whole business of what we studied, felt and

tentatively made sense about in the field'. [1997, p38]

The second event that assisted me to represent the ambiguity and

multivoiced character of my inquiry involved a chance encounter with a

theatre review in a Sunday newspaper. Kilduff and Mehra [1997] speak

of the danger of a ' concern for method [that] can overwhelm a concern

for relevance, surprise, challenge and discovery'.

As I began to be more involved with my research I started to see

similar patterns/themes/links in other areas of my life, whether that

was in my own relationships at home and work or others unconnected

with the participant inquiry groups I was working with. It became clear

that these connections could act as vehicles to help me in discovering

new insights. I started to explore them just to see where they may

lead. A good example of this is the way in which the metaphor of

'stagefright' is used as an exploratory device in the 'Mystery and

Mastery' chapter later.

I experimented with different ways of representing my findings. As in the case of the poem above, I began to feel generally more confident of moving away from standardised forms of writing and using different forms to throw fresh light on what I was discovering with participants.

However, these forms also **emerged out of what I was doing**, they became the cornerstones of my structure although there was no original intention to use them in this way. They also served to galvanise different forms of inquiry taking my interpretations of experience down different 'back-alleys', discovering 'hidden' insights. Like the more confident traveller who discards the guidebook, refuses the guided tour/excursion, and allows his or her own intuitive self to wander and wonder.

My research has sought to represent my encounters with participants, and their own experiences in different workplaces, using different forms of writing. It has sought to do justice to these participants through presenting the findings and discussion in forms that all participants can engage with. I was struck by so much of my early reading on action research that its avowed aim for research to make a difference was often sabotaged, in my view, by the very language it

employed. Dense and humourless, it immediately presented a barrier to understanding and engagement. I sought therefore to represent my work in a different way.

So far I have touched on difficulties that the research processes presented on a number of fronts. Now, I wish to focus on two that I feel are most pertinent to what follows in subsequent chapters.

3.12.   Different Hats: Consultant and Researcher.

Throughout this chapter I have commented on the tension between my role as a consultant and as a researcher. This section summarises the difficulties this brought to me as a participant in this inquiry.

I quickly began to realise, by adopting an action research methodology that I became conscious of my own stances and the possible interpretation that I have brought to these relationships. The fact the companies still saw me as 'offering a business service' to them did not always help the situation. Whilst this may have been a barrier of my creation, I do feel that it manifested itself in two ways:

- I found it difficult sometimes to separate the need to maintain the client-company relationship, for obvious selfish business reasons, from the pathways that research questions were taking. The sponsors of my consultancy projects had distinct objectives for interventions that did not always correspond with what was emerging.

- My own work, this emerging inquiry, started to really challenge whether I could maintain this balancing act and in the end I decided that the relationship needed to be redefined and that I needed to act.

My return to a new University post at the end of the second year of this PhD helped me to redefine my role in the eyes of clients. Now I was still able to continue the relationships I had built up over a number of years and they were still confident and trusting in the way in which I was working with groups of employees.

For me, vitally, it **felt** different. I no longer had to think of the 'business case' for my own work and whether this assignment was going to make money or develop in the future to bring greater riches! I was

an inquirer, free to move in and out with various groupings to some

extent, but not torn in my thinking between economic self-interest and

the demands of the co-inquiry groups that were starting to bear fruit

and prove valuable for myself and others.

I recognise that this may have been my issue alone. My groups and key

contacts, particularly in Brewing and the Agency, did not refer to my

change of status. Their chief concern was whether our contact would

be maintained and how this could be funded. A change on my part had

possible implications for the relations between us. More than anything

it led to me casting a more rueful, inquiring eye on the former practices

that I engaged in as a consultant - to satisfy particular needs of

powerful groups in the organisation, as well as my own contribution to

the promotion of empowerment rhetorics.

3.13. Tensions between Participants, Gatekeepers and the shaping of research questions.

A key factor in action research is political participation in the sense

that research subjects have a fundamental right to partake fully in

designing the research project that is centred on them. This, for me, is

the ideal. The 'right' is the critical part of this principle and, wherever possible, it was fulfilled in this inquiry.

The whole question of empowerment came out of my work with a range of managers who made it plain to me that the reality of their working lives did not conform to the 'accepted view' within their organisations that they had responsibility and freedom to be 'creative' and 'proactive'. The research questions, therefore, centred on their dilemmas and their need for an opportunity to explore contradictions and alternative choices for action. I became aware of how I may be shaping these questions rather than seeing them come out of the process of coming together and exploring dilemmas. Despite the danger of becoming too over enthusiastic and dictating the agenda I became increasingly conscious of where I suggested ways forward and ways of working that they agreed to. This awareness was born out of interaction with the methodological literature as I engaged in the inquiry as well as valuable feedback and challenge from my two supervisors. I sought a position whereby I was keen to 'offer' suggestions not impose them.

Furthermore, to work in the organisations I encountered, it was

necessary to cooperate with 'gatekeepers'. These were mainly HR directors/managers who made it possible for groups to be released from their daily work to come together for meetings, in a series of half-day or full-day sessions. I was aware of the possible impact of such individuals on how the inquiry may be perceived by the participants. Again this centres on the problem of **participation** and the political nature of the organisations I was dealing with. The following example illustrates problems I encountered:

At the London meeting of the Agency group I spent the first hour of a session listening, exploring and refuting rumours and accompanying anxiety, that each of the participants had been allowed to come along purely because senior staff had selected them on the basis that they 'weren't coping'! The rumour appeared even though an invitation had gone out to managers stating that I was involved in a research programme and with some tentative questions that could be explored by a group. The rumour amongst other workmates, they said, was that our meeting was part of a remedial programme to 'toughen them up'. This was untrue and had not come about through any explicit intention to unsettle participants. The problem was poor communication. Participants had been given very little information from the HR

department. They had filled in the gaps! This experience led me to

ensure for future meetings that all participants had clear control over

information given on the reasons for our meeting.[*] For example, once

individuals had been notified by the HR department I personally

contacted each member with my own thoughts on what we could

possibly use at the meeting as a starting dilemma, a beginning. I now

recognise I should have done this earlier and taken more control over

the process of invitation. Coming from the HR department it was

possible for mixed messages to be communicated which, by the time

the group had formed, had spread through the regional and London

office grapevine.

At first my encounter with the action research literature suggested a

method that was simple and straightforward:

> 'The idea is simple: fundamentally it is that people work together
>
> as co-researchers in exploring and changing their world'
>
> [Reason: Solar seminar March 1998]

Subsequently, I recognised that the 'nitty gritty' of research is not so

simple: within organisations it is sometimes 'messy' and, for co-

---

[*] This incident is analysed in more detail in the analysis section 'The Agency'

inquirers, it may be perceived in a variety of ways dependent upon the internal politics of their organisation. These perceptions may also change through time. At the beginning, full co-operation and freedom to meet and pursue certain questions may be given. However, if this approach does not meet the expectations of gatekeepers the situation may change. I recognised that it was imperative for the expectations of gatekeepers to be made explicit to participants at the beginning and throughout the inquiry. Through doing this, though, I risked being seen as their spokesperson.

A further shift can occur if gatekeepers change jobs. During this inquiry a HR manager left one company. She had been very positive and supportive of the inquiry that was taking place. Her successor was more circumspect and sought to reduce the time for group and one-to one meetings, even though managers were giving positive feedback on the outcomes from the work they were doing together. Trying to offset these influences and support co-inquirers was dispiriting at times. Nevertheless, as Reason [1988] has argued rather comfortingly:

> 'co-operative inquiry [is] an essentially emergent process. You can't just set up a group because co-operative processes have to be negotiated and re-learned by every group in every instance...trust yourself and get on with it'

3.13. Assessment of the quality of the Inquiry

There is extensive debate over what determines good criteria for

assessing the quality of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Quantitative research relies on the belief that one set of criteria

should be applied to all scientific research. Other researchers contend

that this search for a 'perfect set' is aligned with a positivist paradigm

(Hammersley, 1992), and that there exist more suitable criteria for

evaluating qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative

approach holds that multiple perspectives and multiple "truths"

predominate, as opposed to the positivistic search for the truth, which

infers that there is only a single correct answer to a research question.

Thus, the emphasis on objectivity is lessened. Discounting objectivity

leads to a discomfort about qualitative methods, namely the

subjectivity of the researcher. The issues arising from the subjectivity

of the researcher have been central to this research. They are dealt

with by me by being fully aware of my own subjectivity interfering with

interpretation and sense-making.

Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest criteria that are often cited for

evaluating qualitative studies: confirmability; dependability; credibility;

and transferability. How does way I have conducted this inquiry

conform to these criteria? The first, confirmability is concerned with

the degree to which I have made explicit the biases potentially

influencing my work. I have sought to make my assumptions explicit and

reflected on these. For this reason I have made clear the

consultancy/therapeutic background that formed the backdrop for the

research, and the messiness of action research in this context.

The dependability of the study is closely linked to the question of

reliability. The key question posed is whether the process of the study

is consistent, realistically constant over time and across researchers

and methods. A way to guarantee consistency is to document the

procedures followed in the particular study. The previously discussed

systematic means by which the research questions were developed

together with others, and the critical self-reflexivity I pursued, are

relevant here.

In respect of 'credibility' this is very much whether the findings of the

study make sense. Are they plausible to the people I have participated

with during this study and to readers of the resulting thesis? Do I

present an authentic portrayal of what we were looking at? In this

context I have been keen to offer the lived experience of the participants through recounting critical incidents, as well as slices of raw encounters with empowerment rhetoric. Thus enabling the reader to engage with the inquiry in depth. I recognise, however, that this is my segment of an interpretation of what has occurred. What I have decided to present in the thesis is chosen from evidence, my choice based on participatory practices, of what I consider to be critical ideas. Wherever possible I have sought to use a variety of means to confirm my interpretations with participants, for them to engage with preliminary ideas and shape subsequent inquiry. Critically, for such a research process based on action research, the actions that came out of its pursuit are documented in the following pages.

Lastly, 'transferability' focuses on the degree to which the conclusions can be generalised. Inferring that themes, patterns and categories of the analysis are deduced from the insights, rather than being determined in advance. In this sense I have taken a different interpretation in that I have sought to ask the question that my readers may ask: "So What?"

It has been my intention that the work should reach out to other consultants/researchers, other practising managers and those that work within and between organisations. For the following makes clear how this inquiry sought to challenge how, both for the participants and myself, we engaged in our professional work.

Chapter 4

Castings Empowerment Rhetoric and Inquiry Group

Summary

Castings Company was at the start of my journey in relation to the organisations that I encountered as this inquiry was emerging and being shaped. This chapter sets out to analyse in depth the nature of the empowerment rhetorics employed in Castings, as well as how this impacted upon a particular grouping of managers that formed the first inquiry group. I present evidence of company literature and presentations at meetings that I attended in order to display the nature of empowerment rhetoric within this company

Castings company was experiencing considerable change during the period 1997-98. The rhetoric being displayed needs to be seen as part of, as well as a contributor to, the pressure that this change generated. The first part of this analysis is a discussion of the company in relation to its customers and the impact that this had on the use of rhetoric. It is interesting to note that the ownership of its empowerment rhetoric is rather fuzzy. By this I

mean that company literature extracted phrases from differing sources -

customer presentations that employees were often called to, from material

supplied by consultants, as well as external training programmes that

employees attended.

The second part of this analysis concentrates on the planning meeting held

to discuss the 'training of trainers'. This initiative sought to identify ways in

which employees could be more involved in identifying training needs,

delivery of programmes for developments, together with providing a

structure for all this to happen.

The transcript of this meeting is then looked at through the different

lenses of the key questions related to this inquiry. Finally, the chapter closes

with comment on material from my reflective journal, which relates to

entries I made at the time of this meeting in order to shed light on my own

involvement, and subsequent learning from this, in relation to issues around

empowerment.

4.1 Castings Company - the nature of the rhetoric being used.

By 1995, the manufacturing sector was at the centre of a number of government initiatives designed to increase competitiveness. A project that Castings Company was involved in at the time stated in its literature that:

> "No longer can organisations in this sector rest on their laurels. The drive for improvements is insatiable and the increase in competition will result in the survival of the fittest".
>
> Source: Birmingham TEC Skills Investment Programme April 1995

The company was involved with government agencies and local universities, as well as lead companies whose senior managers were part of a regional network organised by the local Training and Education Council [TEC]. All of these companies were small and medium sized organisations [less than 500 employees] that supplied components to the major car manufacturers. It was these larger enterprises that generated the main pressures to change. At a managers meeting called by the M. D. of Castings Company, in May 1997, he presented the following agenda for action to his audience:

> "small and medium enterprises in the manufacturing sector are facing increased pressures due to a range of factors. The first of these is

to create a culture where cost reduction is now demanded. This is related to a need for us to increase quality and lower our costs. Our customers are demanding this. Secondly, increased competition means that our speed of response to customers requiring improvements needs to be improved. Thirdly, our customers are demanding that our technical performance of products is constantly being enhanced."

The impact of this rhetoric on day-to-day operations was immense. The managing director, Patrick, told me a story of how he had been called by one of his major customers to its large car plant in the West Midlands. Together with senior managers from other suppliers they were told in no uncertain terms that if they could not reduce their prices to the customer within a short period time then they would no longer remain a supplier to this company. Immediately returning from this meeting an improvement team of managers was formed, tasked with deciding how, within their particular area, this "cost down" would be achieved. The emphasis was very much on examining the manufacturing process and how savings could be made. This was in 1992, and in 1998 this team reported to an improvement meeting that:

'...cost improvements must be a fundamental philosophy of any successful company. Since 1992, this company has established improvement teams across all sites meeting every six weeks to

facilitate and co-ordinate such actions. This has resulted in identified and measurable savings in enabling improvement benchmarks to be set for the teams during 1998.'

Notice the emphasis above on cost improvements as being a philosophy for success. This single interpretation of "success" permeated company reports and briefings. On notice boards in workshops and offices of the company a notice proclaimed [my underlining]:

"nothing is constant except change. It is a natural question to query - why change? The answer is that the world around us is changing and unless we keep ahead with these changes we will fall behind those countries and companies that recognise that to stand still is to die away."

Note how the rhetoric has the personal appeal to the common cause, with use of 'we' and 'us'. Also, the rhetoric presents a universality of 'the world', as though all experience it equally.

At a subsequent meeting the M. D. reported the message to managers and other 'selected' employees about the consequences of not changing their way of working. He said that it would bring about a reduced order book, a

reduced workforce, no 'forward view', reduced wages and conditions, and no

investments. However the alternative for the company would be 'forward

thinking'. This would bring about expanding orders and the company

becoming a 'strategic supplier'. With this status, the workforce would

expand and 'develop', wages would be maintained and improved, leading to job

security and technological developments. He later wrote:

> "it is easy to determine which company you would want to work for. It
>
> has therefore been an easy decision for us to accept forward thinking
>
> concepts. Not least in our decision has been our belief that job
>
> security and all that goes with being an effective employer has to be
>
> safeguarded."
>
> Source: company literature distributed to all employees
>
> Nov 1998

The messages were consistent with others given at this time. It was

constantly stated that unless the employees' accepted these changes then

they would not have a job to go to. The company also had a clear message

about how the changes could be achieved.

At the same meeting, Jack, the training and development manager, outlined

the traditional method of how change was experienced in the past that, in

his words, "has a lot going for it". Basically this consisted of ideas, orders

and systems being disseminated from the management through supervisors

and support services to the shop floor. In other words, 'from the top down'.

Information and problems were then 'taken up' the various levels of the

organisational structure to be dealt with by management. However, he

believed that this 'accepted norm of running a company' used the brains and

ideas of only a few people when what was needed was for the shop floor to

develop 'strategic aims', 'improvement ideas', and to be 'self-motivating'. The

management were there to "support" the shopfloor workers. This new vision

was to use the ideas and energies of everyone, not just a few at the top. He

stated:

"So we intend to create a whole company of experts using the

knowledge that they have gained in particular tasks over the years.

The key to how this change would come out was the changing role of

the manager. The manager would not be seen as the moving force,

more a supporter of a new moving force - the self managing team."

Source: Company literature distributed to

all employees Nov 1998

It was stressed that the group/team ethos would allow 'individual developments'. Training was to be given as requested or required. A greater sense of 'job satisfaction' would come about as more and more of the factors affecting daily working life would be subject to 'group scrutiny'. Ultimately, the benefits that ensued would assist job security, as well as involve 'a reward', whether individually or in the form of an annual increase ("the days of giveaway increases are gone!"). He ended by saying that 'last at not least, this should be enjoyable'.

4.2.   Company Empowerment Philosophy

The company distributed documentation to the newly self-managed teams that made clear its view of empowerment. It was grounded in the rhetoric that we have seen: "in today's economy, a company remains competitive only if every employee constantly looks for ways of doing things better". This assumes that the employee recognises the 'worth' of the approach to the workplace. Empowering employees, the company literature went on to say:

'is the process of building ownership, pride, and satisfaction into [the] jobs they[the workers] do. Crucially, this also encompasses the way they are managed towards the goal of continuous improvements.'

Company handbook distributed to all employees.

The central theme of the company rhetoric is the constant message of competitiveness. It was incumbent on the employee to understand the implications of this message with its assumption that doing things better improves competitiveness. I contend that this ignored vital external factors, such as customer behaviour and the structure of the global industry they were part of.

Casting Company's clarity in their rhetoric takes for granted that:

- empowerment is something that can be 'done to people'.

- it is a building process.

- it depends on jobs being satisfying, as though there is some common understanding of what this actually means.

- employees need to be **managed** to be empowered.

- it is part of the striving for improvements- defined from the cost reduction perspective. Other improvements, like an employee's

221

development that does not have immediate relevance to cost reduction are not considered.

In a company presentation to middle managers in April 1998, it was made very clear to them, by the training and development manager, that empowered employees had distinct needs. Primarily, it was the job of the manager "no longer to boss people around but to supply people with what they need".

These needs could be separated into four distinct areas:

1 direction -- as to what are the key results areas, goals, and measurements.

2 knowledge -- often required skills, training, information.

3 resources -- tools, materials, facilities, money.

4 support -- through recognition, coaching, feedback and encouragement.

Again, we see the rational approach to achieving empowered employees. The manufacturing culture has this at its very heart. Its dominant discourse is of inputs and outputs, of materials being assembled and then processed to make a product. Empowerment, therefore, is where these various

'ingredients', the employees needs [inputs], are brought

together[assembled] into a process which then produces the desired

results[the product].

It sounds so simple, so rational, so important, and so believable. Alternative

perspectives of what employees and their managers might understand of

empowerment are not considered. The corollary being that if you do not

agree that this is the case, then you do not agree that these are needed for

continuous improvements, and so do not believe in the prosperity of the

company. An employee who does not believe this is, therefore, not working

towards the general good -- the 'fundamental philosophy of any successful

company'.

At this meeting for middle managers I observed their reactions as they sat

and listened. At that time the company was losing orders because a major

customer had been taken over by an American parent that decided to source

its production from a Central American supplier. Therefore, the pressure on

managers to be more effective and reduce costs was enormous.

Understandably, there were no dissenting voices and questions posed by

managers at the end of the presentation concerned **how** the strategy could be achieved, not **if it was possible** to achieve it.

In order to fully understand how this Inquiry, in this first cycle, moved beyond such contact with Patrick, Castings Managing Director, and the others within this continuous improvement environment, towards a more in-depth participative mode, it is necessary to explain how the inquiry group came about. It was recognised by the Managing Director that substantial training of managers and employees needed to be initiated in order to develop the skills necessary to bring about the outcomes described above. So a meeting of plant representatives who had a broad training responsibility was the first step in trying to bring this about.

I was party to the planning for this meeting and was insistent on two points. I persuaded the MD and the training manager that employees, first, needed to be invited and not just told to attend and, secondly, for a central question to form an inquiry, without predetermined outcomes. So the formation of the group was based around a basic question of 'who was to determine training needs and choices for how to move forward?' At the beginning each

individual was asked to put forward their own reactions to what they had heard in the meetings so far where these issues had been addressed by the MD.

Present at the meeting were staff from the main five plants of the company, representing the 'supervisor' level within the company. The object being to give responsibility for identifying training needs 'lower down' in the organisation, as well as to try and ensure that different plants needs for training and development could be more rapidly identified. Also present at the meeting was the Training and Development Manager. I facilitated the first meeting in a 'consultant' role. There follows an analysis of the transcript from the taped meeting in relation to three central questions posed in this inquiry. These are first, how notions of empowerment are experienced; secondly, what sense the managers make of these notions and how this impacts on choice making; thirdly, what disjunctions emerge that create tensions for managers carrying out their role.

4.3. Analysis of 'Train the Trainers' Inquiry Group Transcript

In relation to the question of:

How employees in this organisation would experience notions of empowerment as they tried to come to grips with change management initiatives, notions of 'rightness', differing plant context, and 'lacking power' emerge.

4.3.1. 'Doing it Right': being equipped for empowerment

It was clear that the group was anxious and felt it was important that any thing they were asked to do differently, in respect of developing and training employees, was seen to be 'done right '. They were calling for 'proper' training and being equipped with the proper knowledge and skills to carry this out. This was coupled with a sense that new initiatives have meant that people were "rushing around " and not doing jobs 'properly'. The prevailing method of working in this company, as seen by this group, was very much product oriented and they saw the main aim as being "to get the product out of the door as quickly as possible". So, given this day-to-day working practice, it is not surprising that faced with a new initiative, like

involvement in training development, that these employees were concerned about making sure that it was done 'right'.

4.3.2. Individual Plant Contexts

Two members of this group also expressed concern relating to their own plant context. One particular member, whose plant had been suffering from falling sales and, in his words, "poor management", felt that this new change initiative would be really important for him. He thought that it might help him "secure his future". His involvement and enthusiasm for the initiative was driven by the perceived precarious nature of his own position. Another member saw it in a different way. His job was tedious and repetitive and getting involved in the initiative could only help him in the broadening of his job role. So, we see two different perspectives being offered here. On the one hand, some employees are recognising that if this new change initiative is going to be successful then certain things have to be in place, in this respect proper training. Yet, on the other hand, two of the group understand this new situation by exploring how this may make their job more interesting or secure long-term employment for them.

4.3.3. 'Lacking the power' to be empowered

It was not long before the issue of power reared its head. The discussion turned to the importance of others and their actions in making this group 'feel recognised' in doing something different. In a rare intervention, Jack, the Training Manager, who was being given responsibility for the initiative, spoke up about his own history of development in the company. He said that he had been fortunate to have had considerable personal development within the company but felt that little 'recognition' had come his way for this. Others supported him in this respect by saying how reluctant others were in coming forward and offering feedback on their performance, if they did anything differently. One group member felt that this was a major factor in his own plant where it seemed people were reluctant to come forward when asked to be involved.

Intertwined with this discussion was the question of just who would take responsibility in authorising new initiatives. Authorisation was needed to avoid the accepted practice of going to the middle manager for permission to do something different. One plant representative said how he was 'just' a supervisor, who did not know 'how to manage'. He did not feel that he could

go to his manager and ask him not to be involved. There is a 'lack of power' to do this. What he was wanting was someone else to do that for him.

As I sat and listened to the group discussing this issue, I got a really strong feeling of them toying with the notion of being empowered, as determined by the company rhetoric, yet at the same time of them recognising the realities of day-to-day working in their various plants. Day-to-day routine was particularly evident in their discussion of who would be the 'flag bearer' in order to 'take on' certain middle managers and certain individuals were picked out by name as real adversaries. The image came to my mind of their superiors as barons protecting their territory, protected by a 'cost ideology' which emphasised routine and hierarchy, that so prevailed in this company.

In relation to the second question:

*...which processes and patterns of sense making around these notions of empowerment characterise this experience, and whether these various pressures upon managers - to be more involved, to empower, to develop - influence their own processes of choice and action (or inaction) within their own work and social living conditions....*key factors emerge. The managers

make sense through an understanding of empowerment needing sanction and having its place, fitting in, within the cost environment.

4.3.4. Empowerment needs to be sanctioned

The group discussion of empowerment is interesting, in that it is seen as something that will be given to them by someone with responsibility. It seems they are basically saying that is "if we have roles then this would be sorted – by someone with power ". But that someone is not always himself or herself. Although a number of examples are cited when initiatives have gone ahead and employees have been involved, the feeling that is expressed by a number of the group members is one of powerlessness. For it is of being "at that level", possibly suggesting that they believe the only way involvement can take place is if it is sanctioned and operated by more senior people to themselves. Also, they seemed to be suggesting that this process needed to be 'managed', with clear roles identified. The discussion, therefore, of such initiatives being spontaneous, to be taken by all where they deemed fit, seemed to be missing.

4.3.5. 'Organising' empowerment within the 'cost environment'

The early part of the group discussion spoke of the messiness of trying to develop and the absence of any form of "organisation" to support that development within the company. The group were ready to offer lots of instances when new initiatives had petered out and how this acted as a barrier to future developments. Although I will discuss my own involvement in this initiative later, as well as my interventions in this discussion, it was noticeable that a number of my interventions were to try and prompt the group to consider what they themselves could offer as an 'organisation' for training and development.

Much of the talk centred on the issue of 'costs' and getting agreement to invest in new initiatives from senior managers. Group members spoke of the ways in which proposals needed to be justified in terms of "value ". I recognise that a number of my own interventions are related to this point. I actually say that we need to "document these things -- because someone is bound to call us to account at some point".

Listening to their contributions I became aware of the amount of detail that

individual managers and supervisors dealt with. It was not surprising that these employees were so conscious of the cost elements of any development issue, for the manufacturing process that they were part of had been 'costed down' to the finest detail of any operation. I myself had been a provider of such training to some of these employees in respect of calculating best practice in their manufacturing operation. It was as though they were always waiting for a green light before they carried out any action. This thinking was not common across all plants to the same degree. It is noticeable that some of the initiatives carried out in certain plants happened at a time when they had a lot of work. The Birmingham plant, for instance, where a number of initiatives had taken place, was particularly secure at this time. Whereas other plants were more under threat through falling production and this may explain some participants understanding of involvement being closely linked to their own need for security in their jobs. Therefore, individuals seemed to bring to this session their perception of their career, their sense of 'job security', in terms of the viability of the plants. This perception of security influenced their sense making of empowerment as defined by the company.

In relation to the third research question:

.... What disjunctions are apparent that create tensions for employees

carrying out their role? To what extent do they experience the traditional

emphasis on management power and control to be at odds with current

trends in management development and organisational transformation?

........two forms of tensions emerge. First, between the benefits of

involvement and its practicality. Secondly, between being critical but also

anxious when challenging orthodoxy.

4.3.6. Will empowerment be 'acceptable'?

A number of the group expressed, and gave plenty of examples of, the real

benefits of greater involvement -- particularly in relation to training in

manufacturing developments. Participants also spoke of the need for more

support from middle and senior managers - a common remark being the need

to get management to "accept training ". It is ironic in that a system was set

up as part of the Investors in People [IIP] award that the company

successfully achieved that year. This award is designed to align the

strategic intentions of the company with the development of its people,

especially in respect of training and development. It was remarked that 'we have a system but it could be so much better'. So the very thing that participants were saying needed more support from senior managers, training, was the key criteria for its IIP accreditation. It was not surprising that participants experienced such inconsistency between what was said, and displayed literally at the entrance to the plant both in the form of the IIP plaque and proudly displayed flag, and the inaction of senior management.

At this point I am conscious that this, the promotion of training as 'acceptable', could be an area the group could do something about. I sense from listening to the tape that my tone of voice is encouraging the group to engage in some action. My talk in this section is very much about credibility, "going forward", "building on", "being trusted with a bit more", what the first step might be". Possibly this encouragement for the group to be seen to be "doing something" is part and parcel of how I got wrapped up in this need for validation of what we were doing, being able to show the value of this, and also my frustration at the feeling that the group were continuing to discuss the barriers and their frustration with managers and supervisors.

4.3.7. Not being 'too critical': a challenge to orthodoxy.

What stands out as a pertinent interchange is between one member of the group, Morag, and myself, towards the end of the discussion. After a number of the group had spoken of changes that could be made and costs that could therefore be saved, Morag comments "we have to be careful that we do not become holier than thou". She goes on to say that "as a workforce, "as people", we do not produce what is required." This is the first time that someone in the group has directly challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of continuous improvement in developments. She remarks:

"We have to be careful that we do not become too critical -- you can get lost in the criticism".

Listening back to the tape, why does this contribution seem so important? Apart from a couple of examples where the group had felt that the company had performed well in respect of development, most of the contributions had been criticisms and feedback on what they considered to be poor practice. This seemed to echo so much of the work culture the group experienced day-to-day, where a continuous scrutiny of their working practice to drive down cost and make plants viable prevailed. It was no wonder, therefore, that one

of their number seemed to be tired of this continuous search for perfection and the apparent lack of constructive feedback, or praise of a job well done.

4.4.   Reflections on the inquiry group meeting

Looking back now through the document that details the group and myself discussing the nature of training in developments within the company, what really strikes me are my interventions and the nature of these.

First, what I notice is that my interventions are seemingly trying to move the discussion on, particularly towards action. At this time within my working practice with Castings, it seems that I was intent on providing 'programmes' that would be seen as 'actions' out of this session. It was as though I was trying to package the participants into some form of programme that I could 'deliver' for the company. Looking back now, four years on, I realise that I was also caught up in the company culture, as a consultant, of keeping cost to a minimum through programmes that would have maximum impact (or so I thought) without having to exceed a training budget. I also recognise that possibly this need to be thinking ahead whilst

facilitating the group was in fact getting in the way of effective

participation: the group exploring the issues involved, or possibly feeling part

of that process. This is ironic given the nature of what we were hoping to

achieve and what the group had said were the individual intentions from

being involved in this activity.

Why have a 'programme' anyway? I recognise that I was pre-judging the

possibilities that could come out of this session. Listening to the tone of my

interventions I can hear myself becoming impassioned with the need for

documentation of what we were doing. I sense that this was a reaction to my

doubt surrounding senior management commitments to what we would be

trying to achieve through this inquiry, and a need to convince others that

what was going on was legitimate, valuable and in their interest to support.

I can also see this sense of responsibility on my part in my interventions

where I check out with the Training Manager that what we are doing is what

he also wants to achieve. I became aware that he had made very few

comments and had been very quiet in the group. At the time I did not raise

this with him but listening to the tape now his silence almost seems

deafening to me.

In my journal notes, from this session, my comments I sense are

illuminating[my underlinings]:

> 'feeling <u>under orders</u> a bit -- I have Patrick (M. D.) <u>in the background,</u>
>
> <u>I</u> feel <u>I'm responsible</u> also for Jack's needs with this group and on top
>
> of that I still <u>have responsibility to the group</u> to ensure this happens'.
>
> Reflective Journal 8.5.98

The underlining prompts me to ask: why did I take on so many burdens! My

strengths here, of being able to stimulate conversations prior to the meeting

and then manage it, were being undermined by this apparent need to take on

the responsibility for senior management and the needs of this group. An

impossible task.

It is painful for me to read back over the transcripts and recognise the

consultant mode that I adopted at this stage with the company! Some of my

interventions have a real preaching style to them, particularly when I speak

of 'personalising problems'. Now it's clear to me, that Morag's intervention

about 'the reality' is possibly a reaction to this preaching style. The comment was a different perspective on the culture that we were trying to create, and my tone, in reaction to her contribution, seems rather dismissive and defensive.

With hindsight, this intervention could have led to exploration of different perspectives on the situation as described by other members of the group. However, the form of consultancy that I was offering did not allow this to come about. In conclusion, what was prominent here was how one form of rhetoric becomes the "editorial line" which [some] people in the company then adopt, or are encouraged to adopt. In so doing, alternative perspectives are stifled and silenced. The choices open to employees, like Morag, become constricted and determined.

Chapter 5

Hidden Voice: Isolation and Redundancy.

Summary

The preceding chapter sought to achieve two main objectives. The first of these is linked to the first objective of this inquiry, which is to illuminate the encounters with empowerment rhetoric as experienced by managers and their employees in Castings and Brewing. Secondly, through this process of working closely alongside managers and their employees in my role as consultant and trainer I have described an unease brought about by critically reflecting on my own role and its impact on my own and others' empowerment and disempowerment. I describe it as a 'dislocation', as others and myself began to explore the conjunctions and disjunctions between the rhetoric and the lived realities of the workplaces and beyond.

This chapter, illuminating Cycle 2, sets out to uncover the nature of this dislocation through the biographies of three particular managers from the two companies as they began to face redundancy from their posts or loss of senior management support. They relate critical incidents that shape their understanding of the schisms between intent and experience.

Moreover, this chapter seeks to introduce a further theme that of isolation, as individuals experience rhetoric that brings about the processes involved in the breaking of ties with others through self-preservation and mistrust. Contrary to so much of the empowerment rhetoric which sought to bring cooperation and collaboration through joint ventures in work, as well as outside with customers and suppliers, the stories of these three managers emphasise the way in which actions by others increased the sense of 'looking after number one'. However, this chapter also demonstrates that out of such disempowerment came further empowerment as individuals sought to extricate themselves from situations and move forward to other posts outside of their present companies.

5.1. Context

I worked with the following three employees concerned in this chapter for a number of years as a co-inquirer, trainer and consultant. They worked in different sectors of the economy - manufacturing and retail - but all three stories interweave. As I listened to their stories, I became aware that they were inextricably linked together by certain themes and the following seeks to tell these stories, identify themes and give voice to a struggle at a personal and organisational level of both inquirer and co-inquirer. Salzer-Morling [1998] commented that 'we often do not hear the

other voices'. She uses the work of Jeffcutt [1993] to make the point

that:

> .... it is managerial voices creating a management view as though it is
> one coherent story. If we take the standpoint that organisations
> are made up of many voices, as polyphony, then different sounds
> are heard with different meanings.
>
> Salzer-Morling 1998 pp113-114

5.2.   Critical Incidents: Steve, Carl and Jack

The first of the managers is Steve and he worked for the Brewing

Company. I worked with him over seven years in a consultancy role, his

company being a major employer and leader in the service sector. It was

announced in 1998 that practically all the Brewing Company's Human

Resources [HR] department were to be made redundant. Responsibility

for developing and training staff would now be in the hands of operational

managers guided by a 'skeletal HR staff' at HQ.

Steve was a senior manager responsible for management development for

the company with eighteen years service and had all the 'executive

trappings' of company pension, luxury car and share issue. He also

possessed so much more. Over the course of the last seven years his

company had undergone rapid change and had acted both as the 'maternity suite', kick-starting new initiatives, and 'graveyard' as they sought to relocate or provide support for redundant staff; the 'fall out' from organisational transformations associated with TQM and Business Process Reengineering. By the time of his redundancy notice Steve carried with him the experience and learning from being at the helm of all these changes, carrying significant responsibility for initiating widespread reform of employee practice within the company. He was forty-eight years of age, had a young family, had recently moved house and started to become more aware of job adverts that required a relatively younger person with geographical mobility. At a regular meeting in 1998 I found him confused and angry at his treatment by a company he had given so much to. A further irony was that he had been recruiting a new graduate intake of prospective managers and trying to locate them in suitable positions in the company whilst he attended his own outplacement appointment.

Carl was a member of Steve's team. He had been in the thick of much of the 'flotsam and jetsam' associated with the transformational changes spoken of above. His role was extensive and exacting. It consisted of acting as a company counsellor and 'personnel troubleshooter'. Carl worked

closely with employees who were identified, mainly by their line managers, as being under a lot of pressure to perform. Sometimes this led him to liase with their families who were trying to cope with employee breakdowns. A growing trend of increased violence in public houses could be identified in Carl's work with Local House Managers [LHM's] becoming traumatised by the violence they encountered. The first-line managers of employees would request his services and he would be on site with very little notice anywhere in the UK. Carl, more than anybody in the company, had come into contact with the raw data of cultural change and was deeply committed to his job, but now he had also been served his notice. The company believed that line managers could perform the work Carl was carrying out. In our interview Carl stated that senior managers justified their decision by claiming 'that line managers were closer to staff issues'.

Jack worked as the HR manager for Castings. He was also a client and someone who I had advised and carried out research for both TQM and BPR initiatives for his company. They had equally been under considerable pressure to remain competitive in the manufacturing sector in recent times. Jack was nearing retirement; his roles within the company had encompassed acting as a shop-steward, a quality manager, as well as the company HR manager. His company was not making him redundant in the

strictest sense. Yet he was struggling to retain influence in a company

that was becoming more and more driven by financial concerns,

'identifiable outcomes' and output. Public pronouncements of late by

senior management concerning training and development initiatives,

associated with Investors in People [IIP] and National Vocational

Qualifications [NVQ's] had not been supportive. Jack had been

instrumental in securing IIP and in establishing NVQ's as opportunities

for employee development. For Jack, previous support for these had

disappeared at the time of our meeting in 1998. Rather, he felt that

efforts to engage employees in team development, personal advancement

and growth were being opposed. Jack sensed that morale in the company

amongst employees was very low, he felt 'marginalised' and increasingly

'disempowered'. He began to question his own contribution, his loyalty and

trust in senior managers pronouncements on 'empowerment', 'knowledge

management' and the efforts required in order to ride the 'current

recession in manufacturing'. Jack was not being made redundant but he

felt increasing detachment from what the company stood for, in his view,

and whether he could ethically remain in post in light of the changing

company culture.

All three managers seemed to exhibit the same emotions. Initially, sadness for something that had been lost. In Steve and Carl's case it was associated with all the effort that they had put into many initiatives that were now seemingly being cast aside.

> Its just the time we have put in ...all the people's efforts that seem to be now turned off like a tap'
>
> Steve: Interview 3/11/98

Jack similarly was immensely perturbed for all the real shop-floor advances that had been made; where he had seen individuals relish the opportunity to get involved in a company they had considerable loyalty towards, but now did not really seem to value them:

> àll the movement towards teams and groups working in different ways than before, taking group responsibility, building up relationships across different functions...all that has now gone backwards'.
>
> *Jack: interview 4/11/98*

These feelings were mixed with bewilderment. All three managers were confused and exasperated with a policy that seemed so alienated from public pronouncements of engendering trust and demanding commitment:

'what we have now in place, and its getting worse, is a culture of fear; the fear of the bollocking, the fear of losing your job during recessionary times in this industry'.

Steve and Carl recognised, from being so close to the operational teams, that staff were already feeling beleaguered with all the operational demands. There seemed to be no empathy with the situation of the front-line staff taking on extra responsibilities within a retail environment in which there was more and more pressure to perform.

' Its though they are saying, "look, get on with it...we are not going to support you" ...and frankly they would not know how to'

Similarly, Jack hears the senior managers extolling the virtues of 'best in class' companies such as Toyota with their advanced human resources policy. He commented that they are keen to emulate the production performance of such companies, but the company does not have the will or the awareness to initiate the support infrastructure. The latter would provide the resources and the knowledge to support front-line staff to

develop improved ways of working, and then couple this with management development to develop the workforce.

Carl and Steve spoke of the young graduates being 'thrown in at the deep end', and questioned where the support would be if the HR function is 'passed down' to line managers?:

> 'It is just conceived [the empowerment of line managers at the operational level] as a way of putting more and more responsibility at the sharp end....but they are already beleaguered...do not have a development culture at this level so how are they going to embrace their own T&D [training and development], let alone anyone else's?'
>
> *Steve: interview 3/11/98*

All three managers related critical incidents. These formed the frame of reference for further pronouncements from their seniors and became the narrative structure for understanding, for making sense of, senior management actions. Carl spoke of an incident displaying for him the insincerity of senior managers:

> 'Just after the redundancy announcement I was phoned by a senior finance manager. He said initially that he was sorry to hear the news of my redundancy but could he have the figures that he needed as soon as possible.'
>
> *Carl: interview 3/11/98*

.

Steve said that others' reactions were interesting, even those of his own

team who were staying in post. They passed him in the corridor without

speaking, heads down.

> ' they treat you just like a casualty...they look at you in
> corridors with almost pain and anguish....people demonstrating
> traits and characteristics that they would do in classic cases
> of loss and bereavement...not getting the invite for the
> meeting or being invited to an event for fear of "not wanting
> to upset you" '.
>
> *Steve: feedback notes Feb 1999.*

 The most hurtful action though had been a working party, that he had

been an active member of, not inviting him to attend future meetings. All

of these instances became part of the same message - he was no longer

going to take an active part in the company even though he still had three

months of service to complete.

Jack spoke of a 'strategy weekend' at a seaside hotel in July 1998,

hosted by the newly- appointed chief executive. The latter outlined his

'vision' of how he wanted the group of companies to operate. He spoke at

length of the need for improved quality of product and increased

productivity. Jack listened to all of this and, as a former quality manager,

his ears pricked up at the assertion that these new 'tough objectives'

were going to be achieved by more quality staff to 'enforce standards'. He

commented:

> More seemed to being asked of existing staff but also a
> return to a view of the company that we had buried many
> years ago...that quality was not the responsibility of
> employees as a whole but of particular staff...this was like
> going back to the '80's !'.
>
> Jack: interview 4/11/98

Jack put this to the Chief Exec's during the question period. He felt that

the question was 'hardly listened to' and the response just reiterated the

original message. Jack was reluctant to challenge. He said how he felt

isolated in the group of managers and no one seemed to have supported

him in public.

> 'I stood up and presented my argument....I was a bit reluctant to do
> this because what I thought I might be laying myself open to
> afterwards, you know, possible censure, but I thought no, I have
> got to stand up for quality and how I see it'
>
> *Jack: interview 4/11/98*

The increasing 'fear culture', as he saw it, had driven through the team

ethos that had taken so long to engender. He felt compromised:

> 'The weekend had been devised as an attempt to get the senior
> team together but all I was left with was a feeling of
> disempowerment and sadness at the loss of group responsibility'.
>
> *Jack: interview 4/11/98*

The following week a critical incident only served to offer evidence of a

further disjunction. It was decided that as part of the 'quality

enforcement' a new group quality 'supremo' would be appointed to ensure

the co-ordination and standards of those who were going to ensure

standards amongst others! A senior employee had this role already as part

of his job description so he was naturally confused as this was applying

for his own job without any seemingly significant consultation. He went

along for his interview carried out by an external recruitment

consultancy:

> 'I entered the room to find a lone interviewer..I asked her where
> the other members of the panel were. She replied that her boss
> was carrying out all the external interviews and she had been
> detailed to deal with the 'internals'.'
>
> *Field Journal 1998*

He came away with the strong impression that this bode ill for his

chances of securing the new post, as well as anger that the whole process was not being carried out in a professional manner. Any doubts he may have had about the rhetoric of the new regime had been immediately reinforced by the actions of the company in the recruitment process.

Again, this one incident concerning the recruitment process resulted in a whole set of meanings being created by this manager of 'what the company was up to'. He related to me how his trust in initiatives claiming to develop and take the company forward was now shattered. He felt that his ability to be a team leader was weakened by his staff responding to his anger and disappointment by, as he saw it, 'keeping their heads down and not rocking the boat'. The feeling that he once had of togetherness was now being supplanted by a growing sense of isolation and loss of contact with team members who, he believed, had developed so much together.

> *I am struck by this picture of exclusion and recognise it as being connected to academic debate in a number of different fields of study. Rather than make these connections now, and possibly divert from the biography of the managers, I will come back to these connections in later chapters.*

The preceding sections of this chapter have identified the three

managers sense-making around initiatives that seemed to offer so much.

Disjunctions between rhetoric espoused/action or inaction and the

resulting sadness, confusion and feeling compromised. These emotions

impacted on individuals and their organisation:

- The way Steve, Carl and Jack had been treated was critical to each

   person's perception of the events. All three spoke of their sense of

   the contradiction between what they were engaged in day-to-day

   and their attendant beliefs - development, open communication,

   community – and how they themselves and others were now acting.

- The language of improved efficiency/productivity served to mute

   the voices of those who were affected by the change. This was

   compounded by the view expressed at a senior level that all of this

   had to happen quickly and be 'carried through', with little time

   wasted on consultation. This filtered down to staff that remained

   as the need to 'get on with things'. Consequently, those being made

   redundant were of the past and not of the emergent future, as

   described by the new targets and organisational structures

   outlined by the firm's directors.

- Team initiatives and collective responsibility were eroded by individuals perceiving the threat to themselves - individual concerns to preserve status led to seeing the situation through the eyes of self rather than the impact on the group or team. Consequently, relationships that were in place that might have helped the individual's situation were endangered by this focus on self rather than 'us'.

Carl spoke of the 'survivor syndrome':

'Those who have made it through the 'carve-up'....almost demonstrate a newly acquired set of values and behaviours...its almost like the relief factor takes over...whilst they demonstrate the normal platitudes of sympathy one cannot help seeing the almost tangible relief that it is not them and that they have survived'.

Carl: feedback sheet Feb 1999

> *Again, rereading the above points, I am so conscious of how these factors are interlinked. The very nature of the new rhetoric of 'pulling together' and 'we will get through this' ['we' meaning those who were fortunate to still be around!] attempted to empower the 'survivors' in the sense that they were the chosen ones who would be relied on to steer the new course. Yet at the same time this choice further isolated the discarded, it broke up 'teams' who had achieved real gains for the company and had supported each other's development.*

- Critically, the rhetoric of change and empowerment was not carried through in actions of senior managers or other employees. In this sense, as a reminder, I am using the term **'rhetoric' to mean the form that discourse takes when it goes public** [Elshtain 1984]. Here is the overt discourse of empowerment laid bare. What was being laid before them was the 'linguistic repertoire' [Potter and Wetherell 1987], the various reminders on the walls of workshop and office - 'If you have a good idea...act on it!' and "You are our most valuable resource"!, for example. The cynicism and lack of trust that these inconsistencies engendered in the workplace served to put to one side achievements gained by fostering x-functional and effective team support and challenge. These schisms within and between employees served to hinder the organisation in working with the complexity that such changes invoke. Moreover, it led to a different type of discourse, one

running counter to the overt, this covert discourse was denoted by

the cynical comment, the various graffiti amendments to the

official notices on walls, the 'dislocation' of Steve, Jack and Carl.

> *Yet, I am reading now in 2002 my field journal of 1998, where the above reflection was made, thinking that in the above case this did not lead to people recognising the injustice that seemingly had been done to the senior employee. His team could have chosen to rally round him based on previous loyalties, if not outrightly challenging those who had made the decisions but at least offering support. Yet they did not. At the time of writing the above I was not so conscious I believe of the gravity of this teams behaviour. Or, was it that I was also part of the delusion that they were a team, as all the company rhetoric extolled but when it came down to it this affinity was wafer-thin. [The thickness of his redundancy notice?!] It had been myself, over the period 1995-97 who had been instrumental in delivering such 'team development' programmes that carry so many assumptions of delivering a group of individuals to 'team status' through a series of workshops, or by following the training manual provided. I was I believe, in Gergen's words, 'importing my own vessels of meaning'. On reflection, this may have been the optimistic lens that I constructed to view the situation because I had helped fashion it.*

From Disempowerment comes Empowerment

However, the bleak picture painted above was not totally disempowering

for all the three managers concerned. As I sat and listened to the

emotions and thought patterns of these stories I began to realise that

out of this disempowerment was emerging significant empowerment

bringing forth new perspectives and decisions for the employees I

encountered. It was if the intensity of the day-to-day responsibility of all the change that they felt they were publicly shouldering had clouded their judgement. Steve said:

> 'I noticed this one guy, who I knew well, after hearing of his redundancy still charging around concerned about fulfilling the immediate objectives that we had been set. I took him to one side and told him that this was pointless for him. He needed to use that energy to look after himself now, to take advantage of the outplacement opportunity granted to us in the package....... stop giving so much to this firm in the short term, adopting a more long term view was going to be far more beneficial.'
>
> *Field Journal: November 1998.*

I challenged Steve to possibly identify whether he had possibly been acting in the same way, focusing much more on the short term rather than looking into the future. He said he had. He stated that:

> 'For too long I had been involved in the relentless pursuit of objectives and corporate missions...we had one wave of initiatives then another, it caused me to be focused on the detail and I tended to forget my own needs. I'd come to the conclusion that these would be taken care of by being part of these movements'.
>
> Field Journal 1998

He had the warm glow from successfully leading teams towards

achievements and this he felt would protect him from an adverse future.

Now, since the news of his redundancy, he was totally focused on taking a

broader view of his career – coming to terms with the fact that the

company was not going to secure his future until retirement, and that was

hard to take on board.

5.3.   Clean Hard Edges of Strategic Intent

As I listened more and more to the three managers particular tones were

being expressed of experiencing supposedly 're-engineered' companies -

the strategic intent. It could be argued that the financial performance of

both organisations during the onset of recessionary times was

respectable; the redundancies were a cost that had to be incurred in

order to survive in the competitive industries of manufacturing or retail,

yet to me something was missing.

Jack Peter, the theatre critic, wrote of the National Theatre's

production of Pinter's 'Betrayal':

The set...was a massively and brutally minimalist structure, and like

everything minimalist, it makes its own hard, clear comment. The

furniture and fittings in the play only underline it. Minimalism is the

style of an overassurred and admiring age..no frills. We do not need

style...diversions...comfort...anything that diverts us from purposes

and ambitions. Everything must be smooth ease of access, with

clean hard edges. One of things that Pinter's play is saying is that in

such a world you can cut yourself quite badly.

This article caught my eye. Could the theatre set so described be the

organisations of Steven, Carl and Jack? The accent on process-

orientated work activity had created environments where 'cold' and

'efficient' functions determined the work 'scripts' of the various actors

involved. These employees exhibited qualities of being 'industrious',

'empowered', 'lean and focused'. The official rhetoric, the overt discourse

made public, as described earlier, was of the 'clean and hard edges' of

strategic intent. Yet the talk of some of the employees involved, the

redundant 'players', was of mess, uncertainty and open-wounds. Therefore,

to extend this metaphor further, as we become more 'minimalist' in our

activity is the heart, the comfort and luxury of social relationships at

work being supplanted by hard comment, so restricting the choices of how

we can be with others? Peter speaks of 'purpose and ambitions' being

diverted by 'comfort and diversions'. These diversions could be seen as the HR staff being critical of strategic intent as they witness the redundancy of employees. As these three employees were all heavily involved in the carrying out of policy they had ample evidence of the disjunctions of intent and experience. Alvesson and Wilmott[1998: p.49] have commented :

> when instrumental rationality is elevated to rationality per se, it becomes an ideology, as the value-based ends and the value laden means for attaining these ends are shielded from reflection and critical evaluation.

It appears that the three managers reflections on experience is heavy with a sense that they could do little to influence the policy of strategic change, their role was just to see it happen. By reporting 'good news' to their superiors they might possibly have made their jobs safe. Experiences after being given their redundancy notices suggested otherwise. Being the hod-carrier for strategic intent came at a cost. For example, Carl talked of the 'double-life' he seemed to be living at work:

> ....a publican committed suicide and the HR department was trying to make sure that the company was seen in the best light.
>
> *Field Journal Nov 1998*

In his role he was increasingly asked to compromise deeply held values of

how people should be treated. Ironically, it was those values that had

been espoused at interview as being 'key criteria' for the successful

operation of his post. Now, knowing that he was leaving the company, he

almost felt relieved that this compromise was over.

So much of Carl's experience, as described in the above paragraph, mirrors my own reflections in the previous chapter that culminated in the sense of 'dislocation'. I too, felt a growing sense of being the 'hod carrier' for the initiatives, smoothing the passage of their purpose, yet being increasingly perturbed by an itch, an irritation of the compromising of values that did not diminish.

5.4. Voices Resonating: engaging with meaning from these research encounters

So much of this inquiry has been created through an active engagement

with my own practice. By being critically reflective I have been able to

generate new insights into my own sense of empowerment and

disempowerment, and how my own role as consultant, trainer and

subsequent researcher fashioned choice-making for myself, and others.

This reflective practice reinforced my growing sense that my own

research work with the managers was serving to categorise experience,

.

that I was promoting the view of the 'one voice', in the same way as the

organisations dealt with the initiatives described above. Polyphony

silenced by an 'official rhetoric' – in this case my own use of language and

discursive framing [Watson and Harris 1999]. The intention of the next

section is therefore to display how I thought my interpretation of their

stories was correct but when shown to the participants for validation a

different story emerged.

5.4.1. Checking out Understandings

Steve, Carl and Jack were sent a draft copy of my writing from my field

journal about my meetings with them at their companies, an initial analysis

of data generated by the interviews with the three of them, together

with a prompt sheet to feedback their own reaction to my writing [see

Appendix 1].

My intention was to determine if there were common constructions of the

three manager's organisational contexts. I gathered their responses and

compiled a neat rational table analysing themes emerging from comments

they made. This was meant to offer a deeper level of reflection, as I

hoped they would read the transcripts and my own interpretations of the data. What I hoped would emerge were three outcomes.

- That the three managers would check if I had made any omissions.

- Telling me if they felt something had been spoken of but I had not given it enough prominence.

- Anything that they had thought about or experienced that related to our original conversations that they now felt were relevant and should be included.

I then planned to search for some commonality across the responses to my initial sensemaking that would confirm my reasoning. It never came to fruition in this form.

The three responses showed me that I had been in danger of assuming that my interpretation of the encounters with redundancy and attendant actions/reactions were how the managers saw it. From the interviews in November 1998 I believed that similar emotions were being expressed. However, this was not the case.

When Steve read my first draft document, which set out my interpretations of the interviews, he questioned the emotions being

expressed as 'being similar'. He commented that he felt that Carl, his

colleague in the Brewing Company, had been 'particularly more shocked

than himself' and showed much more emotion on the surface than him.

Steve's reaction was defensive and that reading of his emotional reaction

in this draft document led him to reject the idea that he was like any

other manager in this situation. However, it led me to reflect on my own

role and what I was doing in trying to seek common themes and links.

Moreover, as a researcher, could I really see it through their eyes?

> *Recently, I was involved with a group of research students exploring the current state of our research inquiries. We used the metaphors of physical structures and images - photographs, paintings, and drawings - to determine progress. One member of the group had brought along to the session two vivid photographs of, at first glance, abstract images. He began to relate to the group how these depicted the current state of his inquiry. I also looked at the images and listened to his accompanying narrative. Yet I could not listen and 'see' his interpretations. My own need to 'understand' the image was cutting across his explanations and, as much as I tried to change this, the image returned burning as brightly as ever.*

This post interview experience with the three managers leads me to

consider two factors that show how this second cycle helped to shape an

emergent methodology, with greater reflexivity, so producing further

data to reflect upon, particularly in relation to myself as both consultant

and researcher:

- First, when carrying out this form of research - engaging with complexity and sense-making and feeding my interpretations back to co-inquirers - was I also becoming fixed in my view and not listening out for the multiplicity of meaning that others were bringing to that experience?

- Secondly, was I replicating their organisations as senior managers sought to legitimate meaning and reinforce this through rhetoric and actions across the organisation? That employers, when faced with a whole variety of employees from different functions, levels of responsibility, length of service, in different relationships with managers and employees, then categorise responses according to the 'one voice'. Such a voice speaks of the accepted way to respond, to 'go forward' and make a 'new beginning' [the past conveniently being expunged] and to build 'towards that future'.

On some TV sets there is a function called Ceefax. It has an invaluable tool for the deaf and hard-of-hearing which projects sub-titles onto the screen for the programme being watched. In a programme of a well-known sports quiz the computer was finding it difficult to transcribe the

informal speech as team members passed comment to fellow teammates after they had successfully answered the question. This may have been salacious comment or sportsman's banter but we will never know because the sub-title to this passage of play was 'audience clapping drowns out team members talking to each other'. What a metaphor for organisational life at times of strain! Yet, I contend, this is what was happening in the organisations the three managers inhabited. The official rhetoric interpreted the event for all whilst the employees' own conversations, which attempted to explore what was going on, and how they were being affected, got drowned out.

 This complexity of reaction/action, the tension between unofficial talk and official rhetoric, the spoken and unspoken, seems so far removed from the traditional models offered by the change strategy literature. For example, the widely held notion of a 'decision tree' and its attendant notion that some structure needs to be provided for a manager to find a solution. The tree has 'decision nodes' which act as the clearly defined starting points for the manager's thinking. This thinking then results in a whole series of strategies that could be adopted if that decision is taken. Thus a whole series of events would be set in train by implementing the strategies, some events having a higher degree of success than others so

giving 'payback' for the individual and the organisation [Jackson and Scholes 1997, Beckford 1998]. What a neat package!

In reality Steve, Carl and Jack may have been able to engage in such feats of logic and clear sightedness in the future. Often, the first step taken by employers is to sweeten the pill by offering outplacement services for the redundant manager. However, this was, according to the reactions of our managers, a case of trying to 'smooth over' their emotions, 'get them moving', ultimately 'doing something'. It is the organisational equivalent of the constant stream of tea at the post-funeral get-together of relatives. What space is really being offered to allow the real impact of the decision to be explored by the manager and, vitally, by those who still remain in post? Outplacement services in offering such a facility usually focus solely on those made redundant.

This section has explored the different meanings and assumptions that I initially carried to my co-inquirers from the previous cycle in Castings. In conclusion:

- They came forward with a view that I was presumptuous in believing that I captured the 'truth' of their experiences. This is

significant because from this point on <u>I began to increasingly</u>
<u>challenge my own process of reification of social process - shaping</u>
<u>and crafting the managers experience maybe for my own need to</u>
<u>seek common themes?</u>

- Consequently, I had the potential to begin to reveal questions about the processes of dealing with the meaning of redundancy and other traumatic change processes in organisations. I began to see how the official rhetoric could supplant the multivocality to impose a view of the change process as a common experience for all employees.

- At this stage in my inquiry I became more alert to the importance of providing spaces or arena's for the exploration of emotions and choices, which may challenge the official meaning given of the 'common experience' of employees. Can these 'spaces' avoid the action-orientation of the traditional outplacement agency? As Carl made clear in his feedback, there is an assumption that only the redundant may require this facility. Yet, those who remain in post may also find the space provided for exploration of events

constricted and marginalised, overtaken or bulldozed by the need

to 'press on'.

> *Around the UK there are a number of 'Sea-Life Centres'. Each of these aquariums houses a vast pool with a variety of aquatic creatures swimming around in seemingly boundless freedom but many miles and contexts away from their real existence. Running through the largest pool is a tube where, as spectators, we can walk through and peer at close quarters at the sharks and friendly rays. Its like we are in there with them but we are protected in our plastic bubble. They come up to the sides and it seems we can almost touch them but we can remain safe in the knowledge that the glass is tough and we do not have to suffer the difficulty of the submerged self. I seek to avoid this trap with my own inquiry. If the relationship of inquiry is a false one of cooperative work but undisclosed position then ultimately the potential for real change is lost.*

5.5.   Where are we now?

The three managers experiences have uncovered the nature of dislocation

within Castings and Brewing. This chapter has sought to make sense of

the nature of this dislocation through the exploration of critical incidents

at a time of considerable strain in the organisations. The following are

unfolding insights from this exploration:

- The espoused rhetoric of both Castings Company and Brewing

  Company coupled with the redundancy context experienced by the

managers, shaped their understanding of the schisms between intent and experience.

- From my vantage point and those of the trio, this rhetoric seemed to drown out and silence alternative voices affected by the changes that had taken place, to be replaced by a 'din' of efficiency and productivity improvements.

- When brutal minimalism cut through cooperation and involvement, cool individualism emerged. This change appeared to deny alternative perspectives and spaces that could have been used to explore, and potentially counteract, the systemic impact of inclusion and exclusion.

- Despite this, situations have been identified where the experience that was potentially disempowering led to empowerment. Of managers seeking to engage in dialogues that were not self-defeating but restorative of values that were important to them. Or encouraging others, to look beyond the detail of the immediate towards different futures through reflecting on their own experience.

The following chapter depicts the research of cycle three and examines the way in which empowerment rhetoric was encountered in the advertising agency. It seeks to determine the degree to which the insights gained from inquiring with managers from Castings and Brewing increased the potential for sense making within the Agency. Or to what extent the particular context of the Agency shed new light on the conjunctions and disjunctions of its managers.

Chapter 6

The Agency: Rhetoric and Managers Lives

Snakeskin

Laptopped

Windsor knotted

cufflinks glinting

off shiny brogues

Business carded

top pocket

pressed perfection

tailored shirt

Razored

ochred

snakeskin sheen

like inhaling

the pages of

a style magazine

Dry-cleaned smile

matt blue eyes

I shake your hand

its a damp dishcloth

of grip

You turn

smartly

almost clicking heels

for the gawping receptionist

no looking back

to the lift

which will take you

ever ascending

to the

top.

In May 1998 I was formally introduced to the Managing Director of the

Agency. This occurred in the lobby of the London office in the City, as

depicted in the above poem, and had a lasting effect on me. I was not

impressed. He had just come from a meeting and Neville, my contact in

the company and client, introduced me to his boss. It was a cursory

gesture on the latter's part, he hardly broke step and he barked some

order to a receptionist and pushed the lift button a number of times to

get to the top floor. That moment seemed to define so much of my work that I had embarked on in the company up to that point. The lack of warmth and speed of greeting summing up for me the ways of working that Neville was attempting to counter in his role as London office manager. Making people feel good and worthwhile was not a real feature of this office, whether you were a senior manager or the receptionist. With this behind us Neville invited me to his nearby flat for a drink and debrief of the day ……………

My Partner's in Purley

Its nice here
only ten minutes into work
I have a key
its special you see
for residents

So handy
to flop
exhausted
into the 'Polly Pocket'
compartment
that's my life

He comes here

occasionally

to share with me

drink

sleep

to await the pin dropped peace

broken by the TV of the deaf neighbour

Then he leaves

through the special gate

where the besuitted reptilia

return to darkness

under the tenanted stone

to await the corporate dawning

of a new prey

I have everything here

you see.

The 'flat' was in the Barbican complex and it was tiny. To try and commute

to his own home would have been difficult so Neville had taken up this

residence because it was 'secure' and 'on the doorstep' for work. Neville

made great play of the special entrance with its own form of garden gate,

seemingly there to bring some sort of personal touch to what appeared, to

me, to be a very anonymous existence. That is how he saw it, no need to

develop any relationship outside other than somewhere where his partner sometimes visits, but only during the week.

Summary

I was drawn to these two experiences, of the meeting with the Agency MD and the Barbican flat, because they seem to encapsulate some particular features that I had not really encountered before in my inquiry, as well as some familiar themes:

- What was peculiar within this context, the office environment and the lives outside the Agency, that impacted on employees feeling empowered or disempowered?

- What processes of sense-making did these employees bring to their notions of empowerment and disempowerment? Were these localised or universal across the Agency?

- What disjunctions resulted from this sense-making, and did these lead to employees becoming empowered out of their disempowerment, or did it lead to further disempowerment?

I recognised that to try and explore these questions I would have to engage with individuals in a far more intensive process, involving more in-depth one-to-one meetings, than I had used in the Brewing Company or in Castings Company.

The following sections of this chapter therefore put these in-depth one-to-one meetings in context. Section 1 seeks to determine the complex nature of my relationship with the Agency and how this may have shaped subsequent interactions with individuals. Moreover, it seeks to illuminate the biography of particular managers [sections 6.2 and

6.3] in order to make sense of their views of working in the professed empowered

environment of the Agency. Due to the extensive analysis in this chapter each section

has its own summary.

6.1 Practice and Rhetoric: Working with the Agency, uncovering its rhetoric.

Section summary

In this section I will seek to locate both my practice with the Agency, and the rhetoric that I encountered, in the context of what has been discussed before in Castings and Brewing Company. In terms of my practice, I determine the approach adopted and I experience an increasing awareness of the impact of my role in working with individuals and groups. Secondly, by utilising discourse analysis, the company rhetoric is explored where the discourses of 'ownership' and 'inclusiveness of relationships' supplement familiar discourses of initiative with customers and employees.

6.1.1. Puzzles and my Practice with the Agency

As with previous chapters I have been conscious of my own sense making and puzzling and this is represented, as before, in the boxed sections of the text. My involvement with The Agency is different I believe than the other two companies, Casting and Brewing, because I was not at the vanguard of a programme of strategic transformation, such as TQM and BPR, which were the bedrocks of my working in those companies. Crucially, I had also become more aware of the shift in my thinking where I began

to puzzle more critically about the gap between the so-called

empowerment rhetoric, the public discourse seeking to persuade, and the

differing perspectives of those working within these environments. My

PhD programme since 1997 had increasingly fuelled this reflective

practice. So both my previous practice and the PhD inquiry process

impacted on this initiative in two significant ways:

- First, I sought to work in a more open-ended manner that
  had at its heart an approach centred on people participating
  in co-creating their reality through experience and
  reflection.

I had at the time of the initiative become increasingly aware of the work

of Steven Kemmis [1982]. He presented at SOLAR while I was

undertaking the inquiry with the Agency. According to Kemmis [1982] the

aim of action research is the:

> 'establishment of conditions under which aims or claims can
> be tested, under which practice can be regarded
> strategically, and "experimentally", and under which
> practitioners can organise as a critical community committed
> to the improvement of their work and their understandings
> of it'.

I make this point here because I want to impress upon the reader that, as stated in the methodology, my understanding and use of action research has been emergent, being shaped and constructed through critical reflection both on and within relationships, inside and outside of workplaces.

- Secondly, that I was becoming more aware of the effect of this practice and recognising that there are multiple forms of inquiry. That my own questioning of my role as 'consultant' was not separate to what I was doing within the Agency but was an intrinsic part of that practice. The meanings others held of 'consultant' guided choices of how they acted with others, and myself, in groups; or what they chose to disclose to me in an interview.

Both of these points - on the approach I chose to adopt, together with increasing awareness of impact of role - were not new to me. As explained in the methodology chapter, my background in a variety of therapeutic contexts as a qualified counsellor, as well as my considerable experience of leading groups, made me aware of such dynamics and issues associated

with them, such as transference and counter-transference. However, the period of study, away from day-to-day 'delivering' [as I saw it then in 1997], encouraged me to reflect on practice and heightened my awareness of existing knowledge.

6.1.2.   The Agency Rhetoric

In the other two companies that are part of this inquiry the rhetoric of empowerment was immediately discernible. For example, in Castings Company weekly meetings always included the Managing Director reinforcing the constant messages of improvement and the need to remain competitive. It was THE message. This was then promoted through regular training events to develop and heighten awareness of 'the power of team working', kaizen* and self-improvement. The latter was boosted by IIP initiatives and NVQ attainments. The company was drenched in the message. Similarly, the Brewing Company had an extensive management development programme and wide scale initiatives to promote its 'vision' of empowerment' throughout the business.

---

* meaning slow, never-ending improvement by workteams .

The Agency was different it seemed to me. I noticed that the offices did not have the visual signs and slogans attempting to reinforce messages of empowerment that Castings had. It certainly did not seem to have an extensive management development programme or to have experienced a major strategic initiative, such as TQM. What it did have, on first inspection, was its literature.

On meeting the HR Director for the first time I was handed a bundle of material which detailed the company philosophy in respect of 'meeting customers needs' and how 'integral' its workforce was in making sure, from first contact, that the customer was satisfied and returned for repeat business. An analysis of the company literature[*], entitled 'Think Tank' and distributed to all potential customers and to all employees, displays some familiar turns of phrase [these are denoted by the following italicised extracts]:

> *'Ideas fuel every business. **Ours**[my emphasis throughout the extracts] is no exception. **We** apply creative thoughts not only to words and pictures but also to every conceivable business problem. Not surprisingly, **we** find the more penetrating **our** insights, the more practical and appropriate **our** solutions. And the more firmly **we** establish ourselves as the best agency around'.*

---

[*] Informed by Watson and Harris [1999 pp. 6-7] in order to uncover 'discursive cues'.

What is striking here is the constant use of the words 'we' and 'our', as indicated by the bold emphasis above. The 'we' as used here is not saying 'you and us', the Agency and their client. This usage shows a contradiction to the rhetoric pointing towards partnership. It indicates a discourse[*] of takeover and inclusiveness of activity - repeated later when it states of its employees that:

> *Each one of them is there to steer you through the complexity of the advertising process, take ownership of your accounts and deliver the results you want.*

A real sense of the Agency being in the driving seat, very directive, almost 'penetrating' the client.

Again we see here the emphasis on 'creativity' and practicality, *and this is not just confined to the basic product of words and pictures* [for these read castings products, or providing a conducive pub environment] but covers *'every conceivable business problem'* [quite a claim!] that leads them to being the *'best' agency around.*

---

[*] The definition of 'discourse' being used here is by Fairclough and Hardy[1997] where they state that it is 'a particular way of constructing or constituting some area of social practices' p.147

The term *'best'* here is used in a very strict business sense, as opposed to being the best at providing a safe workplace, for upholding employment legislation, for intrinsic work qualities such as variation, development or meaningfulness [Alvesson and Deetz 2000]. It goes on:

> *More accounts are won or lost on the strength of relationships than on any other issue. So we've invested a lot of thought into getting our relationships right. We give you direct access to a **small team of people** who **take the time** to build an understanding of your company, your industry and specific issues you face.*

The emphasis is on 'relationship' and the rational means by which the company has gone about configuring these in such a way to be 'right'. Delving deeper into the company literature it is difficult to determine just what these 'processes' of 'thought' actually are. As you will see from later stories offered by employees these did not encompass particularly rigorous selection policies. The emphasis is on teams and individuals being in close contact and responding to customer need. The literature is attempting to nurture the relationship, of caring for the untold anxiety caused by the so-called 'complexity' of the advertising process. [However, as noted above the quality of the relationship being described in their

rhetoric is hardly one of partnership] This is not the job of one account handler but appears to be the responsibility of a ' small team' who have 'time' and 'understanding' – who take 'ownership':

> *Typically your team will consist of a Senior Accounts handler and one or two coordinators -- people with the right mix of skill, sector experience and personality to gel with each other and with you.* **They take responsibility** *for your accounts, they are reliable and* **so resourceful.** *We take pride in how we work hard to make your life easier……*
> *While one of the team is out taking a face-to-face brief, another is always back at base -- the engine room if you like -- handling your calls, sorting out any queries and making sure things get done.*
> *It's a well-oiled process in which your team acts as an informed link to our in-house specialists. Between them these small teams project manage more than £70 million of advertising and communication every year. To support them, we invest heavenly in administrative systems and training. And to measure their performance, we carry out regular, formal, service level reviews'*

Again the rhetoric is of the well-oiled machine, the closely fitting parts that have been specially selected. These are reinforced by other rhetorics of employees 'taking responsibility', and 'ownership', for that customer. Not only that but they also possess 'admirable qualities', such as 'resourcefulness' in order to 'get things done'!

If I were a prospective client of the Agency, investing a considerable amount in this account, then I would also expect 'things to be done'. However, from the employees' perspective, trying to attain these heights, the language is setting expectations [Watson and Harris 1999]. Moreover it is also promising the employee that the organisation will support them through training and development. Again, this point will be returned to in order to determine whether the managers interviewed really felt that their employer had fulfilled this side of this 'contract'.

> *We can provide fast, cost-effective information that anchors your communication in logic and our creativity in commonsense. All in all, you can be confident that advice is based on rational arguments rather than hunches and gut reaction........*
>
> ***We believe many of the same things you do.*** *That organisations can benefit by having a range of different viewpoints, rather than a narrow perspective on the world. That they should reflect the diversity of the community they recruit from, not exclude certain elements and that they should strive to produce equality sensitive communications. The keener you are to give equality a fair hearing, the sooner you should talk to someone with an open mind on the subject.*
>
> Company publicity material 1998.

The discourse underlying this for me is a real sense of being owned; disempowering clients through ownership of their business. A belief that

the Agency can presume, ahead of time, what their client's beliefs are, as they state 'we believe many of the same things you do'. Immediately contradicted by the statement that ...'organisations can benefit by a range of different viewpoints'. It as if the Agency rhetoric is persuading the reader of their literature to consider their client relations, and their own organisation as 'pluralist' [Morgan 1986], that diversity of interests is seen as potentially positive. However, to follow this same political framework, relations are more, in my view of the Agency literature, characterised as 'unitarist' – the rhetoric stressing common objectives of employees and clients, power embodied in authority, leadership and control.

Moreover, we hear echoes of the continuous improvement rhetoric of Castings, particularly where the Agency literature speaks of the prevalence of 'rational arguments' over 'hunches and gut reactions', as though the latter were not of worth, assuming that all information can be known and work has no 'irrational' element to it. How clinical it must be working in this 'creative way' and what a very narrow view of being 'creative' is being used in this context. Creativity when spontaneity and experience are supposedly supplanted by a rigid formal decision-making process, echoing the experiences of the managers in Castings Company

within a Continuous Improvement [CI] Environment. Previously, I noted the constant reference to action and the muting of alternative voices by the referral to 'serving the customer' and being seen to act. The total conformity of employees towards the strategic 'total quality' goal is also echoed within the Agency rhetoric where it refers to the diversity of views, the relish with which it embraces equality and avoiding the 'narrowness' of minds.

As I read this company literature in 1998 I puzzled how this intent would be realised in the contacts and interactions with the Agency managers and their employees. I was struck by the expectations that were being described and which employees were to realise. Coupled with this was the potentially disempowering nature of so much of the prevailing discourse of ownership and penetration of their clients thinking. I was intrigued to see if Agency employees also shared this view of empowerment. Contact with the Agency began with a meeting with Neville in December 1997.

6.2. Neville: perspectives from a senior manager

Section Summary:

I chart my involvement with the Agency from first contact with Neville, a senior manager. A disjunction is identified of pressure to perform but an increasing awareness on his part of the ramifications of this. Further themes are introduced which identify the nature of isolation he feels, the tension between the 'private' and 'political', and the nature of the 'space' that encourages exploration of these. Such themes resonate with subsequent employee biographies in later chapters.

Neville had handled the advertising account for the Brewing Company on behalf of the Agency. We found ourselves working together six months prior to the meeting with the MD, which opened this chapter, as my contact in the Brewing Company had recommended my services to Neville as a personal coach. At this point my work with Neville was strictly on a private basis, outside of any in-company contract with the Agency.

Neville was, in his own words, 'struggling' and felt that the 'dynamics at the top of the company' were not allowing him to be 'open about his problems'. Admitting to weakness would have been seen, he believed, as undermining the image he was trying to cultivate, that of the 'Young Turk', the possible successor to the MD in the future. He was a single man in his early thirties and the image I derived from our work together was that he was intent on 'getting to the top', and fast. His route through the Agency since University had been, as he termed it, 'meteoric'.

So we embarked initially on a personal programme of exploring his problems and assessing the actions he was taking to solve them. He relished, he said, the personal space that was given for him to 'be himself', to show vulnerability, to admit that 'he did not have the answers', to be challenged on ways in which he was constructing his experiences and how these constructions may be being construed by other employees. [This positive reaction to the **change of pace** that our work offered and a **change of space** was noticeable to me as we met at my home. He was often late having rung me beforehand to explain that he was driving back from an appointment that had overrun.] He invariably arrived in a stressed state and then visibly slumped in an armchair. Yet above all we worked with the problem of what he called 'the pressure'.

His story opened this thesis:

[The following comments were taken from my Field Journal 1: 1997. I wrote this up in my own words as a 'cameo'. As our meeting was a counselling session, I was unable to tape Neville's exact words. With his agreement I wrote the following.]

'A Lay-By just on the outskirts of Nottingham 1997........

A manager of a company sits in his car. He has had to stop because he blacked out whilst driving just a quarter of a mile up the road. It was not for long, probably just a few seconds but it scared him to death. It's not the first time it has happened. In recent months, since having the responsibility for running two offices fifty miles apart, he has travelled many hundreds of miles. Not easy miles either because his mind has been full of the problems that both offices are facing at the moment. He is constantly feeling that he is chasing his tail, rushing to and fro never getting a sense that he is in control of what is happening to him. The firm knows, he believes, that he is able and ambitious. He fears that if he does not take this chance for further development then he will not progress in the company. There is already talk of further 'rationalisation' and 'reorganisation'. The pressure is on to develop the business further. If they do not, then the company will be left behind by the competition. But this pressure is taking its toll on this manager. Blackouts are only part of the story, it's the constant lack of sleep that is also worrying him. How can he keep going if he feels so weary all the time? What cost is this having on his health, his lack of contact with others outside of the work context, the shortage of real listeners to unpack his fears and anxieties?

He sits opposite me and starts to break down. We talk of his firm's espoused rhetoric of empowerment.'

Neville : Field Journal 1 1997

Many complexities are contained in Neville's story. A disjunction, I sense, in that he has a real feeling of not 'being in control' but at the same time cannot let up because of the business pressure to perform, and so compete. At what cost to himself, and to others, inside and outside of his work places? Lack of sleep, constant weariness and concerns about health pervaded this account.

What is significant for me here is that up until now I had not come across anyone who had espoused so vividly, what seemed to me, the human cost of working in a so-called 'empowered' environment. As shown later in this chapter he was far from alone.

During our first sessions in 1997 he spoke of when he first joined the company and was assigned to the Midlands. At that time, based in the Birmingham office as manager, he felt an attachment to the workforce:

> 'There just seems now a breaking away from traditional ties in the workplace, where I had a constant base and was not transitory. It was good because you could develop relationships over time without feeling that you had to be back on the road, or that I was not giving over enough time to other offices I was responsible for ....let

alone having energy for others outside the workplace that I felt I had lost touch with......'

The sense I am making of this is that Neville's 'breaking away', trying to deal with something that was 'not constant', shaped the short-term nature of the 'relationships' he was encountering. Later conversations recognised that the difficulties associated with his work patterns were not only affecting his formation of what he felt were 'effective relationships' in the workplace but, due to excessive fatigue, he had little energy left to meet new people or sustain friendships with others outside of work. Therefore, his supposed 'empowerment', his opportunity he had taken to free himself from the traditional patterns of working at one office with a workforce he managed, resulted in him losing touch with work colleagues, social circles and, possibly, his 'self'. When these perceptions were fed back to him he confirmed their accuracy. Here, for me, was an example of the tension between the 'private' and the 'political', so vividly espoused by Knights and Wilmott[2000]. They comment that:

> ...textbooks and guru guides tend to take for granted what may loosely be termed the personal and the political dimensions of

managerial work...in lived experience, however, the personal and the political are inextricably intertwined.[p.17]

Neville's experiences demonstrate this. For him, the worlds of coping inside and outside of work are not separate but in a symbiotic relationship. Time spent at work eats into social life. He is aware that strong outside relationships would enable him to deal with his 'work pressures' better. However, his use of the phrase 'lost touch' suggests that his relationships may not be as strong as they once were. It may be optimistic to think that he can pick these up as before, both inside and outside of his workplace.

Vic, the main character in David Lodge's novel 'Nice Work', has *private* [my italics] problems and worries that Knights and Wilmott suggest, 'are directly related to his 'public' position of power and responsibility as a managing director' [2000 p.17]. Similarly Neville, I contend, had issues that were concerned with his determination to cope, to advance, to relate to others, as a senior manager within a context that was rich with the personal and political dynamics of Agency life.

6.2.1. Working with Neville: Old Tunes or New Tunes?

As Neville and I started working together I was still in contact with both

Castings and Brewing as detailed in previous chapters. I became very

aware of how his story seemed to resonate with themes already explored

in different settings; that possibly this was not a 'new tune' being played,

that the Agency context was one where 'old tunes'- familiar themes -

were being played out:

- One being the drive for business development with its familiar

  chorus, as heard in the continuous improvement rhetoric of the

  Castings Company, that of 'keeping ahead of the competition'.

- The threat, like the Sword of Damocles, of maybe being the

  employee 'for the chop if you do not push yourself to the limit',

  coupled with a driving ambition, on Neville's part, to push to do

  almost that. This has echoes with the sentiments expressed by

  Jack ['fear culture': previous chapter] and Steve ['turning off the

  tap': previous chapter]. Neville felt impelled to be the 'Young Turk',

  to prove himself the worthy successor to the MD.

I contend that the image of Neville in the 'capsule' of the car and the lack of contact with others inside and, crucially, outside of work, is an old tune - the theme uncovered before of isolation. **That ironically, the very notion of empowerment - of involving others, in taking responsibility for greater rewards for self and others, for personal development at whatever level of the organisation and other life experience - seemingly leads to an increasing sense of detachment.**

A new tune, though, that I believe to be significant is choice. I fed back to Neville that, ultimately, he did not have to cover the miles, **he chose to**. He did not necessarily have to take on two jobs - **but he did**. He felt it was, in his words 'a career investment', but I challenged his construction in our meetings on a frequent basis. On what grounds did he feel this would be an 'investment'? Was he aware that there might be attendant costs to self and others if this choice is made? Were there not certain presumptions in this about others' sense-making of his use of energy? Did he believe that his seniors in the Agency would automatically recognise such endeavours and give him what he thought 'he deserved'?

A further 'new tune' emerged here. The feedback Neville gave me for our sessions was often littered with references to the type of 'space' that I had created that 'allowed' him to explore his position and what he could do about it. He described this space as one where he was not being 'judged'; where he had time, but a different conception of 'time' - a time 'for him', to explore alternative ways of acting. [I recognise at this point that a discussion could be undertaken relating these points to identity. To maintain the continuity of Neville's narrative I return to this issue in chapter 9].

Ultimately, the work with Neville brought forward familiar themes, as well as new forms that I was keen to take forward to different settings with other participants in the Agency. My interest in his position, which he had had chosen to disclose in our work together, began to be focused around responsibility. To what extent did he bring on the problems being expressed through his choices in/of action - or how far was he 'constructing' the Agency as an 'entitative organisation' [Dachler and Hosking 1995], a 'thing' outside of himself, that was imposing 'this pressure' on him?

Due to the success that our work together produced for Neville, in respect of an awareness of the consequences of his actions and the exploration of alternative ways of behaving in relation to him and others, he wished me to develop this approach in-company with groups of employees and, hopefully, have the same success. He believed that many others were in the same position as him - dealing with an increasingly pressurised workplace. More responsibility was given but in return more was now being expected of employees, particularly the managers in the company. Neville felt that more 'support could be offered' to give the managers opportunities to explore what was a 'new work context'.

6.3. My involvement with the Agency: the Group Initiative.

Section summary

In relation to my involvement with the Agency, I discuss participation and how the inquiry groups were established in the Agency; how work was agreed; what actually took place; the messiness of operating the initiative and how this was influenced by the contextual qualities of the Agency; lastly, an awareness of my potential effect as a researcher on their accounts. The chapter concludes with a commentary on participant actions arising out of the initiative.

Participation

If I was going to be involved with the Agency, in the way that Neville envisaged, then I was committed to a participative approach to inquiry. The Agency was organised as two separate divisions: the 'Regions' and the London office. After discussion with Neville, it was thought best to follow this organisational split and form two inquiry groups:

- Regional: employees from regional offices around the UK formed group one.

- London: the second group came from the Agency's head office in London.

Participants were invited from these various offices to contribute to an initial launch of an inquiry of their work practices, particularly their circumstances, actions and consequences within the pressurised 'new work context', as Neville had identified it, that the Agency managers were experiencing. I urged Neville and the HR Director, Jane, to offer this invitation out to Agency staff from across as many Regional sites as possible to encourage cross-company involvement. What I was conscious of were internal politics I had already picked up on from working with Neville. It would have been very easy for others to perceive the initiative as 'Neville's', maybe just involving those staff he had been close to in both Birmingham and Nottingham. Also, I was considering the possibility of

widening this community, so the participants of the small group meetings

could go back into their separate office environments and include more

and more of those involved and affected by the workplace practices

[Henry and Kemmis 1985]. Participants were therefore invited through an

email, sent out through Jane's HR office, to all office managers in the

Regions and in London.

How work was agreed

The London office was potentially the largest group and both Neville and

the HR Director warned me it would be 'the biggest challenge'. At this

point I sensed a possible problem emerging. I had worked with Neville in a

very open-ended 'person-centred' approach to coaching which sought to be

guided by what he brought to our sessions each week. The in-company

initiative seemed a different task. I was particularly conscious of just

who seemed to be selecting the 'topic' of the initiative. I made clear to

Neville and Jane that this was not an 'analytical' study where data was to

be obtained and then fed back in the form of a report for 'more senior

staff' to action or not. Participation would be encouraged by managers

working towards improvement of their own practices, issues and

understandings evolving out of the cyclical process of action research.

The tension that this comment generated, with Jane in particular, was

evident at a meeting recorded in my reflective journal 12/7/98:

> 'Sitting with Jane and Neville of the Agency discussing my
>
> thoughts on the group initiative. I fiercely defended the idea
>
> that it should not be a 'Stress Management Programme'
>
> [Jane's suggestion] for this seems to indicate 'techniques'
>
> people do to themselves and others without giving due
>
> consideration to the situation they find themselves in......lets
>
> enable the group to decide what it wants..what the
>
> programme should be like...who should be involved – how they
>
> can carry it forward. My role is to enable a process, a format
>
> for conversations to take place but letting these be
>
> unfettered by someone else's vision of what this should be
>
> and the steps along the way.'
>
> Field Journal 12/7/98.

Jane was adamant that a title was needed that linked with the strategic

aim of the Agency if, she claimed, the budget was to be approved. So it

was decided to call the initiative 'Working Under Pressure'; I drew up a

short proforma introducing myself and gave a brief summary of how this

initiative had come about. Once I had a list of participants I sent this out

with spaces where they could indicate a response to points I made in the

proforma about my previous cycles of research in Castings and the

Agency. They could bring such responses along to the first session. Within

this document I wrote of the success of 'creating the right environment',

through 'recognition of the contributions of the group', of the 'location of

the event enabling participants to take a psychological step away from the

day-to-day activities of their workplaces', and the benefits of

'participant involvement in devising objectives'. What I am stressing, with

the use of these illustrations of material sent out to participants, is this

was not a traditional 'training course' where pre-packaged activities were

delivered to delegates. Rather the intent here was to engage with, not on,

the starting points and understandings of the participants. The design

would emerge, not be pre-packaged, through the application of critically

reflexive action research processes.

Looking back now with hindsight, and further critical reflection of my role

in shaping the resulting process, I needed to have been more aware of the

profound influence that the key stakeholders in the organisation could

have on the research process from this point on. These were obviously

Neville, a senior manager, who was 'introducing' me into his organisation,

and the HR Director, Jane, who was funding the project out of the 'training budget'. [Later I realised through further contact with Jane that this budget did not exist in a traditional form of an annual allocation of funds but relied upon her powers of persuasion to wrestle funds from the MD on a 'needs must' basis.]

Taylor [1999, newsletter from the Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism] comments:

> 'In conducting management research, I have gained access to many organisations for research purposes. In these companies the gatekeeper has often made clear what the agenda of the company is in letting the researcher into the company to conduct the research. There seems to be no such thing as a free lunch in organisational research. Almost every time management have wanted to know how their initiatives or changes were being received. The notion of independent research begins to look a little

unlikely when these issues are taken into account'.

> *Yet looking back over my field journal of 1998 I recognise now that something was missing. As I interacted with the senior managers such as Neville and Jane, as well as employees from the inquiry groups, I often wonder now whose 'stake' was being attended to at any one time. Was it the gatekeepers, the HR Director and Neville, who permitted the initiative to go ahead, who supported its central inquiring purpose as I saw it. Or were they willing to go along with this in order to satisfy their own undisclosed needs? There are hints....I listened to the complexities of office relations during the coffee break at the London inquiry groups meeting and heard different facets of Jane being discussed...whether she will stay on the Board...whether the MD will remain because the company is not performing well. I was asked by one member of the group to tell her, in confidence, 'what is this really all about?' as though I was working as an undercover agent for some quasi-management agenda. Was I, unknowingly?*

6.3.1.   The Group Initiative: participants and initial aims

The aim was to form a community of employees who were committed to

becoming aware about their situation and the consequence of their own

choices within that context. It sought to bring about action, being guided

very much by the new forms of reading that I was encountering,

303

emphasising emancipatory ideals. A good example in relation to the

outcome from our group inquiry is that:

> '[Managers would be] emancipating themselves from organisational
>
> and personal constraints, which seemingly limit their power to live
>
> their own values'
>
> [Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 23].

My own sense at this point, when planning the programme in early 1998,

was to try and work with both groups at first but, ultimately, to bring

them together at a future date.

Don	Account Creative	Birmingham
Alison	Account Director	Manchester
Paula	Account Director	Leeds
Nicki	Team Leader	Nottingham
Lena	Account Director	Birmingham
Louise	Team Leader	Nottingham

Membership of the regional inquiry group

On the 14th August 1998 the regional group met in Birmingham. It

consisted of six employees, two from each regional office [see table

above]. The group included team leaders, account directors, as well as account managers. Traditionally, an advertising agency has a basic structure made up of an office manager, who is invariably part of the senior management team, creative staff and management account staff. The latter project-manage the design, or 'copy', from winning the business in the first place, to the delivery of the product to the client as determined by the contract. An account director will oversee the work of account managers, who take responsibility for particular client accounts. The regional group was made up of five management account staff together with one 'creative' representative. The second group, based in the London office, met a week later. This was a larger group, ten in number, with a more even distribution of creative and account staff. The number of managers in each office was determined by the size of the offices. Therefore, who was able to attend the meetings for the smaller offices was straightforward. Leeds, for instance, had less than twenty employees and one manager, whereas London had over three hundred employees.

Paula	Account Director
Christine	Account Creative
Carla	Administrator
Moira	Administrator
Norma	Account Manager
Sarah	Account Creative
Alan	Account Creative
Chloe	Account Manager
Trudy	Office Manager [Notts]
Annette	Account Director

Membership of the London office inquiry group.

6.3.2.   What actually took place: critical reflection

Each of the two-day sessions was loosely structured in order to provide a framework for the participants and also conform to the company's need for some 'deliverable outcomes':

- Day One brought the group together to explore their own sense making of their current work situation, as regards working under pressure in the company.

- On Day Two the group explored creative ways to act differently and share experience of effective practice.

Day One: I was encouraged from my use of the CRAR framework with Castings and Brewing to go ahead and begin with the starting dilemmas of participants. The reactions to my proforma questions were individually put onto flipchart paper and then small groups were formed to exchange understandings and starting assumptions about their working practices and the rhetorics of the Agency. This activity was very fruitful for it revealed a great deal of tension around what they saw as the demands of their job being at odds with the exhortations of senior managers to become more involved and at the same time take more responsibility on their shoulders. Common tensions included the 'increased workload' they had to deal with but at the same time a distinct 'lack of reassurance and support'. The issue of time was stressed, participants commenting on how it seemed compressed. The assumption being that they could not 'leave on time', particularly the managers who sensed that they had to set an example to others. Even though their workload for the day was complete they would still remain at work until their 'juniors' had left.

This initial session was rich in stories and meanings about their working life. At the coffee break I encouraged them to move around the room and try and get a sense of what was on the walls and from what they heard in the previous session. This was not without some tension. A participant commented on how they had always been used to a 'trainer' using an overhead projector to present slides of information 'to give them something' at the beginning and he was fearful that the day would be wasted if he 'did not take anything away from it'. I responded by saying that this was not a training session and the intention was for the group to determine what they felt was important to explore without a preset agenda. Another interjected at this point and remarked how refreshing it had been to start with their own experience. At no other event that she had attended had she been listened to in this way.

This led into deeper reflection of the insights from the previous session and I commented on how research with Castings and Brewing seemed to suggest the importance of choice. I facilitated a discussion with the whole group of the extent in which insights or narratives were about choices, what they could do in their job or were prevented from doing, and if certain ways of talking about work were legitimate or not. This led to a lively discussion on the current constraints as they saw them within

the Agency. Particularly how others would perceive them if they chose to act in a way that challenged the orthodoxy of maximum effort at all times or taking time out, as one participant put it, to 'focus on or discuss the pressure she was under'. I sought to broaden such understandings suggesting that the group take some time to reflect on their consequences. A plethora of reaction arose from this. Most startling was the impact such work pressures had on themselves physically and in their lives away from work – difficulties encountered in 'switching off', relaxing at home with family and friends, and poor sleep patterns leading to lethargy at work.

I did little prompting with this session. The group appeared keen to 'off-load' and it seemed that the session had released pressure held by a very tight cork. I was pleased that once the starting assumptions had come to the surface that I had resisted the temptation to go 'well, what you need is....' and reverted to consultant mode. Rather a different space was created where a great deal of information was revealed and feelings vented on the workings of the Agency and the dilemmas the participants encountered in dealing with its rhetoric. Finally that day the group decided what they felt they had achieved and what they sought to focus on for the next day.

The sense was that they had learned a lot about other people's perceptions of their work, something that the Agency was not good at. However, they did sense that they needed to address better the issues faced by them in their day to day working. This would come about by looking for opportunities for how alternative choices could be made and acted upon. I suggested that I could offer some 'ways in' to elicit such alternatives and possibly tap into the very strengths that the Agency had concerning the creativity of its staff.

Day 2: I viewed my way of working at the Agency as attempting to offer 'a kit bag' of ideas and frameworks towards assisting participants in insightful actions back in their workspaces, dependent on particular needs. For instance, the regional group, which was the first group I worked with, became very interested in Transactional Analysis [TA] and in some of the attendant 'exercises' I offered to groups for them to explore the relationship issues that they had broached in Day One, as well as alternative ways of acting. I facilitated the group role-play, for example, offering a short introduction and materials on the various TA 'ego-states' to determine, in different situations, which one they inhabited and how others responded to their behaviour. This led to other

stances being adopted whereby a different ego state could be chosen and experimented with, to act out these different ways of being with others. Consequently, the bulk of Day 2 was spent focusing on particular participant's issues, as they participated as 'the manager', and then the group supported the person to practise new options by offering observations. Particularly with the regional group, these proved to be very successful.

The London group tended to procrastinate more. They tended to stick with the assumptions and highlighted the lack of choices that were open to them. They seemed reluctant on Day 2 to explore different insightful choices and plan how they were to act on them. For most of this group it seemed the real value of this second day was to stay with the moment and enjoy the relaxation techniques that I offered them. I believe, as later meetings with individuals from this group demonstrate, the pressure this group were under coupled with the factional in-fighting that was taking place in the London office at the time was not conducive to action. The trust of each other in this group was not as apparent as in the regional group and this I sense enveloped our work together in this meeting. This lack of trust appeared to manifest itself in 'coffee-time' conversations I overheard rather than during the meetings themselves. In retrospect I

wished I had broached this subject at the time, because I sensed that it was a real blockage to the London group listening in a non-judgemental way to others' stories. That this in itself may have increased awareness of the possible consequences of the London group's ways of thinking and acting.

The final session of the London meeting was not the end point reached by the regional group, which had clear action agendas. Nevertheless, I felt that the critically reflexive process had been set in train through an attempt to utilise the CRAR model with the group. I did not force the issue on action but let the group decide what they wanted to use the meeting time for. In this way the group was revising-in-action: our sessions part of an emergent design that came out of joint work with each other, rather than a 'framework' I had imposed.

I decided not to tape record the events. I made this decision because I felt that the tape recorder would be intrusive taking into account the heightened sense of anxiety, and possible mistrust in the group about the initial intentions of our work together. I felt recording would not encourage the group members to be open about their work lives or personal circumstances. Consequently, I made notes in my field journal and also retained flip chart material, with the group's agreement, for

future analysis. This was checked out with both groups in a 'ground rules' session at the beginning of each day.

When reflecting on my use of TA in working with the stories of the participants it occurred to me that this approach may be just another instrumental tool, no different than the 'team diagnostic frameworks' used in TQM programmes, or the simplistic 'overcoming resistance questionnaires' pedalled as part of BPR employee development training. In retrospect though I feel that this was not the case here. The manner in which TA was used was critical. Here TA was offered to the groups and demonstrated to see if it could be useful. It was not imposed as part of a 'course manual'. I checked out with them if its use was bringing different insights into the situations they were describing and the possibility of them experimenting with new ways of behaving once they returned to their offices and homes. Moreover, I now realise that the way I was using my knowledge when working in-company was different than before. I was engaging with groups in a way that refuted an image of myself as the 'expert' with THE answer. Like possessing a 'golden key' that would unlock their abilities ALLOWING them to pass over some development threshold towards a new world of the transformed organisation! Dialogue, negotiation, and emergence were far more to the fore in determining the activities of my work WITH rather than ON the Agency.

6.3.3. The Contextual Qualities of the Agency

Through my work with Neville I had developed a particular picture of the Agency as seen through his eyes. As I was introduced to others this picture began to change and re-form through listening to stories and observing ways in which participants and their employees related to each other. What was so apparent were the contextual qualities that

subsequently affected my involvement with groups and in individual meetings that followed, as well as with participants' engagement with their employees and others outside of work.

There was 'complexity of place' in the sense that the Agency was organised as two separate companies. The power lay with the centre, the London office. Here were the directors and the senior managers. It also generated by far the most income, more than the regional offices put together. Leading the London office was considered to be the zenith of a managerial career in the Agency. This had been shown through the comments of Neville in the previous chapter. The regions were managed at arms length, their own office managers rarely meeting with 'London' on a face-to-face basis. Such divisions and perceptions of rank and status within the company imbided relations within an office and between offices.

Time and biography were also factors, particularly in relation to this initiative. The company had come through an advertising boom but this was starting to fade and rumours were rife that major contracts were going to be lost. Amidst this uncertainty managers were now being invited to take part in a new departure for the company. Most forms of

development up to this point had been concentrated around key

management competences for certain managers. Nothing had been

embarked on that attempted to bring together cross-functional groups,

as well as integrating regional offices and Head Office, the London

office, in one venture to try and get a better view of what was happening

across the organisation. However, I was aware that this might bring about

tension because the group initiative was a brief from the HR Director and

Neville. Their respective biographies were a factor. They were close allies

in a move to try and change the management ethos of the Agency at this

time. I was to 'deliver', in their words, a 'company reality', an overall view

of what the Agency was 'like'. I was also conscious that the inquiry needed

to represent multiple realities, in the sense that different people

participated from different levels within different offices, within a

certain time frame. The latter, I believe, was important in the financial

context of the business which produced a covert managerial discourse of

needing to 'work harder' through a period of so-termed 'greater

uncertainty' that by-passed the official rhetoric.

Therefore, the contextual backdrop was a heady mix of place, time and

biography. Such issues affected the nature of the research in a number

of respects:

- if some influential members of a project are involved is this going to affect the commitment of others, both in a positive and negative sense?

- How could we plan the research in a democratic manner when participants perceived the Agency to be wholly undemocratic and reluctant to listen to their needs, whilst at the same time pressing for increased effort and responsibility?

- Should the work that is engaged in, and issues that arise, be made public and who should know of this outside of the participant group, and how might they perceive their initial non-involvement?

The following incident encapsulates many of these tensions emerging from the contextual qualities of the Agency.

Each group was to meet over two days. Due to the workloads the HR Director, who acted as the 'gatekeeper' for offering participants 'the opportunity' [her words] to take part, decided that these could not be consecutive. I advised that a break could be beneficial anyway for the participants to reflect, experiment with some ideas and discuss points arising from the first meeting, with other colleagues in their offices. She agreed to contact the participants with details and arrange an off-site

venue. Later, I was faxed a list of attendees. I contacted each one, introducing myself and reiterating what I hoped the session was for.

However, the HR director did not contact the participants and they received my message out of the blue. Coupled with this, at least a third of the participants from the London group were not told until twenty-four hours before the event was to go ahead that they were to take part. It became clear, when we did finally meet up, that the two venues were awash with rumour and misunderstandings, anxiety and plain ignorance of what this was all about.

The company's financial situation exacerbated uncertainty. In the case of the London group, I spent the first hour allaying suspicions and trying to redress the situation. Coincidentally, a recent board announcement had been made of interim results that were relatively poor. I later was told that this had fuelled rumours of imminent redundancies and 'cutbacks'. From the point of view of a third of the participants they were then summoned with little notice to a meeting where their ability [or inability?] to manage was going to be discussed! In the introductions at the beginning of the first day it became clear that the question "why me?" was a pervasive concern.

As I worked with these dynamics I became aware of how symptomatic this episode was of the way in which poor communication at a senior level, seemingly inhibited the manager's work. It also brought home to me the high levels of anxiety that existed amongst this group; that the rhetoric of the smooth working machine was in direct contrast to the disjunctions of disquiet about career, ability to cope and how others may perceive this.

6.3.4. "Do or Die": Exploring working lives and personal stances

I was interested in light of previous cycles in Castings and Brewing in offering some space to explore the potential costs of working with notions of empowerment. The following section therefore illustrates the dilemmas of managers in the Agency in 'giving their all', whilst being aware of the costs to themselves and others of this behaviour.

One participant said during the sessions that as 'soon as you get Agency people together you open up a can of worms'. This is demonstrated in the regional group's responses in group discussion to the prompt *'discuss and then conclude on your experience of working at the Agency':*

Don spoke of the 'excessive workload' that he felt he had to cope with. He believed a lot of this was due to the fact that the business had a policy of 'over service'. What he meant by this was that they were constantly encouraged, as managers, to answer to 'every whim' of the customer, consequently they were:

> ...trying too hard to be perfect, which was over
> and above what the customer required from us
>> Regional meeting: flipchart presentation, Sept 15th 1998

Other members of this regional group felt far too much was asked of them but they did not have the support to deliver. This support was lacking in two respects:

> .... lack of visibility as well as understanding from
> senior managers, which is coupled with the lack of
> resources from both the creative and secretarial
> sections of the business.
>> Alison: Regional flipchart presentation 15th Sept 1998

How ironic, in light of the private work that I carried out with Neville. What came through from a good proportion of these participants were the faults of senior managers, like Neville. The excessive pressures being imposed based on views of their jobs, held by their seniors, which did not conform to what the managers saw as 'the reality'. I did not hear anything during the days of working with the two groups that had not been

experienced by Neville. It was almost that the groups felt a senior

manager was immune from the pressures, contradictions, uncertainties

and complexities that they themselves were experiencing. It is my

contention, supported by Neville's descriptions of the need to show

certainty and assuredness in front of others, that such reactions were

not allowed to be seen. The 'lack of visibility' of managers was possibly

more than mere lack of physical presence. It extended to senior managers

choosing to present a sense of self that exuded certainty and

commitment.

However, the regional group felt that it was not just the internal

pressures that were important to them. A number of this group cited

outside pressures, which impacted on relations and their abilities to cope

within the organisation. Paula spoke of the constant pressure caused by

'travelling between sites' and the 'home stress' that her tiredness and

anxiety caused. Alison put it succinctly when she stated in a group

discussion:

> '…how do I have this positive thinking, "do and die"
> attitude to work, that we are encouraged to operate
> under, and at the same time balance it off with a concern
> for myself?'

<p style="text-align:center">Alison: Field Journal Sept 15th 1998</p>

Lena felt that too often she was taking 'other people's pressures on board'

and that was 'stressful':

> 'In our office we have a misinterpretation of
> the team leaders role. Consequently, as office manager,
> I seem to end up doing this. Solving problems for
> them...taking them home with me...its like me taking
> ownership'.
>
> Lena: Field Journal 15th Sept 1998.

Lena, in her senior position at her regional office, seemingly found it

difficult to 'let go' of her control, and she was aware of such actions, as

well as the consequences of doing this. Similarly, the effects did not

remain on the premises but went with her when she departed the office.

Lena was engaged and planning her wedding, as well as in the process of

moving house. She told the group that she felt she was 'barely coping'.

The London group were very similar in their responses but certain

comments were accentuated. For instance, travelling was a factor in

inducing pressure but half of the London group linked 'commuting' to their

experience of working at the Agency. They also came forward

immediately with comments such as:

... 'hugely stressed out so turn to binge drinking!',

... 'suffer from excessive pressure'

... 'do not get a quality of life at all'

... 'tendency to explode at slightest thing'

... 'love and hate the job'

... 'hard to say no to client demands'

... 'Spend too much time socialising as well'...

[this was Paula's contribution, the last to introduce themselves, and pronounced with real gusto]

Source: Field Journal 23 Sept 1998

This group though were accentuating similar concerns. For instance, as with the Regions, my interpretation was that they felt an acute awareness of the impact that the work pressures may be having on their sense of physical and mental health. As one said, its about having some sort of 'quality' of life. The binge drinking, 'exploding' at a 'slight' thing, being compromised when it is better to say 'no' to certain demands, all of these are the tensions and disjunctions of the 'do or die' discourse that characterised their workplace. On the one hand, they are conscious of what effect it is having on them, whilst at the same time recognising it as being part of a job they need to get in 'balance'.

6.3.5.   Dilemmas as an Outsider

I am conscious at this point that the list of statements above, from the London group, could be regarded as merely anecdotal [Silverman 2001]. However, this was how each of the participants introduced themselves at the London meeting. These I recorded first onto short notes made at the time and then expanded notes were made as soon as I could after the meeting in the field journal. I am also aware of my presence, as one participant put it, 'from the outside', and how this may have been perceived, and how it might have influenced their contributions.

For instance, it may have been in the interest of the managers present to give such a negative view of their workplace if they felt that I could report this back - a message that would have been too risky for individuals to state too openly? The context of the financial figures that had been announced during that week in September, and the rumours that were rife before the meeting may also have coloured their responses and led to their giving such a negative view to me of their company. Again, my own experience with Neville, and his own struggle to deal with pressures, was the backcloth for entering this particular context. To what extent were his explanations of the workplace colouring my own sense making?

Not all managers were so cooperative though. One participant, Paula, refused to attend the second day of the London meeting because, she claimed, that it was purely a 'whinge session'. I wrote of this incident:

> 'Paula responding to meeting negatively.....yet she did not use this feeling effectively. Decided to opt out than critically reflect and then put her feelings to the group so they could work with these........she was lost to them next day so they lost her potential input on dealing with things...was she prepared to do this though?'

6.3.6.   After the Event: Actions of Participants

The following responses arose, as participants were encouraged to write back to me on their perception of the impact of the two days in which we had worked together in September 1998. Their responses were very encouraging in the sense that participants appeared to have gained a great deal from the process. Here seemed to be a way of working with managers in differing locations where they had been able to derive real benefit in a whole variety of ways:

One spoke of how she had countered previous behaviour with a new way of working with others:

> 'I found I was not so defensive...prior to the programme I would have reacted to other people's views. Now though I thought about what they said and put it back to them "I felt that...." And added that when my colleague had made an assumption that was not accurate I had calmly said, "No, it was not that..." '
>
> *Feedback sheet post Day 2 Workshop.*

Similarly, another comments on how she previously made a whole series of judgements before engaging in dialogue with others:

> 'Usually gone in guns blazing...before this I would work with this person by second guessing what they were going to say if I

confronted them over something. I had already made my mind up. But I did not do that this week. I went in, asked questions first, and it was so different...an alternative way of behaving than one I would automatically use'.

There is a strong sense here of a participant changing their perspective in relation to their staff - the 'guns blazing' attitude of before being replaced by an alternative that 'was so different'. If we adopt a cognitive view of empowerment [Thomas and Velthouse 1990] it could be argued that the participant felt free to choose from behaviours rather make a 'knee-jerk' reaction that was typical of her. From a related perspective on empowerment one could argue that the employees were able to make a conscious decision for themselves, by developing self-confidence through coaching [Geroy, Wright and Anderson 1998]. It is my contention that, continuing this individualistic view of empowerment, the participants were committing to an objective, collaborating with others and, in so doing, choosing to act freely within the boundaries of the organisation [Duvall 1999].

Also, time seems to be a key factor in manager's reflections. One manager suggested that she was always thinking ahead and anticipating. This was a

common reaction among many of the participants to how they coped with managing their situation. They felt that they needed to be ahead of opposition – opposing views, 'difficult' clients – or just constantly planning to keep up with the volume of work [or give the impression that they were doing so]. The group meetings, with their emphasis on interactions with others, were characterised by the emergent present rather than the past or unknowable future. One participant, who commented on how this outlook may have had real consequences for her self-image, and how others perceived her, reflected:

> 'Getting into the present more....up to now I would get carried away with what was coming up, planning and always needing to be one step ahead. I realised though that this was not helping me lead my team. So I caught myself doing this and decided to tell the team about the programme, what the learning was for me and gave them examples. It made me really realise that perhaps people really do not 'know me' but perhaps have this impression of this 'planner and do-er'.

This accent on perceptions, and how it may have affected previous encounters, is reinforced by the following participant who related:

> ' I found myself in a group situation where I normally would not ask questions readily if I were unclear what was going on. What tended to happen was that it was like a video that started running in my head with the characters in the room talking bad about me and me

ending up looking a fool. This week though I thought "its there" so what's new....just accept it... and I found myself asking some important questions. People did not laugh and I felt really good.'

It seems that the participants gained confidence and increased self-esteem through adopting a different way of being with peers or subordinates. It was not as though the managers were not aware of the impact their working lives were having on them. As discussed above, they were acutely aware that this was affecting how they related to others and the impact of such pressure on themselves, both inside and outside of work. Possibly, the attention paid to the impact of work pressures over two days accentuated these feelings but, above all, the work they carried out in the group initiative offered some alternatives. One Regional group member remarked:

'A common thing I had before the programme was automatically slipping into a thought pattern that was not very positive when a particular circumstance occurred. Something did occur this week that seemed to be taking me down that route yet again. But I stopped myself, realised what I was doing and started to think differently. For instance, I told myself that there was little I could do about the situation...stop worrying...its having a negative impact on me if I carry on like this.'

During the first day of group working the talk amongst the participants seemed to me to be focused very much on what was 'done to them' - the 'pressure', the 'management', their 'employees' or the 'client'. Their responses, as detailed so far, seem to suggest that they were taking a step back from these incursions on them, replacing the incursion with growing awareness of their responsibility for the shaping of these relationships. This sense of interaction with others and ability to be different had consequences for one participant outside of work:

> I had a much better week at home with my partner. It seems that being different has meant that his behaviour towards me has been 'kinder'. This has resulted in me being more receptive to him.
>
> Feedback sheet post Day 2 Workshop

Was a simple causation operating here? Was her improved relationship purely down to what she had experienced in the group initiative? Maybe other factors were present, for both parties, within the context of that week's experience of being a partner. However, generally there seems to have been a greater awareness of alternative ways of being with others. In this case the effects were not confined to the well-being of the participant, but extended to her partner who responded in kind.

However, I am conscious at this point of Alvesson and Deetz's words of caution in relation to language use in an action context:

> 'some basic characteristics of language and in particular language use complicate how accounts of one-to-one meetings as well as actors observed can be used in research...these involve the metaphorical and contextual nature of language, that language use is typically functional rather than truth-oriented, and that social norms and conventions guide and constrain language use'
>
> Alvesson and Deetz [2000:116-117].

Could these responses then been seen as a site of 'language as contested meaning'? What does the participant above mean by 'kinder'? Would it correspond with my own meaning if I felt someone was being 'kinder' to me; from what 'caring base level'?

The context is important here. It appeared that the participants were investing energy in an event that may have influenced their feedback to me. I can't be sure of the extent to which this shaped their responses nor if their desire to create an impression of being successful and fulfilled after the event determined the type of positive language they employed. It is also possible that my own need to hear that my hard work was being rewarded influenced them!

I have contented that one theme to emerge from this inquiry with the Agency is that of isolation. That contrary to the 'team focus' of the Agency rhetoric, managers were finding themselves becoming more detached from employees, and others outside of the workplace. A constant message that I heard from those taking part in this group initiative at the two sites was the value of working together around similar concerns. One participant stated:

> '...lots of bits of learning that I can apply but the best bit is the comforting one in many ways. That is that it has made me realise that it is not 'just me'. Hearing others talk about the pressure they face day-in day-out and the effects it has on them is 'good' in a strange sort of way. Makes me feel that maybe its not just me not coping sometimes and everyone else doing fine. We are all in similar boats'.

Feedback sheet post Day 2 Workshop

There seems to be a concern here for the need to 'cope'. In addition, it was reassuring for some to hear of others perhaps not coping. This contrasts with the reaction of the London participant, Paula, who reacted to such discussion as wasteful of her time, and that stating concerns of not coping was 'whinging'.

There was a shortage of spaces within the company where managers could

speak of coping and not coping **and be listened to**. 'Coping' was a position

presented to others. This caused a disjunction: presenting a capable self

when knowing this was not possible at all times. The process of managers

working together in a setting that encouraged openness and

confidentiality presented an alternative working context, challenging

assumptions of what was meant by 'managing' [Watson 1994, Watson and

Harris 1999], in terms of being seen to cope, and encouraging recognition

of the disjunction, the 'do and die', illustrated above.

6.4. WHERE ARE WE?

In the introduction to this section three main questions were linked to

the overall inquiry. These have been addressed: how important was

context? What were the processes of sense making? What were the

disjunction's/conjunctions resulting from this sense making? The chapter

has also journeyed through particular phases of my involvement in the

Agency. First, the initial contact and work with Neville, then the group

initiatives with regional and London offices, working on the very issues

that were the focus of this inquiry, followed by the analysis of participant

responses to these initiatives. For me such processes are at the heart of

action research in organisations: the work with the Agency being

determined by different phases, with myself, as the researcher changing

role and attempting to work with rather than on participants, contrary

maybe to 'gatekeepers' intentions. Observing the present, in this case the

group initiative, together with interpretation informed by knowledge of

the past cycles is also central to action research. As with previous

chapters, I have also engaged in further sense making from the

standpoint of writing in 2002, looking back on actions and reflections

made in 1998/9.

What I sense emerges as being distinctive from this first part of the

cycle, the group initiative, is:

- <u>That the language of empowerment, the 'dins' heard across Castings</u>

  <u>and within Brewing Company, is alive and well in the Agency,</u> as

  evidenced by the rhetoric of its literature. How the rhetoric of

  'ownership, 'initiative, 'team focus' and 'serving the customer'

  contributes to the image of the well-oiled rational machine.

  Tensions were explored between espoused empowerment of the

  employees and, what appeared to be, total disempowerment of the

customer in this process. The responses of participants were framed by the discourse of the changing marketplace and the pressure to remain competitive.

- Through working with Neville, and engaging with participants over an intense four-day programme, I became increasingly aware of a more personal impact of the rhetoric in this particular context. The impact of the 'personal and political' were intertwined. This impact characterised by the talk of managers concentrating on coping with pressure to perform and their awareness of personal costs to them and others: of Neville's 'constant weariness' and 'changing relationship to his workplace', a reaction to what a group member called as 'trying too hard to be perfect, over and above what the customer required'. The language of the company rhetoric set expectations, yet at the same time I was aware of the contested meanings that could be attributed to such talk.

- Also this chapter illuminates the need to cast a more critical eye over the sense-making of the Agency managers and to recognise that they themselves may have been treating the organisation in an entitative way. Viewing the 'company' as 'some-thing', imposing and

insidiously shaping a particular response from them. A different

perspective can be taken if we determine what part they played in

constructing such a view. They may have chosen to act in certain

ways, themselves manipulating and shaping events for their own

ends.

- Further, this chapter showed <u>the polarity used in much of the</u>

<u>managers sense making</u>. This was evidenced by 'work and home',

work and 'life', 'inside and outside of work', all of these are spoken

of as separate entities. However, the worlds Neville and Alison

describe seem to depict a relationship that is often symbiotic. That

they are in 'relation to', rather than being the 'opposite of'. For

example, the 'weariness' of work impacting on others outside the

Agency, preventing the establishment of relationships that are

needed to counteract such pressure.

- I have sought to <u>explore my own problems in terms of how others</u>

<u>may have perceived my role</u>. For example, dealing with rumour and

suspicion about intentions, in the context of threatened cost

cutting, and being suspected of being a messenger for the

manager's unease by the participants.

- Connected with the problems I faced I took <u>a critical approach to the feedback given by participants</u> about how successful the initiative was in providing an alternative space for admission of not coping, of how 'pressures' had ramifications for self and others in the workplace. <u>There did, however, seem to be a real benefit, characterised by a different sort of space for experimenting with new ways of being, which was identified by both Neville and the groups.</u>

- <u>My work with the Agency managers also broached issues surrounding identity</u>. Participants discussed their social identity [Knights and Wilmott 1999], in that identity is not seen as some naturally occurring phenomena fixed and stable but constantly changing. The manager's accounts were expressions of these identities. Identity responsive to discourses that interject, the 'do or die' way of working in tension with 'managing self' or 'work-life balance' as Alison described the dilemma she faced. Some talked about both of these as though they were 'natural, rational and neutral' [Alvesson and Deetz 2000 p108]. That she was not sure how she would react to the challenge of trying to be a manager

'putting everything in' whilst, at the same time, staying sane. The fragmented nature of her identity was displayed by her positive 'do or die' attitude to work, the standard bearer of the strategic rhetoric, yet at the same time having a keen sense of 'concern for myself'. Lena had a similar perspective working as the office manager, but also 'trying to be a fiancée' and new homeowner.

The Next Step

I recognised that the two-day initiatives with two groups had only served to alert me to a variety of perspectives. I still puzzled how these related to the context of each manager's particular biography and changing work context. Maybe this was in direct contrast to the in-depth intervention with Neville which I had been involved with immediately before the September 1998 group inquiry. Through in-depth work he seemed to gain a greater sense of himself, in situation, and the conjunctions and disjunctions he experienced and acted upon, in the face of the rhetoric of the Agency. Working with the group was different. What it generated were, for many, glimpses of what acting differently in the Agency could be like. Some, like Alison, had used our meetings to come forward with distinct agendas to do something different and engage with others with

similar dilemmas. I therefore offered to support such endeavours and felt that the strength of my work with Neville on a one-to-one basis could be further extended to these managers.

The following chapter therefore serves to analyse one-to-one meetings carried out with five of the managers that took part in the original group meeting. The way in which managers were encountering empowerment rhetoric needed to be situated in the manager's life, identity and biography as a whole [Watson and Harris 1999].

> *The lighthouse throws its beam and sometimes blinds but just for a second. What the beam leaves is an image of a churning sea or dead calm, and then its dark until the beam comes around again, but the scene has changed. We catch only snapshots; not knowing how they are connected or what might be leading from one situation to another. This image came strongly to mind as I was writing of the shortcomings of the group initiative. When each participant had taken part it was as though I was getting just a snapshot of that person at that time, and the pressure I felt to deliver some 'outcomes' for the HR Director only reinforced a feeling to move proceedings along.*

Chapter 7

The Eye of the Hurricane

JG Ballard described his novel *Crash* as a cautionary tale from the eye of the hurricane

Summary

The following sections are separated into managers' stories with themes, which emerged

from the one-to-one meetings. These are carried forward into the thesis. The three

managers from the original regional group initiative were Alison [section 7.1], Paula [7.2]

and Lena [7.3]. An 'interim' conclusion [7.4] draws together the dominant themes that I

believe emerged from the one-to-one meetings with the regional managers. Two London

office managers' stories follow. Sarah [7.5] and Annette [7.6] were participants from

the original London group initiative. The grouping of these managers is deliberate: I

sought to determine whether the particular context of the Agency office environment

was significant in shaping the managers understanding of the empowerment rhetoric

they encountered. My final conclusion seems to suggest that this regional/London split,

which so preoccupied senior management and formed the framework for the original

Agency group inquiry, may have been less significant than the individual situated

biographies of the managers.

Introduction: Becoming Curious

Judi Marshall remarked, in her enviably cogent work, Women Managers Moving On [1995:7], that she utilised three images to guide her processes of inquiry: a 'vision' - like 'turning something in the light... a sense of wondering about interpretations'; 'touch'- seeing complexity as the tangled ball of wool with strands still attached but pulled just far enough so they can be seen, light enough to touch; and finally 'voice and hearing'- reading out loud her managers' stories and hearing, or not, a ring of truth.

I have really warmed to this view of trying to make sense of manager's stories. For me it captures the need to engage in a variety of ways with the richness and complexity of data that I believe I was encountering. These 'ways in' have therefore served as the basis for my inquiring into the stories recounted during my work with the Agency and with Neville over three years. I fully recognise that the managers who came forward in the Agency and chose to take part in one-to-one meetings were open and informing, they may not be representative of their less open colleagues [Silverman 2000]. Yet as Marshall [1995:331] asserts:

> 'these are not bids for ultimate truth, but expressions in the moment, open to review, 'truths' to be held lightly...engaging in

debate and action in such forms opens the way for radical change to emerge'

As I sat and listened to the employees in the group initiative with the Agency it became clear that practically all of them had an awareness of a shared sense of trying to perform in this organisation, and the impact that was having on them. The image that came to mind was that the space being created was the calm amidst the frenetic working lives of the Agency – the 'eye' at the centre of the hurricane. This impact took many forms, whether the personal fear of engaging in binge drinking, the sense of not getting 'a life', of a feeling of 'exploding', or recognising that others were in relationship with this, whether it was a partner who they were engaged with, or other employees they were responsible for. All this was taking place within a context, as depicted by the company rhetoric, of their being responsible, showing initiative, working in teams, being creative and integrated. The group initiative seemingly had heightened this awareness of the disjunctions and had offered alternatives.

The three methodological themes of participation, critical reflection and action need to be explored in relation to this next stage of the inquiry. Individual managers participated through meeting with me, at their

offices, within the work context they had so vividly described during the group meetings. At the end of the two group meetings it was made clear to me, in discussion in both groups, that they wished this to be not just a 'one-off' two-day meeting but carried forward in some form. Various suggestions were put forward as to how this could be realised but the 'pressurised' work context, and its attendant 'presentism', did not really allow time to be set aside for such group events, however positive the outcome. I was aware of the struggle to get even the two initial meetings set up let alone secure further support for another round. Therefore, the group arrived at a compromise: that the momentum would be carried forward but in a different form. I offered to visit on-site those managers who felt that it would be beneficial to re-engage with pertinent issues that had arisen for them from the group meeting. Therefore, three managers from the regional meeting, together with two from the London meeting, participated in this next stage of the inquiry.

The one-to-one meeting was characterised by critical reflection, particularly of the experience of the group meeting and subsequent engagement with ideas and practice within the manager's work setting. The feedback of experiences from managers given after they had returned to their offices acted as a springboard for reframing and

refocusing the inquiry. I was conscious of challenging myself as to whether this was me trying to 'lead' such engagement or that such reflection was emerging out of coming back together, talking of the group experience, and the manager being on 'home-ground' without some of the restrictions of being part of a group. Lena, in particular, seemed to benefit from meeting on this individual basis, disclosing facts about her faith and how this awareness had caused her to reflect on how she handled pressure. Similarly, Annette spoke feely of her catalogue of illness and how this led her to interpret the rhetoric of the Agency in a particular way. All of the following narratives are multi-layered – in respect of reflecting on everyday practice, of relationships at work and home and how these then impact on choices, for example. Intermeshed with such reflections were clear statements on personal stances: of what was deemed acceptable or not, or issues of identity as a manager, and how others could or should follow them.

A number of actions came out of the group meetings and were reflected upon when I met with the five participants. There were distinct shifts in each manager's practice. Alison, for example, shared insights from the group experience with her team, experimented with new forms of behaviour and then formed new insights. Nevertheless, this chapter also

highlights a heightened awareness, particularly amongst the London office participants, of just how restrictive the Agency context was in terms of changing managerial practice and challenging assumptions. My own actions, as I shifted my role during this time from consultant to university lecturer, were profound and shaped further personal reflection. First, I reflected and then recorded in my journal actions that had come out of my own role as consultant in shaping the inquiry through the cycles with Castings and Brewing. This then led to further action as a result of reflecting how I could be different in an inquiring role without the burden of 'satisfying the client', fulfilling the consultancy brief, or just basically getting paid.

I came away from the two Agency group meetings puzzling at how the managers reconciled with themselves the disjunction between rhetoric and their working lives. Did it impact on their practice? Could it be as simple as that? Annette, from the London group, had stated how she both loved and hated her work. Alison's 'do or die' versus her concern for self, suggested seeking an **accommodation** between work demands and her mental and physical health. Overall, the 'lighthouse effect' [see previous chapter] of the fractured stories I had heard led me to inquire further.

The following managers' stories therefore are explored for their

interpretations, their complexity, their distinctive [or harmonised]

'voices'. In particular, I held these questions lightly in my interactions

with the Agency managers:

- What was it of their individual lives that was leading to their sense

  making?

- What enabled or disabled these processes of sensemaking ?

- Was identity a powerful factor in these understandings?

- what role did biography play?

7.1. Alison

Summary

The following account seeks to embrace the complexity of a working life of a manager in the Agency. It illustrates Alison's perspectives on 'work', her puzzling about the situation as she seeks to deal with her own dilemmas. Moreover, it seeks to illuminate these disjunctions by focusing on the nature of her sense making, together with the way she may have contributed to organisational 'muting' of alternative perspectives. Her 'rugged individualism' is explored and the way she acts covertly in dealing with her manager. Lastly, the context of the one-to-one meeting that followed her involvement in the group session is analysed in terms of how this may have shaped her responses.

An Account Director for less than a year, Alison was the 'number two' of the Manchester office. She had been in advertising for twelve years, six of these with the Agency. She spoke of a growing awareness that came out of our group meeting, about the power that she had to make choices.

Not Boarding the Train: taking control

One of the group discussions over the two days prior to this one-to-one meeting had been an inquiry into how their work environments seemingly took away a sense of being 'in control'. Their discussions had been centred on what this would look like if they had 'control', what impact this would have on work and outside work environments:

> ' Well I came back from the session...and I was talking about " not boarding the train" and my staff were saying, you and your bloody trains!...but it really stuck with me...yes, I have a choice here'
>
> *Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99*

[this comment relates to a metaphor that we played with in the group session. The group experimented with an image of a train; this represented their automatic responses to pressurised situations in their offices. As it came into the station, they 'removed themselves' from the train to stand away 'on the platform', recognising that they have a choice of thinking about the situation. They can decide to board it and go along with that thought-pattern or let it pass through and 'depart for somewhere else', a different way of thinking about the situation.]

346

Even though Alison commented on her office staff being fed up with her reference to the 'trains', they had started to utilise this themselves to assist her in being aware of situations and how she was reacting to them. She states that 'people in the office say to me "you are on the train, get off it!". This, I contend, is how she involved others in her quest to see if she could change. Action research is committed, as Kemmis has argued, 'to spreading involvement and participation in the research process' [1993].

Perspectives on Work: complexity of relationship, balance, competition.

Since we had last met, it was clear that her work situation was in a greater state of flux than before. Her 'real issues', as she called them, concerned her relationship with her manager, the source of her 'stress' as she perceived it, as well as, what she termed, her 'work/life balance'. She felt her manager was not giving her the support she needed, even though he was saying he would give her what was required. This had led her to reassess her contract and decide to go part-time, working four days a week. This way she thought she would get 'my life back.... because my marriage was falling apart'. However, this had not worked out because she found herself cramming five days work into four days - as much work as before, but for less pay.

This 'giving everything' to work was noticed by others and affected them. Her 'family' was telling her to 'give her job up', her partner could not understand why she would not go out or why she was 'tired'. Being so engrossed in her work was 'pushing him out...making him feel in the cold'. Alison described how she 'loved' her work', really wanted to do the job, but needed to find 'a better balance'.

Alison believed that the Agency was a very ' competitive environment'. She felt the competition particularly with other managers in the other regional offices – whom she termed the 'key players'. The agency had a policy of publishing the monthly sales figures for each office on a regular basis so she 'could not help but compare how different offices were performing'. This she felt was not 'healthy' but she did not know 'a way around it'. On top of this was an uneven distribution of work because her manager was not 'doing his job properly'. Alison had to compensate for this:

> 'But Brendon, look at what the agency manager needs:
> ...to be a good advertising person, you need to have that knowledge;
> you need good client facing skills- be very charismatic and credible;
> you need to be a "new business" leader; and most importantly of all ,

a good motivator of people...and out of those four things, my manager does not have one of them' .

Puzzling about her situation: coping with her 'Rollercoaster'

She experienced confusion: what was bringing her down, her work or home situation? Alison recognised that work and home contexts were operating in tandem; she stated that 'it was both coming together', work problems affecting her home life and visa versa. Alison reacted to these dilemmas with a series of positions on herself in relation to her work, her colleagues and her partner. She stated that she realised that it wasn't her manager putting her under pressure but herself:

> '..... because of my personality and my commitment to my clients.
> So once I realised that then I think it was easier for me to say, to
> stop feeling under pressure from the company........... so I have a
> choice, you can opt out of this and have an easier life, but I am
> really into this job. It's enjoyable stress. My family was saying,
> give the job up, it's making you ill, it's making you tired.
> But I do not want to give it up, I really love it'
>

Alison displays a number of reasons why she put herself 'under pressure'. It was wrapped in her commitment to her client base, being 'into the job' and really loving the 'enjoyable stress', coupled with a sense that it was

her 'personality'. She speaks of her partner having a laid back attitude to meeting targets in his role as a sales manager. He 'does not seem to panic', whereas Alison says to herself, 'Oh my God, meet those targets!'. Moreover, she is taking a stance that work is not a negative in her life but is a 'good thing' which she needs to 'control...find a better balance'. This attempt to find some sort of equality between work and home is not helped by what she calls her 'roller coaster'.

Brendon – '...... it seems you move from talking about yourself, the values, home situation, into talking about the business, what that is like. Like you are shifting, sometimes you are aligned with the business, but at other times I am thinking about 'me' – Alison - do you find yourself doing that?'

Alison – 'yes, I do seem to go like a roller coaster'.

Brendon – 'what's fuelling the roller coaster do you think?'

Alison – '(pause) I suppose success. When good things happen I am on the up, when bad things happen it brings me right down. I am not well equipped to find the equilibrium'.

Brendon – 'but maybe the business is like that though, like you were saying, before Christmas it was not looking very healthy. As it picks up, you become more positive. Do you think that is a factor?'

Alison – 'no, to be honest, I do not think it is Brendon. It's more about this management issue. Before Xmas I was concerned about it, now I am being able to do something about it'.

Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99.

Alison senses that she is not 'well equipped' for the good and bad times that she faces. The fear is, perhaps, that she should always have that 'equipment' in order to be seen to be coping, to be in control?

Taking an Entitative Stance

I was intrigued during the one-to-one meeting to discover how she acted in relation to the dilemmas she faced and what her actions were based on.

> <u>Brendon</u> – 'and the issues with your manager?'
>
> <u>Alison</u> – 'they are still there, getting worse. It was so bad that I thought I would have to directly address those issues with the MD. Which I have done. And I believe something is going to be done about it, which makes <u>it all terribly awkward.</u> But again this is me saying, 'I'm not going to put up with this any more'. I feel passionate about it. This business is within me. With my team we have really turned this business around. And I thought that means too much to me. I either walk away because of my manager not doing his job properly, or I address this and make something happen. So even though it is <u>not a nice thing to go through</u>, and that brings its own stress, I feel it was the right thing to do, so I <u>feel better about it.</u>'
>
> Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99

I note [see underlining] how Alison sees her particular choice of action as difficult, not 'nice' and 'terribly awkward'. We get no sense here of *not 'nice'* for whom? The moral stance justifies the means, like use of the term 'collateral damage' to explain away real suffering – not 'nice' but an 'accepted risk' in conflict. I contend that 'acting', for Alison, is pushing to the foreground this moral stance, the 'right' thing to do. This is informed by her relationship to the 'business' and her team. So, this justifies her decision to inform the Managing Director of the shortcomings of her manager as she saw them.

Alison's account of what she had done contradicted the course of action she had discussed at our group meeting. She had been adamant that she would approach her manager to try and establish a more productive working relationship. I broached this with her during the one-to-one meeting:

> **Brendon** – 'when we met last, I thought that you were going to talk to your boss?'
>
> **Alison** – 'I was going to talk to him. But one thing you made me realise, I shouldn't, we shouldn't, rely on our managers to be good at everything. They are not and I know I am not. But yes, fair enough'.
>
> *Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99*

It seemed that she had considered talking to him but seemingly had used some awareness from the group meeting to realise that her efforts would bear little fruit. At another point she speaks of him being 'thick skinned' and having the wrong personality.

I contend that to adopt this position is an entitiative stance [Dachler and Hosking 1995]. What I mean by this is that she sees the manager as a 'thing', with various 'possessions' or essentials [Burr 1995] – his fixed 'personality', his particular resilient 'skin' - that prevent him, through her eyes, from being to able to engage with others in a purposeful way.

'Personality' here is being used as a sense-making tool in order to explain both the manager's behaviour, and Alison's lack of interaction with him. In other words she has not confronted him because of 'what he is like'. However, if we adopt a different position [Shotter 1993], that interaction can be viewed differently. Shotter depicts interaction more like a dance as each partner subtly responds constantly to another's movements that are not predetermined, as they construct the dance. From this position a different way of viewing Alison's sense making can be offered. Her relationship with her boss is a construction, coming out of them continually relating/or not, it is not a consequence of a pre-

determined internal psychic framework. At another point she speaks of

him having the 'wrong personality'. Possibly Alison did not possess the

skills which would enable her to engage in a form of 'dance' where she may

be able to pick up the 'rhythm' or respond to subtle movements in their

relationship, so resolving the situation with her manager.

Influencing Others and the Muting of Alternative Meanings

Alison drew a vivid picture of how she viewed the Agency. She described

the competitiveness of the environment and how what she chose to

disclose was conditioned by a sense of being watched:

> **Alison** – '(lowers voice) because it is quite certainly a competitive
>
> environment. The figures are displayed by the Agency so you
>
> cannot help but compare how different offices are performing.'
>
> **Brendon** – 'is that healthy, do you think?'
>
> **Alison** – 'in some ways it is not. But the only other thing, the
>
> junior people [at the meeting] embarking on their careers with
>
> the agency, I did not want them to think that, bloody hell, is this
>
> what I'm letting myself in for? I did not want to taint their view.
>
> Like, that all our senior managers are a bag of shite, so get out
>
> now.'
>
> *Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99*

Here the 'spotlight of competitiveness' seems to work in two ways. On the one hand Alison is saying that others will compare performance so it's best to be seen to be 'doing well'. Yet, at the same time that overall the Agency is a well – managed company and, contrary to maybe the junior managers experiences, this is to be THE 'message'.

Here, I contend, is an instance of how the empowerment rhetoric of the 'one team', expertly guided towards satisfying the customer, is being shaped and produced by the interactions with others. Alison, it seems, is conscious of not painting a different picture, a 'tainted view', to those junior to her who are just 'starting on their careers'. By muting this particular alternative view of the Agency she herself, I believe, is subtly promoting the rhetoric as detailed earlier.

However, I recognise that possibly the so-called 'juniors' may not have interpreted Allison's behaviour as she intended. Findlay and Newton [1998] argue that it may be an assumption to believe that different groups or particular individuals understand discourse in the same way:

> '...we contend that discourse may be read more directly by managers than by non-managerial employees, since the discourse is written in managerial language, and generally advocates practices which can be seen to operate in management's favour.' [1998:224]

Rugged Individualism

The Agency comprises five regional offices and the London office. Alison does not see a way around the competition between offices, believing it to be inevitable. This powerful discourse of competition extends to how she describes others in the Agency. The managers across the regions that she regards as the 'key players', for example:

Alison – 'There is a lot of competition between particular members of that group [our regional group initiative], between Don and myself for instance. So even within the regions, we see competition for them as the key players. I think that comes more from Don. I do not feel that about him. I am not really a competitive type of person. But I did feel it from Don in that group meeting, with him wanting me to know how good he was at his job'.

Brendon – 'so what did you do then when you had that feeling?'

Alison – 'I said great, yes, I would do that in the same way (laughs). I am not competitive but it is difficult faced with someone like that. Someone who wants to prove their point'.

Brendon – 'would you have been able to say that to Don?'

Alison– 'oh no! (Laughs) It was same with my boss- I found it difficult'.

Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99

Twice Alison refutes the notion that she is competitive. Here she seems

to be defining herself quite subtly in opposition to Don, someone at the

same level as her but in a different office. At the same time those

feelings of separate identity are not knowingly displayed; she chooses not

to feed back her interpretation of other's attitudes and behaviours. She

hints that a similar process may be present when relating to her manager.

I get a sense of rugged individualism being described here. This is in

contrast to the rhetoric of the 'one team'. Rather than being a team

player Alison's stance corresponds to Knights and Willmott's analysis of

'the independent, autonomous agent – a sense of identity that the

employee is impelled to develop as they compete to provide the quality of

skill and reliability demanded by the market' [2000:82].

Alison's meeting with Don seems to have presented her with a dilemma:

that he challenged her sense of self that is so encased in her view of

what makes a good competent Agency manager. To deny that 'things' could

be done in a different way would have set her apart from Don. Her sense

of self was consequently endangered by the context of the group meeting,

where she possibly perceived herself to be vulnerable to potential 'social

and interpersonal rejection and denial' [Knights and Wilmott 2000:77].

This corresponds with the theme that emerges from the work of

Wetherell and Potter [1987] which implies that we need to focus more on

the purpose of what people say, the socially directed behaviour

performing certain functions for them, than concentrate on the

'attitudes' displayed by some sort of internal structure.

'Cloak and Dagger': dealing with those who 'flounder'

Alison described why it was necessary to inform the Board of her

manager's failings. This was important for her because it served a useful

purpose:

> **Alison** – so when the pay review board met I think they sensed
> something was wrong, so I was assigned a mentor - our Planning
> Director. I think they recognised I needed a line into the board
> without having to go through my manager.
>
> *Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99*

Here, it seems that Agency directors are aware of the problems, using

Alison as a conduit for information. She believes that her manager would

'not be left to flounder'. [I got a powerful image here of the beached

whale, a community not knowing what to do with it, so inevitably it is put

out of it's misery!] A meeting was to be held with the MD where her

manager's shortcomings were to be addressed. I was conscious at the

time that this might be wishful thinking on Alison's part and queried:

> **Brendon** – 'how do you know that this is to take place did he[the
> manager] say so?'
> **Alison** – 'no, no, he would never do that.
> (Lowers voice) the managing director told me, very naughty, but
> that's how **we** operate here at the Agency. It's very cloak and
> dagger. My manager knows **we** have said things about him, and
> **we** know that he knows that!'
>
> *Alison: taped one-to-one meeting 9/2/99*

Sitting there at the time listening to Alison tell her story I got a

powerful feeling, with her lowered tones, of being 'let in' to this

'conspiracy'. Of information being owned, subtly controlled by certain

players. The inclusive sense of the use of **'we'**, e.g. 'how **we** operate here

at the agency' [my emphases, as in the extract above], this 'shadow side'

to working, seems to conflict, for me, with the moral tones expressed

earlier about how to treat people and how to stand up for what was right

for the Agency, her team and its junior members coming through the

ranks. It could be that in each case she was endeavouring to promote a

particular view of herself at different points in our one-to-one meeting.

One perspective being Alison, the responsible, professional manager in

front of the 'juniors'; in contrast with 'Alison as manipulator', aware of the

positions of her rivals/threats to her position, in control of what may happen.

Context of the one-to-one meeting

Was the context of the one-to-one meeting a relevant factor here? In other words, I was visiting her after our intensive group meeting over two days where she had wholeheartedly embraced the inquiry philosophy of the initiative. Were her responses to my questions shaped by her view of what she wanted me to hear?

What of me? Was I not part of the same process? Alison could have construed my enquiry as 'checking up' on her. Also, I had made it clear from the outset of our work together that the HR Director was funding the initiative; therefore she needed a report back on progress. A ground rule had been established with the HR Director and the participants that I would always consult with all the participants before 'feeding back' and that confidences would be observed. However, an element of distrust may have been present, so leading Alison to promote a favourable construction of our meeting. Therefore, I am aware of the possibility that circumstances conditioned the sense-making process here, that 'how'

Alison constructed her responses related to the experiences and lives of this study [Holstein and Gubrium [1997: 127].

7.2.   Paula

Summary

Disjunctions between working at the Leeds office and the rhetoric used at the time of Paula's appointment to her job are highlighted. She relates two critical incidents. The first concerns a 'team event' proposed by her manager to be held at a different regional office. The second relates to the recruitment of an office junior at her own office. As with Alison, her relationship with her manager permeates these accounts.

Paula was the office manager of the Leeds office of the Agency and a close colleague of Alison. Paula was at the same grade as Alison, the number two in Manchester, because the Leeds office was smaller, and they both shared the same manager. Consequently, they were in contact with each other on a regular basis. However, whereas Alison had responsibility for twenty-six people, Paula had fewer staff and found she had to manage activities as well as carry them out herself. This led to a conflict whereby she felt 'her strength was in Sales' but she felt she was not 'freed up to do it'. Paula found herself getting involved in a series of 'menial tasks', such as 'putting amendments on posters for a client', on a regular basis.

Paula related how the company seemingly sees her as 'coping' but:

> ' I feel that it's like I have put my finger in the dyke to hold things together for far too long. Two consequences of this situation may arise. Is it that I need to break up mentally and physically before anything changes? Or do I just leave and the company then has to go through the whole process of recruitment and selection?'
>
> Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99

If she did leave she felt that others within the Agency would respond either by saying that she was 'just not resilient enough' to take the pressure, or asking 'how will we fill this vacancy?'. She felt that the structural problems of how work was 'organised' would be glossed over. What came first was, what she termed, the 'business pressure' - fill the vacancy and move on.

This seemed in direct contrast to the rhetoric of her manager when she was first offered the post in Leeds. He recognised that it was not a large office but it was important for her to 'make a go of it' because it will 'enable the Agency to stay ahead'. Increased teamwork and employees 'taking on more responsibility' would accomplish this. Paula would be 'empowering others through involving staff' and that's 'how it is now'. She said that he had claimed that this was 'her chance to shine', to 'expand her job role' and 'keep up'. He thought that the Agency needed to 'get

362

better' and that this would only come about if they 'constantly improved, by freeing up practice and being creative'.

These are familiar tunes. Often the opposite of their meaning is more illuminating: not keeping up, not shining, not getting better would be detrimental to Paula. They are characteristic of the 'upbeat "empowerment, skills and growth discourse" ' that Wilmott [1997] cites from Watson's study of ZTC [1994].

The Team Meeting: out of Empowerment comes Disempowerment.

Paula told me a story:

> 'I was 'called over' for an 'agency meeting' [she manages the
> Leeds office but is linked into the larger Manchester office
> ... the line manager resides here together with the creative
> team that supports Paula]. The aim of the meeting was for
> the team to engage in a 'teambuilding exercise'. I was unclear
> exactly what the purpose was but took part in the process.
> The line manager nominated leaders and I was one of these.
> We then had to 'choose teams' from the personnel present.
> This whole exercise was 'jumped on' us when we first arrived.
> It was challenged by a few who asked what it was all about
> and the line manager replied, "we want to do this as part of a
> 'team thing' ". I felt it was totally inappropriate and more
> suited to a weekend or weekday event, that was billed as a

363

team building event, but not in the context of an agency

meeting without any prior notice of content. The line

manager said afterwards that he saw it as attempting to

involve me into the workings of the office because I was

stuck out on a limb in Leeds. Unfortunately, the opposite was

the result. I felt angry how it all had unfolded and vowed

that I would not attend a similar meeting again.'

<div align="center">Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99</div>

Seemingly, Paula's manager sensed her unease and potential isolation away

from the main office in Manchester and set up the 'teambuilding' activity

to alleviate this. The fact that she had not been notified of the content,

as well as feeling that it was 'inappropriate' for 'an agency meeting', led to

her reaction of not wanting to be involved in such meetings again. For her,

it was an opportunity missed. An attempt had been made to involve her,

yet it led to further rejection of the manager by Paula and her loss of

confidence in his competence.

So, I would contend, out of a potentially empowering opportunity had

come disempowerment. What was missing in the failed event seems to be

the feedback necessary to avoid such a recurrence. No dialogue took

place between Paula and her manager concerning this event. The idea, as

Paula agreed, was a good one. The event did not involve participants and

make them feel part of what was being attempted; to engage them in potentially empowering experiences.

Paula appears to have put unnecessary pressures on herself. She felt that 'we should have been there an hour'. In having a preconceived length for the meeting and sticking to her view she was limiting the time for what was, potentially, a critical opportunity to share understandings and deal with issues that faced the Agency.

Real work: a 'Taylorist' discourse

For me, Paula's experience is typical of what happens once the pressure starts to impact on critical interactions between individuals and parts of the organisation. It was imperative, according to Paula, to get across to the other office, get the meeting 'done in the hour' and return to complete the mounting tasks that in her absence had not gone away. Resources are limited, she has not got the staff to cover her absence and deal with these tasks. So such meetings could be seen as just an interruption to the 'real work'.

The force of the pressure on her to complete tasks with limited resources is indicative of a 'task' discourse. A 'development' discourse,

the language of 'team' and 'process', was being subsumed by the need to 'get things done' and 'complete tasks'. Paula was unhappy with the unannounced event, of being 'jumped on', which ran counter to what she took for granted as constituting a team 'meeting'.

Recruiting for the Office: being 'an island' whilst seeking involvement

She went on to explain how a critical incident of recruiting for the office put the rhetoric of her manager into perspective. Paula's manager had decided to take charge of the process to recruit a new member of staff for the office. Paula had initiated the recruitment process and set up psychometric testing for candidates going forward for one-to-one meeting. She admitted that she did not have a lot of experience of selection and also that she does like to do things herself:

> 'I like to think of myself as an 'island', being self sufficient and 'getting on with things'. However, I felt that my boss had experience of recruitment and selection so he should be involved.'
> Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99

There is a tension here I would contend between her need on the one hand to be self-contained and self-sufficient, whilst at the same time having to reach out to others' expertise in order to fulfil a task.

'He walked into the office with the office junior assistant. She had not been involved with the process so far because of a family bereavement. After the one-to-one meetings the manager asked the assistant what she thought even though she had not met candidates in any real capacity. I was really put out that the manager had considered her opinion so strongly when I had gone through the whole process of testing, etc. and here he was asking an assistant for her involvement. Outside, I said to her "what do you think about this?" The atmosphere was really strange, she answered that she would be guided by me if the girl was the right one.'

Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99

On the one hand a view could be taken that this was just unprofessional HR practice in terms of recruitment, not following a process that would ensure consistency and fairness in the recruitment and selection of staff. Paula's relationship with her manager was critical to her sense- making and he seemed to be undermining her, as well as ignoring the considerable effort she had committed to the recruitment process.

It could be argued that one of the major areas of tension here is between the need for control, with attendant frameworks of practice, whilst at the same time enabling the staff to take the initiative. I would contend

that the control issue was one that centred on both Paula and her

manager. She may have been endeavouring to be guided by her own need,

as she remarked, to be 'an island' and take responsibility. However, due to

her lack of experience she had to bring in someone who, she believed, had

the required skills and knowledge to select this staff member. So the

tension is maybe of wanting to control but not feeling confident enough to

take that forward.

Again, I would contend that her concept of involvement did not extend to

viewing the opinion of a fellow employee, who the new staff member would

be working with, as valuable. It appeared to Paula that the manager was

not recognising her work, seemingly favouring a 'junior' over her own

opinion. She felt that his 'words of encouragement when he wanted her in

Leeds' were not being matched by his actions.

The complexity of this situation increases when we also consider the

frailties in the relationship between herself and the manager. Her

perception of him, that he **should** be more professional, only adds to her

growing feeling of his lack of ability to be an effective line manager for

her. His act of, what she termed, 'clumsily involving her assistant', only

rubbed salt into the wounds and compounded the situation. Her

relationship with her manager and consequently her own identity as a manager in that office was, at that time, being created - being shaped by her actions and others, with new, more embittered, constructions limiting choices of action in the future.

I also became conscious, working with her that day, of a deep rooted sense of 'gut feel' on her part. She seemed to be working on two levels. On the surface was a state of uncertainty, that she fluctuated from not knowing how to proceed, or whether what she had done was 'right', yet underneath was a different and more assured person. She stated at one point that 'I am not going to back down because I feel so strongly about it'. Similarly she was sure she knew herself as a person and what consequences stemmed from that:

> 'I try and see people in a positive light until something like that happens. When it does though I just cut them off...that's how I am. So I may have done that with him which I don't particularly like'.
>
> Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99

The fall-out from such conjunctions between what she thinks is 'right', her expectations of 'her boss', her need for her 'island', are considerable.

She spoke passionately about how the situations so described, and how her manager's behaviour in particular, makes :

'......me feel down there [she moved her hand to about a foot above the floor]...whereas I want to be up there' [points towards the ceiling..she then breaks down in tears.]

Paula: taped one-to-one meeting 13/4/99

Complexities abound here between her own position and her manager, her sense of identity, her expectations of her self and others, as well as coping with the feelings that arise from these disjunctions. Whilst at the same time the dominant discourses within the Agency seemingly reduce the opportunity for her to identify, and experiment with, alternative perspectives.

Personal costs were high. She spoke emotionally about her partner coming into the office with her on a Saturday so she could catch up on the week's work that was still outstanding. He brought his own work with him and worked alongside her during the day. She described the tiredness, extra work and broken sleep patterns that the job brought and how tolerant her partner was but she knew that it must impact on their relationship.

7.3. Lena

Summary

This cameo concerns the impact of the 'task' focus of Lena and the implications this has for how she views 'managing' and, in particular, her relationships with employees. A critical incident is explored which highlights the ways in which she encounters empowerment rhetoric within the Agency and the assumptions Lena employs in making sense of it. It is proposed that tensions inherent in her sense making are the product of two rival discourses of 'deadline' and 'development'. Three different orientations are presented that challenge accepted notions of her work and offer alternative ways of thinking.

Lena was an Account Director at the Birmingham office and had been in post for two months. She sees one of her primary roles as leading the team whilst new business is 'bedded in'. Once this has happened she then feels confident of letting her team 'run with it'. She spoke vehemently of work being 'determined', yet this is not helped by the 'short-term nature' of the business. She stated:

> 'I feel constantly we are trying to hit deadlines and then I am getting involved so much. I cannot seem to get time for my team because I am setting an agenda all the while for the job'.
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

Task focus: getting her hands dirty

She was very much influenced by the task. She is happy with this. She

believes that 'this is what I have to do'. I began to discuss, though, what
happens when tasks are not predetermined and laid out for her to
accomplish:

> 'I find this leaves me feeling uncomfortable, like I am in
> limbo.'
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

The uncertainty and 'messiness' of the task does not seem to sit easily
with her. She felt it was just the same when she was working with her
team:

> 'If I am **helping** with some aspect of their work I feel fine. If I am
> not doing this then what am I to do? What is my job made up of if
> not to **help** my team? '
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

It seemed that uncertainty about her role was a critical aspect of our
conversation throughout the one-to-one meeting. The meaning that she
attached to 'helping' above [my emphasis] seems to suggest her actually
doing the same work as her team, and, critically, being seen to do this.
She called this 'getting her hands dirty'. Other ways she could 'help' her
team - different interpretations of 'managing' such as delegation or
coaching her staff – apparently were not considered by Lena as a
legitimate management style. These were not so visible, but rather more

subtle and 'behind the scenes'.

Yet there is some inconsistency on her part in needing to get her hands dirty because she spoke really enthusiastically about setting up staff appraisals and carrying them out with her team. She felt that 'I have learnt lots about them through this'. She had been proactive in managing other aspects of her role like staff development but this was not seen, in her view, as 'doing her job'. It seemed 'learning about them' was subsumed in the task focus of her working life.

Empowerment is a 'good thing'? - critical incident of a member of staff and her attitude:

Lena was responsible for a key member of the admin team:

> 'I felt that her attitude had not been particularly good of late
> towards her work. As often happens this mood was just not
> confined to her but it seemed to spread around the office and was
> affecting other employees. I confronted her and asked what was
> wrong. She said she was 'bored'. **My reaction was why should she**
> **be bored when there was so much to be done around the office!**
> I asked the employee what could she be doing differently? There
> was no reaction. I got very frustrated by this. I felt I **had**
> **'opened the door for her' but the she had not taken the**

opportunity to sort the problem.. <u>I</u> got the strong impression that she was looking for me to solve the problem without contributing to its solution'.

The interpersonal function of this passage is significant here. Repetition of the sentences beginning with 'I' [my underlining above] which puts Lena to the fore, almost as though she was seeking to persuade me of the legitimacy of her actions. She was indignant that the employee's conception of the work did not fit with her own, the latter shaped by the view that 'so much had to be done'. The employee, Lena felt, did not share the work ethic that the workload prompted in her!

She spoke of how, within so-called 'empowered environments', we often work under the assumption that empowerment is for the good. But not all employees want this. She said:

'Employees want to be managed 'tightly' and this fits into a certain mind-set. This could be summarised as, 'I'm here just to do a job from nine in the morning to five at night, so why should I be doing more?'

This is presented here as a truth, a taken for granted, it is what all employees are like [are all employees like this, all of the time, in every context?]. Lena felt that this attitude held by employees was very frustrating for the manager.

> **Lena** - 'The prevailing wisdom I feel is that the manager is expected to coach, give responsibility to others, and generally support'.
>
> **Brendon** – 'So what do you do in these situations?'
>
> [**Lena** is seemingly very pragmatic about this.]
>
> 'There are some people who cannot be changed and so I have to work with this. Nothing I say or do will make a difference'.
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

However, she also said she felt quite 'perturbed' by the whole episode with the employee. Somehow she had not accomplished the **'task set out for her'**.[my emphasis] It appears that the rhetoric- in her words 'the prevailing wisdom'- suggested she should act in one way-the 'right way'. However, this 'wisdom' is then blocked by her own assumptions about people, thus reinforcing her need to impose 'tight' management.

This situation developed in an interesting way. The employee decided to go 'over Lena 's head' and broached the 'boredom' issue with the Agency

Manager. Lena decided to be present and she reflected on how 'well' this

session with all three of them went. One aspect of it in particular:

> 'I had asked the employee whether her boredom was due to the
>
> nature of the job – the routine nature of it- or whether this job
>
> was not just right for this employee at this time. Could she [the
>
> employee] offer them more?

<div align="right">Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99</div>

The Agency Manager commented after their meeting what a good

question this was. It seemed to free-up the discussion to consider a

broader canvas - what was in this job that the employee did not like and

what other things could she offer the agency. In other words what are

the alternative perspectives or possibilities of the situation. The

employee felt that the job as defined was too narrow. The three then

discussed possibilities for expanding the employee's job to increase

interest. According to Lena, the employee went away satisfied that

progress had been made.

For me the significance of this incident is centred on four interrelated

issues:

- How it contrasted vividly with the initial meeting Lena had with her

  employee where she appeared to impose her own assumptions about

work – 'so much to do', 'how can you be bored?'. The second meeting is characterised by a more open investigation, not centred on the person per se but on the working environment of which she is a part. It became an inquiry into the nature of the job, rather than purely the nature of the person. The open investigative approach offers opportunities for alternative ways of acting, unburdened by both possible resistance to 'challenging' information, as well as a reduced capacity to listen to other's stories. Using untested assumptions about the person, as Lena did, closes down the possibilities for alternative ways of acting and being because "that's what people are like, aren't they?"

- This incident also promoted action inquiry into the nature of relationships, in terms of how others perceived Lena. Her Agency Manager also had thoughts about his role in all of this. Lena felt that the employee had been reluctant to bring problems to her and, when they did talk, she had hardly been forthcoming about them. When Lena had raised this with the employee she was told that 'it's difficult to talk to you because you always seem busy'. The employee said that it seemed easier to talk to the head of the Agency because he was less busy. It was Lena's own actions, her

'busy-ness', which were possibly stoking the reluctance of the employee to explore the problem. The latter's reluctance to 'engage with the problem', reinforcing Lena's view of her employees only wanting 'nine to five'.

- The incident provoked different, and illuminating, reactions on both sides! From Lena's perspective she said she 'felt guilty because it seemed that she did not have enough time for her staff'. She commented that her boss, however, felt bad because the employee seemed to be saying, because he had time to listen to her, that he did not appear to be working hard enough! An opportunity for Lena and her boss to be challenged by this incident was lost by them viewing it through their 'task' lens. This is endemic in the power of the deadline discourse with its talk of sorting out tasks, of 'doing', being seen not to be at a 'loose end' or, god forbid, 'bored'! Tensions surround puzzles such as, is 'helping' really 'doing'? Is this 'true work'? More, I contend, that this exemplifies the tension between the developmental human resource discourse of empowering, coaching and supporting, and the deadline discourse of 'getting things done' and being seen to be 'acting'.

- Having 'time for staff' is recognised as being important in the Agency and this is one form of rhetoric the manager is being exposed to. The manager is also pressured to carry out a number of tasks and, as Lena has related, she likes having these. It causes her to be very outcomes focused, which is fine if these are determined and clear. Yet, staff problems are not always of this nature. They also demand a different set of skills and a different perspective of herself as a manager.

Shifting Orientations 1: viewing the incident with her employee

So how was this reflection in the one-to-one meeting used to enable Lena to confront an alternative perspective on her work, to view her role in a different, maybe more innovative way, for the benefit of herself, and others? Towards the end of the session we explored the different ways she could view this incident with the employee. Did she feel that how she had acted had been 'effective'?

She felt it had. The subject had been broached with the employee; she had not allowed it to fester and cause more problems with other members of her team; she felt she had not taken responsibility away from the

employee by 'giving her a set answer' to the problem. She had sought to

involve the employee in a decision.

Yet.........

She still felt that:

> 'My initial intervention had not 'worked' but when we all got
> together with the head of the agency then the situation got
> resolved. This bothered me because I had not been able to deal
> with it myself'.
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

Listening to this, I heard the 'be strong' rhetoric of this workplace being

played loud and clear. I remarked that for her it seemed important to be

seen to have 'the answer'. Maybe it did need a 'third-party' to resolve the

situation, and it did take longer to resolve situations. Further, Lena did

not have direct responsibility for its solution but she was instrumental in

getting there. The incident acted as valuable feedback to Lena for the

employee had given her an insight into her style of management; an

impression that she was 'often tied-up' and unavailable to listen to staff

concerns.

Shifting Orientation 2: Coming together in meetings

Lena spoke of the large numbers of meetings that form her working day.

She viewed this is as all part of the need to involve different opinions and gather expertise, as detailed in company literature. Her tone, however, when expressing this was very downbeat, as though this was a burden she had to carry as part of her work:

> 'The agency is very team-focused; the reality is very much 'another meeting'.
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

She spoke of so much time 'being wasted' in meetings:

> 'You come in, have the meeting, and then go away thinking what did that achieve?'
>
> *Lena: taped one-to-one meeting 23/6/99*

I was keen to explore the consequences of such sense making for her and we discussed a meeting that was about to take place. She had a current dilemma over her job. She was carrying out a role where there were no clear guidelines on what it should be. So, she had initiated a meeting with the Agency head to dispel 'her uneasiness'.

The purpose of the meeting was for her to be told what her job should consist of. So we spoke of exploring this situation. I helped her view the situation as her boss [using the Gestalt 'empty chair' to symbolise him].

They are both relatively new in their roles and Lena had prompted a meeting to determine something that at that moment was intangible, nothing documented, and potentially messy. I encouraged her to think through and document what she considered the role should consist of. Lena replied that she had done this and would therefore take it along to the meeting. I challenged this by saying that as this would be the first time her boss was aware of her thoughts, she would need time to think about these and their implications. Perhaps it would be better to pass these ideas on before the meeting, giving her boss space to understand her perspective of her role. Lena's perceptions and her boss's reaction to them could then form the dialogue of the meeting so it did not become merely an exchange of information. This would reduce the need for another meeting.

Our exchange was important, I believe, because it denotes the importance of **responsibility within a relationship**. Lena was encouraged to state her case beforehand and be open about her expectations. This constituted a real departure from Agency practice, which was dictated by a belief that the employee was there to react and so look to others in positions above them for guidance and 'the answers'.

If solutions are not readily available in the Agency then there tends to be a reaction, from both employees and senior managers 'that they [the manager] **should** know'. This response pattern was reinforced through time by actions of senior managers that gave the impression 'they did know'. I contend that, more often than not, this caused the employee to 'freeze', inhibiting their capacity to be different or offer alternative perspectives. Lena is a good example of this in the way she acted towards her own boss. It is interesting, however, to note the frustration and unease she felt when she was faced with a similar reaction from her own employee.

Shifting Orientations 3: Putting work into perspective

At our group meeting Lena had spoken of how life outside of work helped her deal with pressures she faced within it. This intrigued me as it linked to one of the research questions in this inquiry about how notions of empowerment relate to the lives of the participants outside their workplace.

She felt that her Catholic faith had a large bearing on how she viewed her life at work. Daily prayer and attendance at church 'put things into perspective'. She also related how it made her quite intolerant of those

who seemed to exaggerate the impact of what Lena would see as quite 'trivial' occurrences! This approach to life could be interpreted as a way to bring her beloved order to occurrences at work that did not appear orderly? Her use of faith here is possibly a 'sorting tray' for the important/not important items in her life. She said that she felt it would have been very difficult to disclose the impact of her faith on her view of the workplace at our group meeting. This seems to suggest that her faith plays for her an enabling role in dealing with her 'uneasiness' surrounding the seemingly disordered and 'non-routine' aspects of her work. It is not shared, just used.

She stated that she felt really calm at the moment and 'at one with herself' and this sense she 'brought into' her relationships at work. She felt that a lot of this was due to her being 'busy with wedding plans'. This deflected her attention away from work and put 'such pressures into perspective'.

How useful had this one-to-one meeting session been for her? Lena found it particularly useful. She valued the opportunity to 'chat' in an **informal way'** to someone who was '**independent'**. She perceived me as 'having no **strings attached'** and that I 'was **not monitoring** her'. Consequently, she

felt she was able to 'offload'. I believe that all these emphasised words

have a common base; that is they disclose a form of relationship. If we

explore the opposite case then it is to be 'monitored', 'strings attached' to

the manager in a formal dependent manner; an approach that summed up

her perspective on the company's operation.

7.4. Summary: What appears to be emerging?

From these three regional one-to-one meetings in the Agency it is

necessary to pause and determine what are the possible 'threads' that are

visible in these co-inquirers sense making, and how these link to the

concerns of this inquiry.

- Both Alison and Paula deal with the uncertainty and messiness of

  their work by projecting a 'rugged individualism' or 'island

  mentality'. This appears to be both enabling and disabling. It helps

  to deal with pressures of competition in the company that are

  fostered in order to bolster its market position. On the other hand

  both managers were, I contend, under considerable pressure that

  had adverse effects for their relationships within their work

  situation and outside of work. Alison not wanting to show just how

much pressure she was under, and the disjunctions she experienced in relation to this, to other 'key players' or 'junior' staff. Paula needing to be seen to be in control and not 'undermined' by her manager.

- Competing discourses are also present. These are centred on the 'deadline discourse' of task in relation to the 'development discourse' of teambuilding and espoused job development that Paula was exposed to. At the same time both managers are being shaped by, as well as shaping, such discourses. Alison, for instance, muting alternative meanings at the regional group meeting in order to promote a company view of effective team management.

- Line management relationships were arenas for the acting out of identity and enabling and disabling processes. Alison, projecting a moral stance of how a manager should 'be' whilst at the same time seeking to gain influence by more covert dealings – her actions reinforcing her view that 'this is what the 'Agency is like'. Paula also countering attempts by her manager to involve others by rejecting such moves because it ran counter to what she considered the 'real work'. Equally, Lena acting out of certain "taken for granted's" about herself as a manager, about attitudes of employees, and what she expects in return from her manager.

- Personal biography plays a leading role in all three managers' sense making. Alison's 'rollercoaster' and the impact of partner and family, Paula taking over the Leeds office and Lena's faith and impending life changes act as a counterpoint for them to explore the enabling or disabling features of their working lives. In Lena's case, her faith offers an alternative perspective, a sorting tray, for interpretations of work events.

- However, all three managers had, in our work together, displayed opportunities to counter prevailing 'deadline discourses' and offer an alternative perspective on work, to view their role in a different, maybe more innovative way, for the benefit of themselves, and others.

Would these factors be common to the London office managers I met? The chapter is complemented by the exploration of the stories of the two London managers from the Agency. Shifting to a different set of structural arrangements, away from the regions, gives the opportunity to assess the impact of biography further.

7.5. Sarah

> 'Pregnancy is a funny thing: you are no longer the
> person you were, but you are not the person you are
> going to be.'

<div align="right">Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99</div>

Summary

Sarah was five months pregnant when I met her in 1999. She was a 'Creative Manager' within the Agency, having responsibility for a team of designers and copywriters assembling the visual and written copy for a number of accounts. When engaged in our one-to-one meeting I was struck by the way in which her pregnancy had caused her to be more reflective of her role in the company and her attitude towards her career. Moreover, others' reaction to her during recent months had seemingly provided a 'mirror' for her to see the Agency and its rhetoric in a different light.

Changing Priorities: grappling with uncertainty and transition

Sarah spoke of the way that she had been 'driven by her career', she liked working for the Agency but her views had started to change:

> 'Being pregnant has changed my viewpoint away from work. It hasn't quite happened yet. It is starting to happen. It's like I am in transition. Pregnancy is a funny thing, you are no longer the person you were but you are not the person you're going to be. It is a very short phase of your life. It is trying to find which is 'you' through all this hormonal experience. It's a hugely life- changing experience.'

<div align="right">Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99</div>

There is an assumption in so much of the management literature that

managers have a clear view of their position at any moment in time, i.e. needing development perhaps, or knowing where they wish to be. What is apparent here is that Sarah is in, what she terms, 'transition'. It is uncertain what her 'you' is going to be like. The way she views the Agency, therefore, is coloured by this sense of movement. She senses that she has a lot to 're-evaluate' because what she does know is that she did not 'want to be under this pressure with a family' and this will lead to her 'not going to any great heights within the Agency'. What she has taken for granted here is that having a family will not aid her career prospects [although having observed the HR practices at close quarters this was probably accurate]. The only options open to her, she believes, are to go part-time, or as a freelance. Yet there are costs incurred in cutting her hours: she feels it may prevent her perhaps getting the projects she enjoys - those that gave her 'a buzz'. At the same time though she feels that she needs to 'motivate others':

> 'I need to motivate these people at the same time to help me. So they could probably do with more stimulating things to do. Usually, I would say I would like to do that because I most enjoy it. So that's a problem.'
>
> *Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99*

A number of assumptions here. First, it seems that Sarah senses that others' **need** to be motivated to help her, as though that cooperation is bought rather than given. Secondly, that her involvement in projects enables her to siphon off the most interesting parts. Sarah's position allows her to do this. I noticed this tendency to 'cherry pick' on a number of occasions when interacting with managers in the Agency. Sarah also had expectations of the Agency. The rhetoric boasted of a well-oiled machine with functioning empowered teams and work allocated rationally to serve customer need. She painted a different picture:

> 'But I have realised that the agency are not going to manage that situation [her increasing lethargy] From thinking that they would split up my work, not give me new business projects to go ahead with, the reality is we are under-resourced, now they are giving me new work'.
>
> *Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99*

She spoke of the 'Agency' as a monolith. At no time throughout the one-to-one meeting did she speak of particular people whose responsibility it was to allocate and monitor workflow. [see my underlining below]:

> 'You would think that <u>they</u> would see me looking tired awhile, working long hours, you would think <u>they</u> would know something was happening that <u>they</u> would then do something. But <u>they</u> haven't'.
>
> *Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99*

Sarah went on to explore what should then happen:

> 'I have made it quite public that I am tired; I am quite a vocal
> person anyway. People have said that you are working great and you
> should be resting, and I have quipped back, yes.... that would be
> lovely, but nothing has happened in response. Nobody has taken
> ownership of the excess work'.
>
> *Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99*

A sense here of Sarah seeing herself being let down, an expectation that

'ownership' should have been forthcoming, that her informing others of

fatigue would then provide a response. It is only later when she revealed

that she was at 'near breaking point' that she started to take control:

> 'She [the HR Director] has been sympathetic, saying that she is
> one-to-one meeting for new posts but these people have still not
> appeared. I cannot wait any longer, I'm nearly six months pregnant.
> I've got to slow myself down now ......so I've started to say "no" this
> week'.
>
> **Brendon**: 'How did that feel, doing that?'
>
> **Sarah**:'I felt uncomfortable about it at the beginning, but then I
> thought 'no, **you** have done your rushing around, **you** have been
> committed, **you** have nothing to prove'.[my emphases]
>
> *Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99*

The reiteration of the 'you' in the above passage indicates the internal

dialogue that Sarah engaged in. On the one hand wanting to be accommodating but then a different perspective offered that this was not going to help her, and an alternative position had to be adopted. It is also hinted that her reaction in saying "no" might promote others to call into question her 'commitment' to her job.

'The Hamster on the Wheel': being calm and accessing support

Working at the Agency was frenetic and took its toll on Sarah. She spoke of the way in which this pressure often leads to her acting 'aggressively'. The group inquiry session had enabled her to take a 'step back' and become aware of this. It was short lived though. Sarah admitted that once back at work the benefits of the group participation had become forgotten but what had stuck with her was the stress in saying 'no'. She engaged in self-talk that tried to bring, what she termed, 'order' to often 'chaotic situations', yet often this seems a defence mechanism [my underlining]:

> 'Just stay calm, think about what is achievable, <u>how many people am I going to upset</u> with the consequences of my action,,,,,,,,,, what is the easiest solution?'
>
> Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99

However, the demands of her role within the Agency were acute and her

air of calm could quickly dissolve. She vividly described a meeting called at

5.30pm at Milton Keynes, the timing of which she thought was unfeeling.

It would have been 'easy…. to play the pregnancy card', so she had

attended. However, it had taken its toll:

> 'Sure, but there has been a lot of tears……Monday night after the
> meeting , I got into the lift and burst into tears'.
>
> Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99

In order to gain support though it appears she looked outside of work to

her boyfriend. After the late meeting they 'thought together how we

could manage the situation'. This kind of space to address her issues is

not present in the workplace, so Sarah needed support in order to satisfy

that need.

However, what if managers, or other employees, do not have this support?

It exemplifies the way in which the shortcomings of the workplace

encroach on relations within domestic life. The two are not separate but

related. The Agency offered very little in terms of support to managers.

They had little experience of a manager at Sarah's level actually becoming

pregnant. It was a surprise to everyone, she commented. Perhaps her

actions were indicative of different choice-making taking place within

such pressured environments. That managers, like Sarah, were rejecting the 'Agency career' and re-evaluating the meaning of work, in its traditional sense, to their sense of self. This lack of interest consequently affected her view of the Agency in the future.

Sarah felt that there was..

> '...little to motivate you to want to come back...no help or assistance with child care places...nurseries, asking £1000 a month, are surprised that I am not getting any assistance from the company'.
>
> Sarah: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99

Although, on the one hand, I formed the impression that she felt that the company wanted to retain her, it was clear it lacked the mechanisms and attitudes to support this intention. The Agency, from listening to Sarah's story, was too intent on, in her words, 'pushing to get out of staff the most they could get in a day'. She admitted that she did this with her staff so was she not surprised that her boss adopted this attitude towards her. The prevailing discourse of 'deadline' and 'task', and being shaped by, as well as shaping, the affected re/actions of managers and their staff.

7.6. Annette

Summary

Particular attention is paid to Annette's understanding of 'team ethos' in relation to rhetoric in the literature promoted by the Agency. The motivations and involvement of managers and employees are heavily influenced, it is claimed, by membership of cliques. Informal power relations are dominant which often transcend the formal team structure and how these influence Annette's choices of whether she wished to be part of these informal groupings or not. Biographical factors that also relate to her sense making are significant to this inquiry.

An Account Director for nearly ten years Annette was regarded as a senior member at the London office of the Agency. At the group meeting she had described her job as 'love-hate'. Her story appears to fluctuate between these poles.

Team Ethos at the Agency

The Agency literature, as detailed earlier, is permeated by the principle of 'cooperation' - in respect of internal team functioning, as well as between the Agency and its client. Annette's story suggests that internally so-called empowered groups worked in ways that were far from cooperative. She spoke of a particular 'clique' made up of individuals from different teams:

> 'It is really about the power of the office clique. It is an unhealthy climate, which goes through to the MD. We call them the 'It Crowd'. They act just like a pack of wolves. This clique 'work-play' together. A lot of them share a house and get involved in regular

drinking after work with the MD. They see each other at weekends as well, so a lot of their conversation is centred around this social-side'.

As Annette views them the startling image of the wolf-like behaviour of this grouping is adversarial and potentially dangerous. Yet at the same time they are exclusive and look after each other. She felt this was distinctive to this location as opposed to the regions. The latter seem:

'..more 'respectful' of the company, more 'corporate'. There just seems so much more loyalty in the regional offices with team spirit and willingness to be flexible. In London, you get recruited, get put on this wheel and don't get off until you go'.

She equates being loyal as fitting the corporate mantra - not accepting this would be viewed as being disloyal to the company. However, alternative ways of viewing working practices, being critical of 'flexibility' for instance, would be considered as not part of the team ethos, and so remain unspoken.

Annette's view has some similarity with Sarah's use of the image of the 'wheel' in her story to depict life in the London office; providing support for an assumption made by Annette that 'life is not like this' in the regional offices. However, the biographies of the regional managers suggest that this is not purely a London office phenomenon. What does seem distinctive, and I did not hear to the same extent in other managers' stories, was the integration of the social life of employees and their office activity. The employee's position in the 'pecking order' seems to be determined by interaction with this powerful group both 'in' and 'outside' work. All the names mentioned, with the exception of the MD and one other senior male manager, were female. The group, according to Annette, 'sharing a house together', were also female employees in the London office, in other teams to Annette. Her inference was that they exploited this contact with the MD to exert influence, as well counteract the male dominated senior management, and exclude those who did not share this activity.

Throughout Annette's story there are constant references to being 'inside' or 'outside', 'loyal' or 'disloyal'. With reference to the 'It Crowd' she remarked that: [my underlining]

'If you are <u>outside </u>of this group then you are not recognised as much. I made a conscious decision not to <u>be part </u>of this group. They are <u>different</u> people to me.'

Again she reasserts her choice, her decision not to be part of this group. Her reasoning is a moral one. She feels it is wrong because:

'...boundaries are not upheld, which I feel are vital for effective working.'

The schisms between the official rhetoric, and the Agency as viewed by its employees, highlight the power of the informal- the alliances and networks - in shaping the day-to-day constructions and actions of its employees. These are not constant but shifting. A major reason for this is the backcloth to Annette's story, which was an increased need to 'perform'. The London office was the largest operation of the Agency. Overall, the company had not been performing well, it had tried to deal with this by restructuring but this, she felt, had led to increased pressure on her as a manager:

'[there is].......more [pressure] on London I believe . We have the biggest office, expectations to make the most profit, so the

regions, being a much smaller operation, do not get badgered as much.'

Generally, the office suffered from a high turnover of staff and her team, in particular, had lost a number of members up to the time of the one-to-one meeting in July 1999. Her reactions to this are fused with facets of her own biography.

Biographical factors

To recap, the nature of the team ethos as experienced by Annette is divorced from the rhetoric in the literature promoted by the Agency. The motivations and involvement of managers and employees were heavily influenced, it is claimed, by membership of cliques. Informal power relations, which often transcend the formal team structure, are dominant. This picture influenced Annette's own choices of whether she wished to be part of these informal groupings or not. I was curious to inquire which biographical factors she felt were important in determining her choices.

Like Sarah, the most important factors were linked to her health. At the group meeting she had spoken of returning to work after serious illness and I reminded her of this:

Brendon: 'You were off work for a considerable length of time with illness; did you notice changes when you returned?'

Annette: 'Good god yes!.....Felt very much on <u>the 'back foot'</u> when I returned from my illness. I heard sympathetic noises, but also the message that 'we do not want to put her under pressure or anything but we are busy...

My illness made me think about my job in a different way. I was trying to get better but <u>did not feel my job was secure.</u> I felt I was <u>trying to prove myself</u>'. [my underlining]

Annette: taped one-to-one meeting 7/7/99

The emphasised parts of the above interchange denote the defensive and wary attitude that Annette adopted after returning to work. The self-talk she engaged in here echoes a similar sentiment of Sarah's where she spoke of sympathy being extended, but also 'bottom lines' still to be realised.

Annette's need to 'prove herself', I believe, influenced subsequent relationships with her team members and other managers. She recounted a number of stories of current problems she was experiencing in her team and how others may have construed her attempts to solve them:

'I am trying to promote the ethos of the team... I'm not concerned about the 'nine things' that others outside of the team hear about me because they will probably dismiss those. It may be the 'tenth' part of the total message that they may listen to and this worries me.'

Like Alison, she recounted conversations with relatives who issued warnings about her work conduct: that questions might be asked of her if staff were leaving in her team. The relative spoke of this situation as putting 'the spotlight on you'. Annette refuted this with her relative, yet admitted in our one-to-one meeting that 'she [the relative] was probably right'. Moreover, if this were happening in other teams then she would also 'ask questions of the team leader first'. She stated that:

'I would question whether the manager of the team was really up to it - something may be going on. I have been here for ten years and this is the Agency culture.'

Here is a further example of the individual shaping the prevailing discourse in the Agency. Annette knows that the problems are not totally down to her leadership, so others querying of this may not be justified. However, she is ready to promote the same thinking if staff loss occurred outside of her team. The lack of support for peers was evident. Annette was unaware of the contribution she, and others, were making to the

shaping of an entitative 'Agency culture' - seen as a 'thing', apart from her but influencing her actions.

As with Alison, Annette draws on a 'morality' [her phrase] to try to shed light on other team members' actions. She seeks cooperation and involvement but they 'challenge' her 'sense of 'fairness'. She saw this as ' a framework' that she 'offered' to the 'problem employee'. She was indignant that the employee did not respond in kind. There is an assumption here that they should have shared the same sense of 'fairness', and recognise what she was doing for them. Annette's 'framework' suggests a singular view of the world.

This disparity, between what she believes in and how others act, took its toll on Annette. She stated that 'it became personal and 'got under her skin'. To such an extent that she 'seemed to be continually taking the problem home' and then had to get à mouth guard to stop grinding of my teeth at night... it got [so]bad'.

Therefore, her biography is intermeshed with the changing nature of the Agency, as structural changes were made to 'retain market share'. The resulting pressures on Annette seemed to exacerbate her feelings of

unease, concerns about health, and informed her subsequent relations

with her team. These are the visible 'threads' of a complex 'tangle' that I

encountered in the Agency.

Chapter 8

The Reflexive Turn: analysis to interpretation.

Summary

The previous chapter has chronicled the narratives of five managers who took part in the original inquiry groups in the Agency. An interim conclusion was used to pause and identify significant sense making from the three regional managers. This chapter compares and offers further interpretations of all five managers' experience that requires more than a mere conclusion at the end of Chapter 7. I therefore have devoted a short chapter to the themes that arose from the five managers interviewed.

At the end of Chapter 6 'The Agency and Managers Lives', I used the metaphor of the lighthouse beam to suggest that the group process only provided partial 'illumination' of the managers' stories. What then was made more vivid, or uncovered, by the in-depth interview process with all five managers? The themes that follow hold the stories together and enlighten us further about empowerment rhetoric. These are themes of:

1. Personal stance
2. Competing discourse
3. Identity 'in-line' with management
4. Sense-making through reflexive biography
5. Re-forming alternative perspectives

8.1. Summary of Themes

- **Personal stances of 'rugged individualism'/ 'island mentality', both enabling and disabling.**

On the one hand, these countered the pressures of competition in the company by providing a mental 'metal jacket'. The managers embraced a protective layer in order to withstand the pressure of continually having to perform and <u>be seen to</u> perform. In distinct contrast to rhetoric encouraging 'pulling together' and, from the perspective of the customer, being seen as a united work body smoothly operating to meet requirements.

There were real costs to the individual and the teams of which they were a part. Alternatively, such stances produced adverse effects for the managers' relationships both inside and outside of work. For example, Alison not wanting to show this disjunction to other 'key players' or 'junior' staff, Paula <u>being seen to be in control</u> and not 'undermined' by her manager. To do so would have led her to be seen to be vulnerable, possibly indecisive, of not knowing. Their islands became their territory. Each controlled their area in order to work through this disjunction as best they could. The interviews displayed the costs

405

of this construction, to both themselves and other relationships
outside of work.

- **Competing discourses**

Tensions were identified at the interface of the 'deadline discourse'
of task with the 'development discourse' of teambuilding. This had
been apparent in both Castings and in Brewing, as well as in the
Agency; the managers being both shaped by, as well as shaping, such
discourses.

- **Line management relationships as arenas for highlighting
  identity issues.**

Alison and Annette projected a moral stance of how a manager
should 'be', whilst identifying ways of influencing by more covert
dealings. Paula rejected attempts by her manager to involve others;
it did not conform to what she believed she was there 'to do': the
'real work'. Lena and Annette also constructed particular personal
positions of themselves as a manager in relation to line-managers
and other employees in their teams. For Annette, the exclusivity of
certain groupings in the London office shaping her actions, which ran
counter to the 'one team' promoted by empowerment rhetoric.

- **Personal biography played a leading role in their sense making.**

All five managers saw significant factors, such as partners, faith, their 'resilience', career opportunity [as presented to Paula], health issues or pregnancy, as vital to their sense-making at any one time. These were being employed as a 'sorting tray' for the interpreting of Agency rhetoric.

- **Forming Alternative Perspective**

I sensed from the three regional interviews that the group inquiry process had been more productive for Alison, Paula and Lena, compared with Sarah and Annette in London. They had seemed more ready to explore alternative perspectives and experiment with these. Both London managers had an increased level of awareness but their view of the London office appeared to preclude alternatives. I sensed that Sarah's pregnancy had a far greater impact on her reviewing the nature of the Agency rhetoric, and its impact on her choice making, than our group work together.

Kaleidoscope

Hands gripped

I gently place my eye

On the spaces

encountered

Moving between tapes

The scene changes

then remains still

as colours of experience

purple for enjoyment to

dark of despair

blend

become fractured

suddenly still

Making sense

of what?

pin-pricks of understanding

a recognisable pattern there?

its gone

dissolved

moved on

Just peer

take time out

to wonder.

The poem, Kaleidoscope, was written in response to the assembling of

my conclusions from the chapters of analyses, as detailed above. I

intended to 'package' themes and conclusions that could then be 'passed

forward' for the next stage of the 'process'- to investigate themes in

the relevant literature. It didn't work.

What had gone before seemed so close to the image of the

kaleidoscope with its shifting patterns, differing according to the

particular ways in which it was viewed. Marshall's image of the ball of

wool had been helpful in working with the complexity, interconnection

and distinctiveness of what I was encountering, but it lacked its

dynamism. Which 'colours' or 'patterns' seemed most in view when

discussing the experiences detailed in the preceding chapters, were

they constant or did they fracture or change shade?

When embarking with Castings Company this inquiry was rooted in my

consultancy experience and starting points as detailed earlier. The

strategic straitjacket of the continuous improvement rhetoric seemed

to sculpt the determinants of choice for employees in the company,

both at a senior and more junior level of management; the lived reality

of the managers did not match the empowerment rhetoric being circulated in company literature. This was a background 'hue' that stayed in place throughout the research cycles in Castings, Brewing and the Agency.

However, by applying a 'contextual turn' the patterns change. The ways in which employee's encountered empowerment rhetoric are apparently determined by the nature of the relationships inside and outside of the workplace. For some they interpreted the rhetoric according to how they perceived their own career or job security. For the three managers of the 'Hidden Voice' chapter, the espoused rhetoric appeared to shape their understanding of the schisms between intent and experience. The Agency manager's 'sorting tray' of their own personal biographies also important in determining their sense-making of empowerment.

Other patterns could be determined by individual's constructions. The assumptions that the Agency managers held of their role in respect of involving others, and themselves, coloured their own patterns of sense making in respect to empowerment rhetoric. The 'shoulds' and 'oughts' of responsibility, for example, can be seen in the Castings group's need

for a 'flag bearer' for their initiative, as well as the Agency managers

believing that their manager should possess certain qualities or act in a

prescribed manner. Later discussion, in respect of the Agency, cast a

different shadow. The competing discourses of 'deadline' and

'development' were seen to be important in processes of sense making.

However, the manager's own contribution to the shaping of these,

through personal stances of 'rugged individualism', and subsequent

actions, emphasised their own role in co-creating and sustaining such

discourses.

8.2. What of actions?

Managers often sought dialogues - through group participation and

individual working utilising critically reflective action research [CRAR]

frameworks - that were not self-defeating but restorative of values

that were important to them. Moreover, in Alison's case, or as with

Steve and Carl of brewing, they engaged with others - regional office

workers or fellow candidates for redundancy - to act in ways that

countered the prevailing wisdom of the company 'empowerment'

rhetoric. 'Spaces' were sought that challenged the official meaning

given of the 'common experience' of employees. In such spaces choices

could be explored, or plain admissions of not coping were forthcoming.

The character of such arena's seemingly countered the 'action-

orientation' of the working life of senior and junior managers.

As I observed and worked with such patterns of sense-making my own

'eye' began to change. **The research process intensified the**

'dislocation' that I experienced in my role as 'consultant'; as a result

my own way of working with participants created a growing sense of

disempowerment in myself. This understanding was prompted by the

critical reflection I engaged in, and is detailed in the boxed sections of

the thesis. Through changing my role from consultant to researcher I

was able to shift my 'view' to working 'with' the Agency, rather than 'on'

the Agency; unburdening myself of necessarily having THE 'answer' or

the necessity of planning ahead to secure future work with the client.

Increasingly, I began to recognise that I was **a part** in the research

process not **apart** from it. This process was challenging as it made me

think differently about my practice. Subsequent actions were

therefore characterised by increased dialogue and collaboration with

others.

Such insights seem far removed from the traditional tracts on empowerment that were highlighted in the introductory chapter. Having engaged in the guts of my inquiry, I now wish to return to such literature and identify what seems to be spoken of by others that resonates or, to carry forward our 'Kaleidoscope' metaphor, what literature seems to 'colour match' these insights. Alternatively, literature that seeks to illuminate and sharpen, challenge and so prompt fresh insight, to the understanding that I have brought to this inquiry.

Can You Play Football in a Business Park

Can you play football in a Business Park?

Eat a picnic on a bench

Row boats

Paddle in ponds and fountains

Build dens in woods

and ache for that first proper kiss?

Where are the peacocks?

[except in their cars]

the hills for screaming

    rolling

        landing

            in a heap

the pram wheeled trolleys

and tantrums that just wouldn't keep.

Do I buzz for attention?

Check in at reception

Photocarded identity

of security chic.

A camera blinks

the knowing eye of corporate disapproval

at the visitor parked in the wrong space

in the one-way system

of the tie-and-suited.

Sitting opposite on the leatherette

he feigns interest at the FT

Waiting for his call

But it's not to come out and play.

The context for this poem came from a visit I made to a placement

students workplace in July 2001. It was a glorious day and the road

leading to the Business Park was full of articulated lorries and noise. Then

I turned off into what seemed an oasis of calm, with all various business

units scattered around this vast area. It struck me how so little of this

ground was actually being used and how there was not a person to be

seen, not even through the glass of the windows which were all mirrored.

It all seemed so dehumanising and sterile. Yet the grass was beautifully

kept and I had this mad urge – which goes back to when I was a kid – to

run across it!

There seemed such a juxtaposition to the idea of a 'park' as used in/by

business and this ordered, rule-bound introduction to parking, checking-in

and surveillance of all actions. Its as though the meaning of 'park' had

been colonised and sanitised to a wistful view of interdependence of

companies, sharing ideas and growing prosperous through collective

effort. Frankly it did not stand up to inspection.

I sat there, waiting my turn in reception, wondering if it was just me or

did others feel this tension between being urged to be different and

creative in modern-day organisations, yet it seemed that the restriction

of order and increasing scrutiny of action was in direct contrast to that.

I tried to suggest this tension in the same way I have constructed the poem also. The first part, where it describes my recollections of experiencing a park as a child, I have tried to write it in a way that depicts the movement of play and richness of various activity. This contrasts then with the more ordered description of sitting in reception, overlooking the firm's car park awaiting my call to meet up with my student.

Having looked back over the poem and the above a whole series of

reflections come to mind about my inquiry and the nature of this form of

writing:

- why did this image stick with me?

- how much of the meaning I am attaching to such experiences is

  wrapped up in my own sense of frustration at my creativity not

  being given an outlet in my own workplace?

- I never mentioned this to my placement student at the time or

  since, yet it has stuck with me as a powerful image.

- That I may be polarising such meanings ['ordered' environments =

  'restricted', whereas 'disordered' environments = freedom]. So

  losing some of the multifaceted dimensions of working

environments where freedom may come from order, as much as

some employees may perceive unstructured environments as

restrictive to action.

Above all, I was left with a sense of contradiction in the language of

'Business Park'. How different forms of describing activity had been given

prominence, the idea of 'park' colonized and then sculpted to attract and

project an image of connection and creativity, when the reality seemed

just the opposite.

This discussion chapter seeks to explore such themes in respect of

empowerment, against the backdrop of the literature that has gone

before in the previous section and the data presented in preceding

chapters. Given the critique so far, what would 'empowerment' be like if it

was more credible?

Chapter 9

Empowerment: As Mystery and Mastery

Summary

This final chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part [9.1-9.3] explores,

using the metaphor of 'stagefright', the possibility of a different view of

empowerment. This alternative perspective emphasizes a re-definition of ability and a

view of empowerment as in-action rather than the connotations of 'doing' and 'moving

forward' by individual assertion commonly to be found in the management literature.

It illustrates, through reacquainting the reader with evidence from the inquiry, in this

case Paula from the Agency, how this different view of empowerment impacted on

practice.

The second part [9.4 – 9.7] moves the discussion forward by taking the concept of

empowerment as 'in-action', and exploring the notion of participating in different

forms of talk [9.4]. Stacey's work in respect of uncertainty and mess reinforces the

importance of 'not knowing' and the anxiety that this can produce. Flood's state of

between 'mystery and mastery' runs counter to the empowerment discourses of action

and control identified in this inquiry. Both Stacey and Flood reinforce, therefore, the

notion of viewing individuals as what they are capable of, rather than what they do

[9.5]. However, this section concludes that the 'cult of the manager' stresses the individualistic interpretation of empowerment [9.6].

The third part [9.8 – 9.10] introduces a further lens to view empowerment: critical theory. Here the interconnectedness of relationships counters the individual perspective of empowerment. The meaning of work is derived through the interaction of individuals in the formal and shadow systems of the organisations that form this inquiry [9.7]. The feedback given by participants and my own reflections emphasised the importance of social connectedness that the inquiry fostered. Citing Deetz and White the preceding section's call for wider participation is put under the spotlight and rendered problematic.

Critical Theory's contribution to shedding light on this inquiry [9.8] is through its highlighting of the corrosive nature of empowerment rhetorics, as well as enabling critical reflection of these. Moreover, it seeks autonomy and responsibility that emphasises our interconnectedness and the making of informed choices when encountering such rhetoric. Yet, this is not without ignoring the limitations of such an approach [9.9]. Again, as in the previous sections of this chapter, theoretical perspectives are supported by links to the evidence presented through the stages of this inquiry. Three criticisms were particularly apt in respect of this inquiry and critical theory: the emphasis of reason at the expense of emotion, the creation of meta-narratives, and pessimism without construction.

9.1. Introduction

This is a different chapter than has gone before. It emphasises to a greater degree the way in which this inquiry, centering on managers encountering empowerment rhetorics, informed the practice of others and myself.

The management literature is swamped with advice for practitioners on 'how to....' do their job, 'guide' their development, 'improve their effectiveness' and even 'win friends'. Within these books and manuals the manager will find prescriptive models that guide the practitioner through the 'mess' of their everyday work and toward a rational future of efficiency. Yet, so much of the literature is based on an assumption that managers know what their predicament is. All they need is a guide to help them to get where they want to be.

Managers' reactions during this inquiry were symptomatic of this 'need to know', Castings exhortations to keep ahead of the competition as it sought to meet the expectations of more powerful customers or the Agency literature urging employees to be resourceful, created this need to be informed. This knowledge may secure their job; the view

held by an inquiry group member from Castings [see 4.3.3.]. Or for

Neville of the Agency, enabling him to achieve his ambitions within the

company. However, as I engaged in this inquiry, working closely with

managers from Castings, Brewing and the Agency, I encountered

managers such as Alison in Manchester, Paula in Leeds, and Neville, who

exemplified the situation of 'not knowing' and where role parameters-

what they are expected to do as a manager - were not set but

indeterminate. I have tried to capture a sense of them exploring the

dilemma of wanting to know but caught in the moment, illuminated by

doubt and insecurity. I now wish to make this more explicit, by

reacquainting the reader with the managers who took part in this

inquiry, through exploring different ways of describing such moments

and then posing a different view that may challenge some of the

assumptions of their roles.

This inquiry has portrayed one view of empowerment as being both a

philosophy and an activity. It is depicted as purposeful and action-

orientated. Yet one of the outcomes from the data sections detailed

earlier was the ways in which managers, in different contexts, grappled

with the disjunctions of 'task' and 'development' discourses. These, I

contend, led to them feeling uncertain and 'not knowing' what was best

for them or the employees they were responsible for. Sarah of the

Agency, for example, grappling with what she called the 'transition'

between previously 'being driven by her career' and the ways in which

her pregnancy had changed her views on work and her employer.

Tony Watson's [1994] work 'In Search of Management' greatly

influenced my own perspectives here. He counters the rational view of

management discussed in this thesis. Drawing on the work of March and

Simon [1958] and the concept of 'bounded rationality' he remarks on

how limits are placed on human rationality. We can only take so much

information in and do something with it. Management lives are full of

ambiguities and uncertainty, so in order to get through, Watson

contends, 'we fall back to a considerable extent on recipes, formulae,

legends, folk tales and intuition to make sense of these situations'

[1994: p.21]. Among these 'recipes' he argues are the discourses, what

he terms 'empowerment, skills and growth discourse' and 'control, jobs

and costs discourse', that are very similar to the task and the

development discourses I encountered in this PhD inquiry. These act as

tools enabling managers to make sense of the worlds that surrounds

them. At the same time they bring confusions and anxiety.

However, Watson's own descriptions of the managers he encountered still seem to suggest a level of rationality, of making choices from options, that was not found amongst the participants of this study. The degree of uncertainty and 'not knowing' expressed by managers seemed far greater in the Agency, for example, than in Watson's 'ZTC Ryland'. Of how Neville, in trying to cultivate the image of the 'Young Turk' of the company, rushes from office to office never feeling totally in control of situations or seeing any opportunities to express doubts until we work together. Out of a so-called empowered situation came a sense of being disempowered - not knowing where to turn, who to turn to, fearful of being 'found out' for not knowing - and so being seen to be less than his carefully constructed image.

Furthermore, in Watson's own role there is a sense of his own 'knowing' that appears to belie the complexity of what he encounters. As an avowed ethnographer, 'getting close to managers as individuals and getting involved oneself in their organisational context' [1994:p.6], Watson leaves to the reader the interpretation of his impact on the sense-making of the managers he encountered. At times, this reflective voice is present, but it is not wholly a critically reflexive one, puzzling with self and engaging the reader in this venture. I was still left with a

feeling of Watson's certainty and over-assuredness concerning the

'ways in which managers shape themselves and shape their

organisations' [1994: p. 28].

9.2   Making a difference: Working with participants and their unease.

It is the contention of this section of the thesis that the pressure to

perform is debilitating and that empowerment rhetoric is part of that

pressure on the managers of this inquiry. This part of the chapter

utilizes a metaphor to aid such sense making. I came upon an article by

Susannah Clapp on 'stagefright' in the New Statesman. It struck me as

a good metaphor to explore the situations of the managers, for it

emphasises performance, the need to supply the 'next line', as well as

the anxiety surrounding this.

Chapter 7 illuminated managers' need to come up with 'an answer', to

'act', to be seen to be doing this, together with their anxiety when

answers are not forthcoming. For example, Alison dealing with her

'rollercoaster' perspective of the business and always feeling that she

should have her 'equipment' – the skills and qualities needed to deal with the rise and fall of the Agency business cycle.

Susannah Clapp [1997] described actors 'frozen' by stagefright and what they thought and how they reacted [or became inactive] in respect of this. Here was the link I was searching for because it seemed helpful in making sense of the dilemmas managers had described to me, as well as understanding my own need, at times, to provide 'the answers'.

The following, therefore, explores the parallels between the situations of the managers, as I encountered them, and the actor on the stage as Clapp describes the experience. The actor's comments from Clapp's article, are in italics and I use these as a counterpoint to my encounters with Paula, from the Agency, in order to shed light on, and make sense of, her sense of unease and then, crucially, what to do about it. This section is both about Paula's sense-making as well as illustrating how my own practice was informed and changed by this inquiry.

To recap, the need to perform in the Agency was overwhelming. Paula had been recently appointed to a new post. She appeared to be the

ideal candidate for a more prominent managerial role and had been

encouraged to accept the post, even though she was unsure what it was

she was meant to accomplish. This I contend is similar to the situation

of the actor who, recognizing he is literally in the spotlight, freezes

during a performance:

> 'Ian McKellern, speaking of his experience of stage fright,
> recalled how he overheard some actors damming his own diction
> and physique," I thought I was impervious, but the next night, in
> the second act, I stopped in mid-flow, certain that every member
> of that nights audience agreed with my critics'.
>
> [Clapp: 1997]

This paralleled Paula's predicament. She spoke to me of her sense of

not knowing and feeling the strong compulsion that she should be

'coming up with the answers'; she was stuck, not knowing what to do.

Paula was struggling with her need to know what this new role meant

and 'delivering' quickly because that was what was expected of her. She

was keen for me to 'frame' the situation and come up with some possible

solutions for her predicament. She admitted that she wanted a possible

'model', a possible framework for how 'she could move forward'. It was

possible that she may have perceived me as putting her in the

'spotlight', putting pressure on her, in our meeting, to be seen to supply

the answer. If she was unable to do this then, having put her in the

'spotlight', it fell to me to supply one. This connection with 'stagefright'

provides a 'way-in' to consider alternative choices for working with

Paula's predicament.

Sticking with her sense of unease, and exploring this, was unfamiliar

practice for Paula. She certainly did not wish to share it with anybody

else in the company at this time. This is similar to the point made in the

earlier chapters concerning those discourses that are marginalized and

those that are more 'hear-able'. In Paula's case the idea of 'managing',

or 'coming up with the answer' is what is thought to be legitimate. Not

knowing how to proceed is not 'permitted' to make sense. As Clapp

[1997] explains, ' *performers don't like talking about stage fright'.*

Contrary to my previous practice prior to the inception of this inquiry, I

refused to go with her need to know by supplying solutions and decided

to keep with her 'stuckness' and uncertainty.

Paula related how, before she took the managers job in the Agency, the

work culture had reinforced the need to come up with answers. That,

she believed, was a role that suited her, but she found herself unable

to 'perform' in a new unknown situation. After being prompted she

worked out the difference between the two roles. Her new role was ambiguous, her line manager himself seemed unsure about how to move forward, and did not task Paula with the 'tight objectives' she had been used to in her previous job. It was up to her to develop these and she was being given the responsibility to do that herself. It seemed scary and isolating to her. Extending the metaphor of stagefright:

'Terror is a part of being on the stage, and incapacity has its varieties and degrees: when the symptoms stop short of freezing an actor, they are as idiosyncratic as any performance. Laurence Olivier, overcome by fright when he was appearing in the Master Builder, went on stage sure that he would not be able to stay there: "I began to watch for the instant which my knowledge of the next line would vanish. Only the next two, no – one more....and then – NOW. I took one pace forward and stopped abruptly. My voice had started to fade, my throat closed up and the audience was beginning to go giddily around.'

[Clapp: 1997]

Could 'terror' be associated with Paula's experience of her job? I put to her that it was unrealistic to believe that her new role could be like her last where she felt comfortable. Yet, as in the stage example, it was maybe more about the degree of incapacity that this sense of unease leads to. Being 'thrown in at the deepend', as she described it, was

particularly traumatic and so her early experiences of her new job were bound to be potentially incapacitating.

What was missing from Paula's vividly communicated story was the absence of others from the narrative. She was speaking of herself in isolation. It was her up against this impenetrable fog of a job that enveloped her, gradually immobilising her capacity to perform as she thought she should be. We began talking about possible others whom she could engage with about her dilemma, and how she could find repositories of information, other managers in other offices for instance, that would throw some light on the situation. She spoke to me of the power of talking about her anxiety, without feeling that this was being judged. Being supported independently was important, for an alternative way of working was being created here that led to potential empowerment.

Paula spoke of our discussion being the first time since taking on the role that she had given any real time to considering what it meant for her, and what might be getting in the way of her seeing it for what it was, or could be. The investment she had made so far, in respect of reflecting on her job, were snatches of thoughts between engagements

or whilst driving to and from work. Space, both physical and mental, had

not been allowed for reflection to take place[*]. Unlike the stage where

prompts are given within the silence:

> 'One actor, playing Jacques in As You Like It, sailed through his
> opening scene and song, but then started to hear a voice in his
> head saying "this is not very good...do something...change your
> rhythm". He began like a drowning man to respond to his
> command, but as he did so forgot what he was supposed to be
> saying. He put down his head, asked for a prompt, and as he was
> given the line, caught a reproving murmur from the audience.'
>
> [Clapp: 1997]

At this point the metaphor of stagefright ceases to be useful. In the

organisations in this inquiry 'gaps' cannot always be filled, or prompts

from fellow 'cast' members may be unwelcome. Choices were not always

determined by lack of space but also shaped by political factors. For

instance, at the beginning of the first cycle of the inquiry [see section

4.3.7] with Castings it was noted how Morag was conscious of being 'too

critical' and that she felt the group, in seeking to focus on continuous

improvement, had lost the capacity to praise good work. She seemed to

challenge, as a lone voice, the CI rhetoric that prevailed. Again, in

---

[*] Paula's use of the term 'space' being the same as Neville's own description of our
work together. See Chapter 6 'The Agency'.

Brewing, team initiatives and collective responsibility were eroded as

individuals perceived the threat to themselves - the main issue being

the need to preserve status in the midst of redundancy and loss.

> *Later in this chapter this issue of recognising and dealing with the*
> *anxiety associated with change is discussed. On re-reading the above I*
> *am aware of my own potential anxiety as consultant and coach and how*
> *that may have affected the interaction with Paula and others.*

9.3. What characterises this different form of 'space'?

When first discussing the notion of empowerment this thesis

associated it with action, that impetus to do something. Subsequent

involvement with managers, through their active participation in this

inquiry, has shown how their sense-making in terms of encountering

empowerment rhetorics was characterised by a number of disjunctions.

That the rhetoric with its emphasis on 'doing' often was at odds with

the reality of their workplaces and lives outside of it. This inquiry has

demonstrated that a different perspective on empowerment may be

more useful for managers experiencing such disjunctions.

The adjective -able- is from the Latin *habere*, which means 'to hold'. If

we now use this definition of ability - of 'holding' - then a new

interpretation of empowerment emerges. That being supported, of engaging with others and recognizing that help is available, and that its other employees' job to offer that help, which enables 'the play'- the work- to proceed. This process has links to one of the inquiry skills Heron and Reason [2001] identify as being helpful in improving the quality of knowing [Heron 1996]. It concerns trying to arrest our 'classifications and constructs we impose on our perceiving, so that we can be more open to its inherent primary, imaginal meaning' [p. 184]. They see this as enabling different constructs to be tried out, to reframe the 'defining assumptions of any context'.

I contend that such interaction, and resulting actions, is fundamental to individuals and groups seeing workplaces as credibly more empowering. It is the denial of the positive potential of particular social relations of work, and resulting retreat into isolation coupled with the very nature of a results orientated environment that negates such behaviour. Such isolation can be identified in the Agency with Paula's 'island mentality' or Neville's work and social patterns, as well as in Brewing as 'survivors' coped with redundancy of colleagues. This point is supported by the work of Lee [1999:259] when she states that:

'From an organisational perspective, empowerment is about the ability to set the goals and values that are 'valued' by the organisation.. An "empowered" employee would be one who proactively supports and furthers the organisation's activities...[but] one loses one's self-responsibility to the needs of the organisation.....impotent as a questioning, reflective, and potentially disruptive individual'.

Yet Lee does not offer an alternative way of being. Stacey [2000] seems to offer an alternative: that out of 'stuckness' arises potential opportunity. Such spaces may be characterised by different forms of talk. The following explores the links between 'talk', the concept of 'ability' and its links with anxiety.

9.4. Participation in different forms of talk

Stacey argues that opportunities for different types of conversations are not just for senior executives masterminding the organisation. His work impacts on this study for it opens up the possibility that intention is being understood as emergent and problematic. It is the quality of the participation in self-organising conversations **by all** which cannot be necessarily pre-determined in terms of outcome that is more important. Similarly, Neville in attempting to plough a controlled career

path but faced with ambiguity and anxiety, yet finding a form of 'space' enabling him to explore his predicament. For Alison and her 'knee-jerk' behaviours recognising that through CRAR other choices were possible, that she did not have to 'board her train', and then getting her staff involved in such inquiry.

Chance may be something that we grant ourselves to be different, to think in different ways, to engage with others in ways that we had not thought possible. We free ourselves up, and also potentially, offer the space for others to develop and assist us. This inquiry makes clear that if experience is kept hidden, with anxieties resulting from insecurity and defensiveness, then opportunities to be different do not arise.

Yet Stacey does not take into account the difficulty of creating these opportunities. Anxiety, created within an organisation by insecurity and defensiveness, is actually contradicting rhetoric about empowerment. Amidst insecurity it is not surprising that it is difficult to be different, to take that risk, to admit to not knowing. When change programmes are imposed -'done' to others - it limits the potential of individuals to say what they really think. Consequently, managers and 'change agents' feel more trapped, become frustrated and the enterprise fails.

To pursue our stage analogy further, as Clapp [1997] remarks, '*Is an actor still an actor if he can't act?*' So, is Paula from the third cycle of this inquiry, still a manager if she cannot manage? Not necessarily forever but, just at this moment, when the next line that 'should be in the script', as she sees it, does not arrive. What if she refuses to see herself as giving 'a performance', of identifying with empowerment rhetorics devised by others? Rather, merely taking herself through a series of different arenas that have expectations, certainly, but no one script written by others for her to craft and deliver - for her to 'act'. She then has the opportunity to improvise around a concept, to recognise that the uncertainty is going to produce 'blocks', and then try to circumvent them.

So much relates to how 'ability' is constructed, as pointed out above, yet its significance maybe lies more with links to anxiety. **An alternative view of the manager's ability is not purely about the instant, desired solution but his/her capacity to work *with* the anxiety and sense of not knowing.**

Stacey [2000] writes of the importance of 'focusing attention on the quality of the holding of anxiety' [p.408]; this is similar to my 'staying with the 'stuckness' of Paula's predicament described above. He believes that new ways of conversing publicly give rise to new ways of individuals making sense of themselves. This movement also gives rise to anxiety. However, Stacey sees this as a positive. For within this sense of unease lies the possibility of 'struggling to find new meaning' [p.408]. He contends that it is the very pressure to set extreme targets and place people under stress that works against the development of the 'kind of conversational life that makes creativity possible' [p.409]. In response the manager has an unrealistic expectation of wanting to know everything. This view is supported by Flood [2001] who argues that:

> 'seeking mastery over our lives as science and technology do, misses the point of wholeness and takes away our human spirit. It turns the magic of mystery in our lives into the misery of failed mastery over our lives....so there is a need to maintain a balance between mystery and mastery'.
>
> [Flood 2001: p.142]

For Flood believes that in the context of work we need to find a further characteristic of this space: an operating space between

mastery and mystery, to keep in balance the feeling of 'hopelessness' that we cannot know anything whilst holding in check the 'naivety' that we can know everything.

Finally, Clapp [1997] contends that:

> 'Like all theatrical events, stage fright makes explicit what, off the stage, is tacit. The sensations are of being "behind the beat", of a sudden self-consciousness, of being stranded with no internal imagery. But this attack is on display'.

To sum up, being 'on display' as experienced by Jack and the inquiry group at Castings, Steven and Carl of Brewing, and Paula and Neville of the Agency, was a common feeling. If what they do is regarded as an 'act', a performance for a potentially disapproving audience, then all the debilitating effects of stagefright may come to the fore and dominate working life. If they view work as a script that must be delivered, always 'having the lines', the 'right pitch', the 'correct interpretation', then they will be stuck in one form of organisational auditorium. In other words, incessantly striving for mastery is, I believe ironically, counter-productive. For it creates a form of space that prevents the wondering about not knowing with anxiety held in check.

Therefore, managers seeing themselves differently, in a culture that encourages alternative creative forms of interaction, offer a potentially different way of dealing with 'not knowing'. Unlike a theatrical script, where you may skip to the end or in rehearsal take a scene out and play with that, life in The Agency, or Brewing, is unpredictable. It does not have a written ending that the script builds towards [although reading the Agency's company literature you would think that this was the case!]. Increasingly, to continue the metaphor, employees of Castings, Brewing and the Agency found new twists in the 'plot' that did not conform to the actions of fellow 'cast members' as they had demonstrated before. For example, new senior managers at an office threw into disarray previous loyalties and confidence that the company was 'getting things right', as Neville once described the situation to me. Or, in the case of Jack of Castings [see Chapter 5], a loss of a major customer threatened the security of the workforce and led managers to reappraise the viability of their plant and question the public pronouncements of engendering trust and commitment.

Consequently, the ability to improvise and interpret new situations and twists in 'the tale' of working practices becomes paramount. Given the relative lack of experience of managers, and the limited opportunity for

development and mentoring, it was clear that not all situations would be understood or answers readily to hand to solve problems. Critical to participation, therefore, seems to be managers taking a different view of themselves, yet this has implications for them and their organisations.

9.5.   What I am capable of rather than what I do: implications for individuals and their organisations.

Caroline Sullivan ends a review of a concert by saying:

> 'Why Badly Drawn Boy is doing something for which he's so clearly unsuited is anyone's guess, but he offers a whole new way of appreciating live music.'
>
> [Guardian April 13th 1999]

On reading this conclusion I was struck by its assumption that in some way this artist's approach was 'not suited' to the accepted order of things, how concerts and live performance *should* be. Yet it also goes further than this. The need, as Sullivan makes clear, to 'be suited' for an accepted way of performing is made redundant once that accepted way is redefined. If we cast a critical eye as to what possibilities are available to 'performing', or 'ability', then different perspectives can be encountered. Thus, here empowerment is being viewed as both mystery

and mastery. Not knowing in detail what may happen but at the same time being committed to realising differing possibilities.

What seems to allow managers to cope with this environment of not knowing and uncertainty is an ability to deal with both the messiness of their working lives and the impact this has on them outside of the workplace. An example of such choice-making is Annette, of the Agency, on returning to her office after participating in this inquiry's group initiative in the Agency:

> '...... you end up having knee-jerk behaviours based on particular thought patterns of 'situation ...my response.....this is what I do'. I began to look at this differently and recognised that the thought pattern was just like a train coming into the station. I did not have to get on it. If I did, I knew where it would take me. Just that feeling of not being an automaton but having a choice of how I thought about situations and courses of action was something really different and liberating.'

Again we see the same ability to be creative from Steve of Brewing [see Chapter 5] where, after working with myself through the issue of an employee who he realized had been too focused on the short-term rather than looking to the future, I challenged him to explore similar parallels in his own reaction to planned redundancy. He recognised that

his 'relentless pursuit' of corporate objectives had enmeshed him in detail, disabling him from looking after his own needs. It was necessary then to focus on these and how creatively to achieve them.

Therefore, the perspective seems to be one of managers viewing themselves as what they may be capable of, as opposed to what they need to do to follow a prescribed formula.

This viewpoint has real implications:

- for recruitment and selection where evidence points to the strong tendency to appoint staff in the manager's own image and frame of reference. This not only may contribute to the hardening of organisational culture but also have serious equal opportunity considerations as selectors dismiss those with alternative viewpoints or from different cultures [Marchington and Harrison 1997].

- managers may be caught between their boss who is desperately trying to control and limit the range of behaviours that are acceptable, and their own intuitive sense of wanting to be different. This can result in a dilemma of how to manage a

working relationship within differing power relations during times of uncertainty.

- the opportunities for critical thinking about what employees do day-to-day are limited as the reduction by 'paring down' of permissible behaviours is reinforced through rhetoric of improvement and conformity of practice. Accordingly, the alternatives for different ways of knowing and acting are not discussed or even attempted.

The rhetoric of the 'empowered' organisation places demands on *individuals* to find their own way through uncertainty. In reality, this is often coupled with a ruthless strategic search for perfection and 'lean' methods of managing incorporating the 'right ways' of doing things. This lean management leads to a paring down of behaviours rather than welcoming alternative perspectives. The phenomena is apparent in the fast-food 'have a nice day' cultures of responding to customers or the call-centres with the operatives almost responding in harmony, like well-drilled backing singers, slick and together but potentially antiseptic and soulless. However, this thesis, as exemplified by the examples from the inquiry process above, contends that a different

443

way of working collaboratively with managers brings about more

creative responses to the lean management contexts so described.

Although each of these factors are relevant in determining if managers

see themselves in different ways I also contend that it is the very

'cultist' nature of management itself that is preventing both a different

perspective being taken individually, as well as potentially hampering

Stacey's notion of participation *by all* in different forms of interaction.

What do I mean by 'cultist' in this context? The OED defines cultist as

denoting a person or thing popularized in the form of a cult. It is the

denotion of manager as individual, the popularizing of the person in the

role, with attendant followers, that characterises this interpretation

of the term.

9.6. Through the Passage: Empowerment and the cult of the Manager.

'Robert Hughes [art critic and social commentator] wrangled with

modernism in his series the 'Shock of the New', which ended with

a heartfelt plea for art as our means of 'opening the passage

from feeling to meaning'.

Peter Conrad, Observer, June 27th 1999.

This section explores the connections between my work with co-inquirers and their encounters with empowerment rhetoric and the sentiments of the quote above, with particular reference to the cult of the manager.

Conrad describes how Hughes 'wrangles' with 'modernism' in his work and I can empathise with these sentiments. A number of metaphors and 'ways of seeing' that may aid the formation of alternative perspectives surround this research and, again, I have recourse to metaphor to explain the way in which the 'cult' of the presenter', as evoked by Conrad, enables an exploration of the cult of the manager. There are connections in the 'passage' analogy of Hughes and this inquiry, as I encountered the feelings the participants attached to their working lives. The nature of the inquiry is the 'passage'. From this we may derive meaning, further understanding of how empowerment rhetoric impacts on participants, guides or disables action and choice, stifles or creates alternative meaning and action. As with the stagefright metaphor, I wish to use to the 'cult' of the presenter', as evoked by Conrad to explore the cult of the manager.

Conrad could be interpreted differently. He describes the nature of

television and how it makes its subject matter understood through

utilising presenters. In this case it is the 'performance' of Matthew

Collings as a frontman for a new Channel 4 series on modern art:

> 'Channel 4 has made critical comprehension fatally easy:
> if you want to understand modern art, all you have to do is look at
> Matthew Collings, which has become almost compulsory, since his
> face gazes at passers-by from billboards throughout London. The
> book of the series enforces this neat identification. On the
> cover, the titles captions a portrait of him, with his rumpled
> shirt and retro sideburns...........'
>
> [Conrad 1999]

Conrad compares Collings with Hughes and finds him a more modern

phenomenon when compared to Hughes' former ground breaking series

on art, the 'Shock Of the New':

> 'Hughes, despite his combative verbal style, preferred to keep
> out of sight in the Shock of the New...Today, artists, like
> everyone else, from chefs to disgraced politicians, want to be
> stars. Professional aptitude or a sense of vocation has been
> replaced by careerist self-promotion.'
>
> [Conrad 1999]

It is my contention that this promotion of the 'frontman' can be likened

to a common notion of empowerment. That if we interpret

empowerment purely as an individual phenomenon, then the **person**

'becomes the message'. The individual success or failure is the focus as

opposed to the support that is offered, the task that is given, or the

context in which the actions are performed. The 'frontman' is also a

manifestation of the cult of the manager. This observation can be

substantiated with reference to the companies of this inquiry.

The 'Frontman' and Castings

The task discourse, as opposed to the development discourse,

identified in previous chapters, especially in Castings, created a working

context whereby managers promoted themselves, and were judged on

their ability to 'motivate' and 'deliver the goods'. How they did this was

often open to question. The ramifications of not being able to do this

seemed also to fly in the face of the simultaneous 'developmental

discourse'. The managers in this inquiry indicated an absence of support

from others to create suitable spaces for acknowledging the sense of

'not knowing'. The excessive pressure placed on individuals; the

reluctance to involve others and communicate decisions; the disjunction

between espoused 'team' philosophy and, in reality, the lack of trust in

managers; all of these suggested that managers' worth was not necessarily based on 'professional aptitude' or 'sense of vocation'. Managing is seen as a singular activity, instrumental and rational carried out by the manager, which others, their employees, succumb to. Whilst for the employees, being 'managed' is seen as being **'done to'**, rather than 'managing' as a process **'in conjunction with'**. This point is closely allied to Alvesson and Willmott's [1996, p.10] dichotomy of management being seen as mainly a technical activity, the employment of instrumental reason, as opposed to being intricately entwined in the social situation of the managing group. Just as Collins is 'up-front' as a presenter so the manager is no longer 'out of sight', allowing their ability to draw on and develop those around them. It has become vital to be seen to be LEADING from the front and taking the plaudits, the 'action man' of Castings, for example. Or in my guise as the consultant being party to, and promoting, the Continuous Improvement [CI] rhetoric within the company.

This is not a singular activity in its entirety. Others, the followers, witness this behaviour with its attendant values of 'at all costs' and '101% commitment', which do not seem to accord with the notions of the development discourse and the empowerment rhetorics of 'team' and

'support'. It appears to represent how work is done and how promotions are attained. It becomes 'the message'. Alternative meanings that could be mooted for this behaviour, and other ways of achieving the same business outcomes, become suffocated by the rhetoric.

Conrad [1999] explores this notion further:

> 'In the book that Collins writes for the series he proposes that art may offer a route to 'transcendent meanings'. That phrase never made it to the film...television is no longer in the business of purveying 'transcendence'. The epic series 'Civilisation' could not be made today, and that very fact establishes how uncivilised we have become'.

Could it not also be argued that within the organisations in this inquiry their businesses are not 'transcending' meaning - in relation to this inquiry transcendent means going beyond immediate experience of different forms of 'organising', 'managing', 'acting'. Rather these organisations are characterised by a paring down of a range of meanings that are offered or can be created by employees - the 'lean management' already discussed. . Therefore, the ability to interpret situations that they experience day to day in different ways is becoming more and more difficult. This has real social, organisational and personal impact. For example, it becomes' risky' to go out on a limb;

confidence becomes usurped so they look to others to derive solutions; the pressure is still there to 'keep up' so they resort to firefighting and the long hours syndrome.

So, just as the BBC wants to 'brain up' [Conrad 1999], the organisations in this inquiry seek through their rhetoric to constantly encourage creativity, thought and initiative. **Yet, just as modern television cannot cope with deep thought so the organisations may have problems considering what is beyond their established norm – their legitimate thinking. In the television world it is the cult of the presenter that has put a stop to this. In the case of the company it is the 'cult' of the manager that is equally powerful.**

Morgan [1993] in his persuasive phrase of 'imaginization as personal empowerment' suggests that if individuals are committed to change and they act on it then that is the starting point for social movements. Change, he argues, is an 'individual affair'. However, he underplays the notion of complexity in change. For example, this inquiry has shown the nature of empowerment rhetorics which individuals not only shape but also are shaped by. That by treating empowerment as purely an individualistic notion then the very nature of differing power relations

shifting and shaping interaction is not given its due importance.

Individuals, I contest, following the social constructionist notions of

relationship offered earlier, do not exist in isolation, in a 'bubble', but

are in *relation to*. These points in themselves contest the notion of

becoming, in Morgan's terms, our own 'personal theorists'. McNamee and

Gergen [1999] go further by stating that:

> 'Let us here distinguish selves from persons, viewing the former
>
> as constructions of relations and the latter as individual
>
> bodies.....given this distinction we can treat persons as the
>
> intersection of multiple relationships, local and immediate
>
> manifestations of relational histories.'
>
> [McNamee and Gergen, 1999: p.22]

Social constructionism emphasises the process of relating as opposed

to objects that interact. Certain actions therefore become viable and

understandable within certain relational forms. This is amply illustrated

by the following discussion, which depicts an initiative in the Agency

seeking to help managers 'deal with pressure'.

The 'Frontman' and the Agency

What the companies in this inquiry did to try and arrest the situation

where managers are 'under pressure' to achieve and survive is of

particular interest. According to the participants in the inquiry, the companies failed to notice the individual and the context. Taking the Agency initiative, for example, noticing the down side of excessive workloads, absence and sickness and weekend working was one thing but deciding how to intervene to break this debilitating cycle was quite another. The Agency believed that it had 'dealt with' pressure through its stress management course. Therefore, the meanings that may remain hidden behind individual stories of working lives are lost amongst the rigor and outcomes of the programmed intervention led by the 'Consultant' and 'HR' : the 'frontmen'.

The ownership of the initiative is labelled as 'X's programme'- they promote it, delivering what the organisation believes to be required – in this way the organisation 'looks after its people'. The manager 'on the programme' is portrayed as the deficient one, not coping, needing assistance to become more robust. This was highlighted in discussion, quite wrongly, by some of the London group speculating that their deficiency was 'the real reason behind the inquiry group'. Empowerment here is being defined, using Willmott's phrase [1995], as 'false charity'. Charity because it:

'seeks to bestow the gift of greater discretion and involvement upon employees and false because it is motivated by a concern to enhance business performance and profitability rather than an attempt to improve the "structural inequalities" that make such gestures possible'. [p. 92-93].

In summary, the power of established meaning and norms of behaviour were powerful within the inquiry groups, whether Castings, Brewing or the Agency. These are reinforced and co-created by the 'cult of the manager'. Its not surprising, therefore, that the initiative designed to offset the negative consequences of such actions is also seen in this same piercing light.

9.7. The Interaction of Different Agents: the formal and the shadow

Stacey, Griffin and Shaw [1997] have remarked on how different voices in the management literature have dealt with mess and uncertainty. They contend that those that concentrate on control and individual agency are 'more appropriate for articulating contexts close to certainty and agreement'. These tend to be the most dominant voices

and so dominate managers' understanding. Both Senge [1990] and Covey [1989] speak of intention to change, seeing action in terms of goals without exploring the process by which the intentions were formed in the first place. This view is inherent, Stacey, Griffin and Shaw argue, in the concepts of 'leverage' in respect of Senge, as well as Covey. [A similar point was made above in respect of Morgan encouraging individuals to change themselves if their situation is to be different]. Referring to the usefulness of the social constructionist position epitomised by the work of Shotter [1993], Stacey, Griffin and Shaw [1997] argue that social reality is not pre-determined but constantly being created and emerging out of what people say and do in their working lives. In this respect, Stacey et al. are aligned much more closely to the reality of the managers as encountered in this inquiry:

> '...when groups of managers in organisations engage in their everyday conversations they are doing much more than applying theories, building teams or fostering positive motivational attitudes - they are constructing the nature of their work. Conversations at this ordinary, everyday level do not unfold according to anyone's intention and they cannot be modelled in advance...it is also difficult to see how anyone could identify levers in such conversations that they might then use to control its direction.'
>
> [Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 1998: p.9]

454

Stacey [1996] has been informative to this inquiry. He illustrates the difficulty of speaking about organisations as if they are one unified, coordinated whole. He suggests that different systems co-exist within organisations. On the one hand roles, hierarchy, procedures and the adherence to the dominant official ideology typify the formal, legitimate system. For example, the kaizen teams and organisational improvement processes formally set up in Castings typify this legitimate system.

A second network of relationships, a shadow system also exists centred on everyday social contacts and informal networks of relationships that are interwoven and not separate from the formal. Annette, from the Agency, encountered the formal and informal within her own working life:

> 'The place is formally team-based but they are all very large...this is not conducive to team spirit...we are constantly being told to 'get out there and do the business'. And also subtle messages of what your job should involve...what you are 'being paid for'...its constant stress...all these messages seem to be reinforced on a daily basis...if teams do have someone who is not performing then they tend to get passed around other teams like a 'bad apple'. No one will bite the bullet and act and try and engage in any sort of

conversation with this person and see what it is that's stopping them doing well'.

This 'web' of everyday conversations and interaction is immensely powerful in impacting on the working lives of people in organisations and potentially changing them. Therefore, the challenge for working with this system becomes one of accepting its nature but not seeking to control it. Respecting that life in organisations is often intangible, that the complex cannot always be rendered simple and tucked into convenient categories typified by the concentration on individual empowerment rhetoric. Moreover, we need to engage in sense-making, a seeking of a sense of coherence, of what is meaningful, recognising the emergence of new patterns of order out of disorganized activity.

For Annette is expected to get into 'action mode' and 'come up with the goods' with the poor performing employee. Agency, again, being seen as an individual act, with intentional control through 'performance management'. What was taken into account was recognition by the manager that the reality was co-created by the interaction of different agents, they themselves being influenced by the system of which they are a part. Annette had begun to engage in other

conversations with the possibility of creating a situation different from those the employee had been used to. She, as a manager, felt it was necessary to act alone, to 'do something about it'. Moreover, there was pressure that it might not go 'right', that her approaches would be construed as 'misguided, misdirected, and not conforming to the norm'. The manager, in this case, failed to participate in different forms of conversation that may have run counter to accepted notions of 'dealing with' the problem.

Reason [1997] has argued that 'participation is an epistemological imperative ...the western worldview [being] based on a fundamental epistemological error that humans are separate from each other and from the natural world.' Furthermore, he quotes Skolimowski [1992] 'we always partake of what we describe', to emphasise that our 'reality' is a 'product of the dance between our individual and collective mind and what is there'. Therefore, within the context of this inquiry the individual perspective of empowerment has been at the expense of a more collective view. Questions remain about what this different view would be for, what would be its aims?

9.8. Critical Inquiry: from individualism to a collective view of empowerment

It is the contention of this PhD thesis that the opportunities for critical inquiry about what employees do day-to-day are lost as the paring down of their behaviours is reinforced through rhetoric of improvement and conformity of practice. Alternatives for different ways of knowing and acting are not discussed or even attempted. Easterby-Smith and Snell [1998:270] pose a question: 'are companies using the rhetoric of the learning organisation to obtain compliance and commitment from employees, or does the idea represent a genuine attempt to establish mutual partnership in collective action learning?'.

Inherent in this different critical approach are managers and others considering what it means to think, act, interact and work differently [Weil 1999]. Managers in this inquiry were 'locked-in', with their thinking/action subject to rhetoric's of 'lean management' and to 'strategic straitjackets'. The challenge for themselves and others is how to work *with* these dilemmas rather than *on them*. It is a process of engaging in inquiry that seeks to challenge those involved and change the practices and systems of which they are a part [Kemmis 1982].

Employees are often engaged in action where choices seemed to be limited, their working lives 'messy', ambiguous and isolated.

The empowerment rhetorics that participants encountered isolated individuals and deepened their sense of separateness. On the other hand, this inquiry, and my changing status/critical reflection within it, served to promote connectedness. The groups extolled the virtues of coming together, collectively listening carefully to strong feelings and powerful emotions of wrongs and rights within Castings, Brewing and the Agency. This was heard at the training meeting of Castings, when Carl and Steve were discussing the redundancy context of Brewing or the managers meeting in the London venue of the Agency eager to gain some space from the office. [Yet, such space was still controlled by the absence of funds for any future meetings.] It was the nature of these connections that seemed to act as a counterpoint to the isolation of their working lives. The 'spaces' co-created by participants and myself were understood as being different and exhibited features that were missing from their offices or foundry - challenging assumptions, an encouragement of open communication between participants, an opportunity to collectively critically reflect on action outside of a 'task' or 'development' context of the continuous improvement meeting or

official appraisal. However, I sense that this inquiry has shown that

countering the prevailing empowerment discourses is not quite so

simple.

This point is critical, and it echoes Deetz's criticisms of Gergen cited

earlier, in that individuals and communities can benefit greatly from

social participation and mutual trust, but the outcomes will depend on

what resources are accessed, who is excluded from them, and what is

demanded in exchange. Deetz and White [1999] have argued that:

> '... .shifting the locus of responsibility from individuals to
> communities, that is, to various systems of relationships [is]
> guided by the idea that new obligations need to be produced: to
> the voices within ourselves, to the relationships in which we
> exist, and to the processes through which these are
> constructed.'
>
> [Deetz and White [1999] pp.115-6]

To Deetz and White, however, this is a world without 'passion and

rage'. They argue that McNamee and Gergen's [1999], for example,

depict people 'who wish to learn and grow rather than people who hate

and fear that their world is fading' [p.116]. I do not believe that this

duality is necessarily helpful as it infers, for example that learning may

not be connected to fear. One may inspire the other. Fear of the

changing nature of the world may well inspire growth in a number of

different forms for individuals and the communities of which they are a

part, for example in the creation of alternative forms of community

based on different values. What may be more revealing are the

constructions placed on these forms of communities in the sense that

they may be described as being 'disordered' or even 'threatening'.

However, Deetz and White do focus on what has been an integral part

of this inquiry, namely my own 'dislocation' in terms of practice. Their

contention is that power, consent and ideology enter into the search

for new communities. In this sense, I recognised whilst involved in this

inquiry that I was smoothing the passage of strategic purpose within

my own role of consultant but becoming increasingly aware of

disjunctions of empowerment rhetorics and the everyday experience of

the managers.

Deetz and White believe that talk and voice are problematic. For

although McNamee and Gergen do advocate the need for better

discussions their reclaiming of voices misses how these voices exist at

all: 'the productive quality of fundamental conflict, the process of

entering into decisions we make together, and the interdeterminancy of

all situations' [p.119]. Their work is characterised by the use of a

cartoon to support their argument:

> 'In the 1930's one of artists Saul Steinberg's drawings captured
>
> an emerging sense of our mutuality and shared responsibility. He
>
> showed two people each balanced on an end of a seesaw [or tee-
>
> totter]. The fulcrum for the board sits on a cliff with a person
>
> over solid ground and the other over a void. But the person over
>
> the void has a gun pointed at the one over land. The drawing
>
> provides a quick image of a kind of mutual responsibility, a
>
> responsibility built into the structure of the situation rather
>
> than the hearts and minds or even the language of the
>
> participants.'
>
> [Deetz and White, 1999 p.116]

This is a striking image that encapsulates the nature of structural

relationships that has bearing on this discussion of empowerment, for it

spotlights the nuances of power, mutuality and responsibility.

9.9. A critique of the critical

A critical stance needs to be adopted towards those who advocate a

critical stance! Three strands of criticism can be identified. First, that

critical management theory treats individuals as though they can, by

applying reason, pull themselves away from their everyday practices,

their habitual world as they understand it. Fay [1987] contends that

people want to hang on to this world because they are addicted to it

and highly dependent on it. As in this inquiry the strength of the CI

rhetoric in Castings, for example, was powerful and limited choices for

managers in those settings. To challenge it is frightening and

demanding. Appealing to people through reason without taking into

account their 'emotional attachments' [Fay 1987, p.83] is a major

obstruction to enabling emancipation. Alison 'loving her job', the

successes of the teams at Castings, the values espoused so strongly by

Carl of Brewing, were all strong emotions 'muddying' their ability to

make 'rational' sense of their situations.

Alvesson and Wilmott [1998] argue, however, that the limited power of

reason is still vital if conventional wisdom and current practice are to

be questioned. This criticism could also be extended to the researched

as well as to the researcher. Alvesson and Deetz [2000] have called for

both 'closeness' and 'distance' in researching social phenomena.

Closeness in the sense of:

'being able to be familiar with the site under study. To sensitively listen to the considerations of the situation, and not rejecting immediately the viewpoints of management'.

and 'distance':

'...which ideologies are at play that frame these situations...what are the institutionalized doctrines that play behind the backs of actors...just how can we reform such tasks so to reduce the contradiction between emancipation and instrumental values...how can we interpret social reality in a really novel light?'

[Alvesson and Deetz p.208-9]

They do not focus wholly on the researcher but discuss 'research' as a 'not just theory and values, but whose and which'. [p.3].

This inquiry has sought to centre both my, the researcher's, values and espoused theories [Argyris and Schön 1974], in my practice with others. Critical research puts these issues to the forefront and constructs them as central for both reflection and creativity. It is therefore vital that the researcher is the focus of critical management research as much as participating employees. I have sought to do this with exploration throughout the thesis of my own place in the inquiry and discussion of the 'dislocation' in my role [see section 8.2].

The second strand of criticism that can be levelled at critical management theory is that it is attempting a meta-narrative and ignoring the variation and inconsistency that is such a feature of organisations. Weedon has emphasised the problems of creating an autonomous subject just waiting to be released from oppression. With echoes of the analysis of the way participants in this inquiry both grappled with, and generated, competing discourses [in particular sections 7.1 with Alison and 7.3 Lena of the Agency], Weedon sees:

> 'The individual [as] both the site for a possible range of subjectivity and, at any given moment of thought and speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly.'
>
> [Weedon 1998: 34]

The earlier discussion of Foucault and his 'microphysics of power' - the intricate ways by which power is exercised through variable links of relationships - is important to the present argument. His analysis emphasises the fragility of relations, as opposed to their inevitability.

The third strand of criticism concerns pessimism. My own inquiry rejects the employment of empowerment rhetorics but this critique

could be seen as not offering a constructive way forward for practice.

How the substance of critique is represented, and the need to exhibit

its relevance, is important [Hardy and Clegg 1997]. If relevance is not

stressed and negativity is the sole voice then this can lead to critique

being 'marginalized' [Alvesson and Deetz 2000] and 'silenced' [Calas and

Smircich, 1987].

9.10.   Conclusion

To orientate the reader it is necessary to pull together the strands of

argument in this section. It has concluded by placing at the centre of

this inquiry the necessity of critique. Critical theory illuminates current

notions of empowerment as displayed in the companies in this inquiry. It

highlights the corrosive nature of such rhetorics through critical

reflection. Moreover, it seeks autonomy and responsibility that

emphasise interconnectedness and the making of informed choices. The

sense of interconnectedness ensures that the organisation is not

treated as a 'thing' but recognises the interrelationships between lives

inside and outside of work. A critical management perspective also

highlights the apparent gap between oppressive practices and the

benevolent view of empowerment being bestowed on employees, like a charitable act. However, the criticisms of such an approach were also addressed: over emphasis of reason at the expense of emotion; the creation of meta-narratives, and pessimism without construction. Such criticisms need to be heeded if critical management theory is to have relevance to the individuals in this, and in future inquiries.

A more credible view of Empowerment

This chapter has sought to identify a view of empowerment that is more credible, given the disjunctions between the rhetoric espoused and then encountered within Castings, Brewing and the Agency. This alternative perspective emphasizes a re-definition of ability and a view of empowerment as in-action rather than the connotations of 'doing' and 'moving forward' by individual assertion.

<u>A sign of being empowered in the organisation is therefore when the manager is able to stay with times of uncertainty, as opposed to be seen to do something, to act. Sometimes 'holding on', the notion of ability is about not acting but puzzling and considering</u>

alternatives. Empowerment seen as tolerance of anxiety, as opposed to the current notions of empowerment discourse centred on action.

Therefore, in the context of this inquiry, how would empowerment be more credible?

- Managers are subject to ambiguity and mess, and the discourses surrounding the unknowing quality of the manager's working situation are marginalized.

- Using Paula's situation as an example I illuminated a different perspective and practice which does not encourage isolation, but creates a different form of space with a different notion of being 'able'.

- Different forms of talk can pervade employee participation although difficulties arise in making this happen. By focusing on the tolerance of anxiety a new form of ability was constructed.

- This alternative perspective is centred on what managers are capable of rather than what they do. Implications of this are critical: these impact on recruitment and selection, relationships with line managers, and the effects of lean management processes limiting spaces in which to be different.

468

This sensemaking is still centred on individual agency, although Gergen [1999] has suggested viewing the manager as representing the intersection of multiple relationships. Nevertheless, empowerment, as has been emphasised earlier, was cast as an individual activity within Castings, Brewing and the Agency.

This chapter, therefore, has sought to accomplish three aims:

First, the metaphor of stagefright emphasised the 'unknown' in relation to empowerment, which contrasts with the rhetorics encountered in the inquiry based on certainty, action and moving forward. The themes carried forward from previous chapters - increased isolation, limited choices, prevailing disciplinary power that limits alternative perspectives - all contribute to unease and anxiety similar to that found in stagefright.

Secondly, to go beyond a critique of what is known but to develop ways in which empowerment could be seen to be more credible for participants and myself. A different meaning given to 'ability' and the nurturing of a form of space that enabled working with uncertainty and

anxiety impacted on the working practice for participants and myself. Within this was a keen recognition of the shadow of individualism and the implications of working in different ways for groups and individuals, centred much more on the emphasis given to the co-creation of reality through the interaction of different agents in both the 'formal' and 'shadow' systems within workplaces.

Thirdly, by engaging in critical inquiry participants were able to discuss, acknowledge and experiment with alternative ways of knowing and acting. The three different inquiry cycles, as detailed in chapters 4-7, based on the CRAR process, led to participants and myself identifying dilemmas and disjunctions of so-called empowered environments, deepening understanding through critical reflection and informing further choices or actions, in certain situations. In particular, my own growing awareness of the dislocation between the aims of my consultancy brief with the human consequences of empowerment rhetoric, then acting to change role from consultant to researcher; or Neville's or Allison's actions within the Agency to appreciate dilemmas, critically reflect on choices they made and recognise the need to involve others in working in different ways within their work contexts.

Fourthly, this chapter has sought to bring its own critical lens to this quest for collaboration. The discussion of critical theory in respect of empowerment emphasised the 'rage' and 'passion' that needs to be asserted to offset the corrosive practices associated with the disjunctions between what's said and what's done. In so doing, re-asserting the implication of this inquiry that the impact of such empowered practices is not purely contained within the confines of the office or the factory but can impact on lives both inside and outside of work.

Change Here

I met you on a train

your anxious voice

breaking the forced silence

of suburban rail

'Is this my next stop, now?'

not many turned to her

whilst they pored over the tabloid bile

about values and society

I spoke

she

reassured

told me her life story

in ten minutes flat

she was married by the time we got to Gravelly Hill

thought I was a student

[her sight was bad]

She was left in a country

she had known so well

but was more

an ember

refusing to be dowsed

by a shower of damp insularity

Her bag

platform propped

I then wished her a safe journey

she struggled with the right words of thanks

saying

"I hope you come up in the lottery'

the money goes to good causes

you know

but we glance at them everyday.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

This inquiry's primary focus has been the processes and sense making around notions of empowerment characterising the experiences of co-inquirers and myself. However, it has seemed much greater than this. An evolving methodology centred on critically reflective action research has enabled me to discover so much more.

Cooperative inquiry, I contend, is not a single form, for it needs to be more systemic in its focus and impact. So, how can we link 'first' and 'second person' research to 'third person ' research? [Torbert 2001]. The latter is not just about changing an organisation; it is located in the particular, and raises powerful questions about the systemic patterns and the reproduction of power relationships. This inquiry has engaged with depth, over time, through relationships, through co-inquiry, so that I can authoratively offer a different perspective of how empowerment is viewed. The many approaches that I have employed have been central to

creating an alternative perspective; a different form of management research centred on variable ways of knowing, critically reflexive action research through different voices, and the use of poetry and other literary forms.

I wish to illustrate this journey towards a different form of management research with a story about:

- research

- ways of being in relation to the whole notion of change, research and development

- the shrinking discourses of empowerment, its individualisation and striving for action and improvement; participants encountering the 'lean' definitions of empowerment and the pressures in practice to collude with that.

In the methodology chapter I described how using different forms of writing enabled me to gain greater insight into an encounter with a senior manager of the Agency. I wrote, after producing the poem 'Here One Minute...', that:

I recognised, to a far greater extent that the 'official' talk was so far out of touch with the reactions of the employees. That it spoke in generalisations but he saw it through a personal gaze. Moreover, it set out to inspire and mobilise yet for this manager it was deflating and dispiriting [p. 181]

It is three years since that was first drafted. Now, through critical reflection, I recognise that all of its sentiments apply to my own development brought about by engaging in the research, with the uncomfortable feelings, breakthroughs, productive relationships and practical career choices that resulted. The research process centred on inquiring and then representing the results in different forms of writing, to engage in a form of *being* and *acting* that was dissimilar to when I first started on this inquiry in 1997. I became aware that I was shaping, and being shaped by, the shrinking discourses within Castings, particularly at the outset of the research in 1997. Through this research journey I have turned my personal gaze to the systemic practices I was party to then, and subsequently, as consultant and researcher. Through adoption of this methodology I have been able to reconsider these practices and find different ways of knowing and acting, both for myself, and the other participants.

476

This inquiry has centred on disjunctions that managers experienced in the face of empowerment rhetorics, which encouraged inclusion, action, task completion and development. Alongside and entwined within the spiralling cycles of the research journey has been my own practice and development, characterised by parallel disjunctions and choices.

This inquiry has proposed alternative meanings of empowerment both within and beyond the workplace. These deal with both my practice and that of other participants. The task and development discourses that were encountered emphasised empowerment as '*doing*' and '*being done to*', yet the lived encounters with such rhetorics were more of 'not knowing', of anxiety and of isolation. It is the contention of this thesis that by changing our perspective to offer a discourse of empowerment as 'holding' we foster the ability to create a different form of space where critical perspectives can be acknowledged, encouraged and different choices explored and acted upon.

Ely et al remark:

> ...the big job for qualitative researchers is not to make a slick piece but to strive for writing a report that gets as close to the essence - the whole business of what we studied, felt and tentatively made sense about in the field'. [1997, p38]

Consequently, the essence of the inquiry, this research as an epistemology of research practice involving many processes, has both allowed me to challenge and change my practice, and helped those working alongside me as participants to recognise, rethink and then act upon disjunctions. Such research practice has allowed me to produce a narrative that I believe is an account that engenders both a critical and social constructionist notion of management and empowerment that offers a new synthesis to existing management literature.

For future researchers the conclusion to this thesis suggests a number of avenues for inquiry. Reason [2002] has contended that all good research speaks to three audiences:

> It is for them to the extent that it produces some kind of generalisable ideas and outcomes...........
> It is for us to the extent that it is relevant and timely for those who are struggling with problems in their field of action...........
> It is for me to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world.

The 'me', 'us' and them' Reason identifies is an exemplification of the 'first, second and third person' research discussed earlier, in the sense

that this inquiry has benefited from critical reflection on my practice in conjunction with others. First, by colleagues within the research community that I belonged to since the inception of this research in 1997. Dialogue with other students, supervisors, as well as with the managers in this inquiry, supported my initial questioning of practice and challenged me to get to the heart of the puzzles present for participants and myself. It is imperative that such critically reflective practice takes place in other workplace settings <u>beyond</u> the contexts of this inquiry. I realise that the inquiry was limited to three companies in particular sectors, across time, in certain locations. For, as this inquiry has made clear, the collaborative process that resulted shed new light on organisational practices, the rhetorics of empowerment, and brought new perspectives on their impact, both inside and outside organisations. This could now be extended to different locations, sectors and managers.

Secondly, through chronicling my own shifts from 'consultant' to 'researcher', this inquiry offers opportunities for others to examine their own links between the 'first person' perspective and the collaborative practices of 'second-person' research. My own critical inquiry fused with the on-going collaborative processes within the three companies, with me as the researcher 'being in the world'.

Finally, although this form of research and its focus on empowerment rhetorics was 'timely' for the three companies involved it has a wider contemporary relevance. Just as with the pontificating on the arrival of new technology supposedly creating the 'age of leisure' for the 21st century, liberating workplaces and their occupants, the rhetorics of empowerment have equally promised personal and organisational development that does not stand up to close scrutiny. Questions need to be asked about the impacts of such rhetorics beyond the three companies in this research. Are the rhetorics similar in nature? To what extent does time, place and biography resonate within different contexts? As with this inquiry, it is hoped that the immediate concerns of individuals and the communities of which they are a part can be engaged with in such as way - research *with* rather than *on* - in order to further sense-making and extend knowledge. Alvesson and Deetz [2000] have drawn attention to the importance of such critical management research that cannot be 'easily dismissed as unfair and irrelevant' [p 209]. Further attention now needs to be paid to illuminating other managerial experiences, in Alvesson and Deetz's words, in 'empirically sensitive projects', through utilising the critically reflexive research methods that are at the heart of this thesis.

References

Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. [1996], Critical theory and postmodernism approaches to organizational studies. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies.* London: Sage: London.

Alvesson, M., and Deetz, S., [2000], *Doing Critical Management Research*, Sage: London.

Alvesson, M., and Willmott H. (Eds), [1992], *Critical management studies.* Sage: London.

Alvesson, M., and Willmott H., [1996], On the idea of emancipation in management and organization studies. *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 17,3, pp. 432-464.

Alvesson, M., and Willmott, H. [1992], On the idea of emancipation in management and organization studies. *Academy of Management Review, 17,3, pp.432-464.*

Alvesson, M., and Wilmott, H., [1998], *Making Sense of Management,* Sage: London.

Argyris, C. and Schön, D. A., [1974], *Theories in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness,* Jossey Bass: San Francisco.

Argyris,C. & Schon, D. [1996], *Organisational Learning II*, Addison Wesley.

Barone, T., [1995], 'Persuasive writings, vigilant readings and reconstructed characters: the paradox of trust in educational storysharing', in Hatch, J. and Wisnieski, R. [eds], *Life History and Narrative,* Falmer: London. pp. 63-74.

Beckford, J. [1998], *Quality: an Introduction*, Routledge: London.

Bentley, T., [2000], Gestalt in the Boardroom, *Gestalt Review, vol 4., 3.*

Boje, D. and Dennehy, R.F. [1994], *Managing in the Postmodern World,* glossary retrieved 11/2/02 from: http://cbae.nmsu.edu/mgt/syllabi/1997/spring/mgt661/glossary/index.html.

Byham, W. [1991], Zapp!: the lightning of empowerment, Harmony Books: London.

Burr, V. [1995], *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, Routledge: London.

Capra, F. and Flattau, M., [1996] *Elegant Solutions: The Power of Systems Thinking,* New Leaders Press, San Francisco.

Carr D. & Johansson H., [1995], *Best Practices in Reengineering*, McGraw Hill.

Champy J., [1995], *Reengineering Management: The Mandate for New Leadership*, Harper Collins.

Clapp, S., [1997], Stage fright, *New Statesman, London, April 4th 1997, vol. 10, 4, pp.40-41.*

Clegg, S. R. & Hardy, C. (1996). Organizations, organization and organizing. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies* (pp. 1-28). London: Sage.

Coffey, A., [1999], *The Ethnographic Self*, Sage: London.

Collins, D., [1994], The Disempowering Logic of Empowerment, *Empowerment in Organisations, vol.2, 2.*

Conger, J.A. and Kanungo, R.N. [1988], The Empowerment Process: Integrating Theory and Practice, *Academy of Management Review*, July 1988, pp. 471-82.

Covey S., [1989], *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Managers: Restoring the Character Ethic*, Simon and Schuster.

Covey S., [1993], *Principle Centred Leadership*, Simon and Schuster: New York.

Crosby, P., [1979], *Quality is Free*, Mentor: New York.

Dale, B.G. and Plunkett, J.J., [1990], *Managing Quality*, Philip Allan.

Dachler, H.P. and Hosking, D-M, [1995] 'The primacy of relations in socially constructing organisational realities', in Hosking, D.-M., Dachler, H.P. and Gergen, K.J.[eds] *Management and Organisation: Relational Alternatives to Individualism*, Aldershot: Avebury.

Dean, J.W. and Evans, J.R., [1994], *Total Quality Management, Organisation and Strategy*, West: St Paul.

Deetz, S., [1992], Disciplinary power in the modern corporation. In M. Alvesson & H. Willmott (Eds.) [1992], *Critical management studies*. Sage: London.

Deetz, S., and White, W. J., [1999], 'Relational Responsibility or Dialogic Ethics? A Questioning of McNamee and Gergen', in McNamee, S., and Gergen, K., [1999], *Relational Responsibility: Resources for Sustainable Dialogue*, Sage: London.

Deming, W.E., [1982], *Out of Crisis*, MIT.

Denzin, N. K, & Lincoln, Y. S., [1994], Entering the field of qualitative research, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage: London.

Dickens, L., and Watkins, K., [1999], Action research: Rethinking Lewin, *Management Learning, June 1999*.

Department of Trade and Industry, *Managing into the 90's*, October 1991. pp.37-44.

Duvall, C. [1999], 'Developing individual freedom to act', *Participation and Empowerment: an International Journal, Vol. 7., No. 8., pp. 204-212.*

Dreyfus, H. L. and Rabinow, P., [1982], *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*, Harvester: Brighton.

Easterby-Smith, M. and Snell, R., [1998], 'Organisational Learning: Diverging Communities of Practice?', *Management Learning, 29[3].*

Egan, G., [1977], *You and me: The skills of communicating and relating to others*, Brooks/Cole: Monterey.

Egan, G. [1986], *The Skilled Helper*, 3rd ed., Brooks/Cole: Monterey.

Egan, G. [1988], *Change Agent Skills*, Prentice Hall: New York.

Egan, G. [1993], *Adding Value: a systematic guide to Business-Driven Management and Leadership*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Egan, G. [1994], *Working the Shadow Side*, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Ellis, C., and Bochner, A.P., [1996], 'Introduction: Talking Over Ethnography', in Ellis and Bochner, [eds.], *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, AltaMira Press: Walnut Creek, California. pp. 13-49.

Elshtain, J. [1984], "The rhetoric of women's studies," *Paper presented at Iowa Symposium on the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences. Iowa City, Iowa.*

Ely, M., Vinz R., Downing M., Anzul M., (1999), *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words*, Falmer Press: London.

Findlay, P. and Newton, N. [1998] 'Re-framing Foucault: the case of performance appraisal', in McKinlay, A. and Starkey, K. [eds.], *Foucault, Management and Organisational Theory*, Sage: London.

Fine, M. [1998], Working the hyphens: reinventing self and Other in qualitative research, in Denzin, N, and Lincoln Y, (eds), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, Sage: Thousand Oaks , California. pp. 130-155.

Fletcher, S., [1991], *NVQs Standards and Competence*, Kogan Page: London.

Foley, M., Maxwell, G., and McGillivray, [1999], The UK context of workplace empowerment, *Participation and Empowerment, vol. 7,6. pp. 163-177.*

Freire, P. [1972], *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin.

Gergen, K. [1985], The social constructionist movement in modern psychology, *American Psychologist 40, p.266-275.*

Gergen, K. [1995], Relational theory and the discourses of power, in Hosking, D-M., Dachler, H.P., and Gergen, K., *Managing organisations: Relational Alternatives to Individualism*. Avebury: Aldershot.

Gergen, K. [1999], Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics, in Newman, N., and Holzman, L., [eds.] *End of Knowing: a new developmental way of learning*. Routledge: New York.

Geroy G., Wright P. & Anderson J., [1998], Strategic Performance Empowerment Model, *Empowerment in Organisations*, vol.6, 2, pp. 57-65.

Goffman, E., *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Penguin: Harmodsworth.

Grundy, S., [1988], *Curriculum: Product or Praxis?*, Falmer: London.

Hall, B. [2001], 'I Wish This Were a Poem of Practices of Participatory Research', in Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. [eds.], *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage: London.

Hammersley, M., [1992], *What's wrong with ethnography? Methodological explorations*. Routledge: London.

Hardy, C. and Leiba-O'Sullivan, S., [1998], The power behind empowerment: Implications for research and practice, *Human Relations*, New York, vol.51, 4. pp.451-484.

Hardy, C., [1985], The nature of unobtrusive power, *Journal of Management Studies, 1985, 22,4, pp. 384-399.*

Hart E. & Bond M., [1995], *Action Research for Health and Social Care: a guide to practice.* OUP.

Hatch, J. and Wisniewski, R. [1995], Life History and narrative: questions, issues, and exemplary works, in Hatch. J. and Wisniewski, R. [eds], *Life History and Narrative,* Falmer Press: London.

Heaney T., [1995], *Issues in Freirean Pedagogy,* Thresholds in Education, Retrieved 4/24/01. from thea@chicago1.nl.edu.

Herman, S.M. and Korenich, M., [1977], *Authentic Management: A Gestalt orientation to Organisations and their Development,* Addison-Wesley: Mass.

Heron, J., (1996), *Cooperative Inquiry: research into the human condition,* Sage: London.

Heron, J., and Reason, P., [2001], The Practice of Cooperative Inquiry, in Reason, P., and Bradbury, H., [2001], *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice,* Sage: London.

Hertz, R., [1997], Introduction: Reflexivity and voice, in Hertz, R. [ed], *Reflexivity and voice,* Sage: Thousand Oaks, California.

Hickson, D. J., Butler, R. J., Cray, D., Mallory, G. R., & Wilson, D. C., [1986], *Top decisions: Strategic decision-making in organizations.* Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.

Hirsch, W. and Strebler, M. [1994], 'Defining managerial skills and competences', in Mumford, A. [ed.], *Gower Handbook of Management Development*, Ch.6., Gower.

Holstein, J. and Gubrium, J. [1997] 'Active Interviewing', in D.Silverman [ed.], *Quantitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice.* Sage: London.

Hollway, W. [1991], *Work Psychology and Organisational Behaviour*, Sage: London.

Hopfl, H., [1995], Organisational rhetoric and the threat of ambivalence, Studies in Cultures, *Organisations and Societies, vol. 1, 2, pp.175-188.*

Houston, G [2002], http://www.gaiehuston.co.uk/intro.htm

Houston, G. [1999], Interview with Neil Harris, *British Gestalt Journal, Vol. 8,2.*

Hughes, C., [1999], Learning to be intellectually insecure: the dis/empowering effects of reflexive practice, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 1, 4, pp.281-296.*

Hughes, C., [2002], 'Developing Reflexivity in Research', retrieved 19/12/02 from

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academic/hughesc/h
ughesc_index/teachingresearchprocess/reflexivity/

Hughes, I., [1997], *Introduction* Action Research Electronic Reader,
retrieved 20/12/02, from
http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arr/arow/rintro.html

Inamori, K., [1990], "The perfect company: goal for productivity", speech
given at Case Western Reserve University, cited in Senge, P.M., *The Fifth
Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*, Doubleday,
New York, NY.

Jackson, P., and Bradshaw, W., [2000], commentary to Bentley, T., [2000],
Gestalt in the Boardroom, *Gestalt Review, vol. 4., 3.*

Juran, J.M., [1988], *Juran on Planning for Quality*, The Free Press: New
York.

Kearins, K., [1996], Power in Organisational Analysis: Delineating and
Contrasting a Foucauldian Perspective, *Electronic Journal of Radical
Organisational Theory, vol 2., 2.*

Kemmis, S., [1982], *Action Research Reader*, 2nd ed. Australia: Deakin
University Press.

Kemmis, S., [1993], Action Research and Social Movement: A Challenge
for Policy Research, *Education Policy Analysis Archives, Vol1., No.1.,*
retrieved 12/5/1998 from http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa.

Kemmis, S., and McTaggart,R., [2000], Participatory Action Research, in Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Sage: London.

Kilduff, M. and Mehra, A., [1997], Postmodernism and organisational research, *The Academy of Management Review, 22, 2, 453-481.*

Klagge, K. [1998], The empowerment squeeze – views from the middle management position, *Journal of Management Development, vol. 17, 8.*

Knights, D. and Wilmott, H. [2000], *The Reengineering Revolution*, Sage: London.

Knights, D., and Wilmott, H., [1999], *Management Lives: Power and Identity in Work Organisations.* Sage: London.

La Valle, I., [2002], *Happy Families? Atypical work and its influence on family life*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Lather, P., [1991], *Getting Smart*, Routledge.

Layder D., [1997], *Modern Social Theory*, UCL Press.

Lee, M., [1999], The Lie of Power: Empowerment as Impotence, *Human Relations, vol. 52, 2. pp.225-261.*

Lees, J. and Dale, B.G., [1990], The Development of Quality Circles, in Dale, B.G., and Plunkett, J.J. [ed.], *Managing Quality*, Philip Allan: Hemel Hempstead.

Lincoln, Y. and Guba, E., [1985], *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage: London.

Lukes, S., [1974], *Power: A radical view.* Macmillan: London.

March, J., and Simon, H., [1958], *Organisations*, Wiley: New York.

Marchington, M., and Wilkinson, A., [1997], *Core Personnel and Development*, CIPD: London.

Margerison C., [1991], *Making Management Development Work*, McGraw Hill.

Marshall, J., [1995], *Women Managers: Moving On*, Routledge.

Marshall, J., [1999], 'Living Life as Inquiry', *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 12, 2, 1999. pp.155-171.*

Marshall, J., [2001], 'Self-reflective Inquiry Practices', in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H., *Handbook of Action Research*, Sage: London. pp. 433-439.

Marshall, J, and Reason, P., [1997], 'Collaborative and self-reflective forms of inquiry in management research', in Burgoyne, J. and Reynolds, M. [eds.], *Management Learning*, Sage: London. pp 227-52.

McClelland, D.C. and Burnham, D.H., [1976], 'Power is the Great Motivator', *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1976.

McCutcheon, G., and Jung, B., [1990], Alternative Perspectives on Action Research, *Theory into Practice, 24,3, Summer.*

McNamee, S. and Gergen, K., [1999], *Relational Responsibility: resources for sustainable dialogue*, Sage: London.

McKernan, J., [1991], *Curriculum Action Research: A Handbook of Methods and Resources for the Reflective Practitioner*, Kogan Page: London.

McTaggart, R., [1992], *Action Research: Issues in theory and practice*, paper presented to Methodological Issues in Qualitative Health Research Conference, Deakin University.

Meldrum, M., and Atkinson, S., [1998], 'Meta-abilities and the implementation of strategy: knowing what to do is simply not enough.' *Journal of Management Development, 17[8]. pp.564-575.*

Melnick, J.,[2000], 'Editorial', *Gestalt Review, Vol. 4.,3.*

Merry, U. and Brown, G. [1990], *The Neurotic Behaviour of Organisations*, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland Press: New York.

Mintzberg, H., Ahlstrand, B., and Lampel, J., [1998], *Strategy Safari,* Prentice Hall: London.

Morgan G.,[1993], *Imaginization - The Art of Creative Management,* Sage.

Morgan, G. [1986], *Images of Organisation,* Sage: London.

Morris D. & Brandon J., [1993], *Reengineering Your Business,* McGraw Hill.

Nonaka, I. and Takeuchi, H, [1995], *The Knowledge-Creating Company,* Oxford University Press.

Oakland, J. [1989], *Total Quality Management,* Heinemann: London.

Oakland, J., [1993], *Total Quality Management,* Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.

Obeng E. & Crainer S., [1994], *Making Reengineering Happen,* Ashridge.

Parlett, M. and Page, F. [1990], Gestalt Therapy, in Dryden, W. [ed.], *Individual Therapy,* Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Performance and Innovation report, [2002], 'Social Capital', Government Strategy Unit, April 18 2002, retrieved 15/06/02 from http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2002/futures/attachments/capital.pdf.

Perls, F., [1969], *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim,* Real People Press: California.

Perrow, C. [1973], The Short and Glorious History of Organisational Theory, *Organisational Dynamics, Summer, 1973.*

Peters, T. J, and Waterman, R.H., [1982], *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's-Best Run Companies,* Harper Row, New York.

Petersen D., [1990], *Teamwork: New Management Ideas for the Nineties,* Victor Gollanz.

Pettigrew, A. M., [1973], *The politics of organizational decision making.* Tavistock: London.

Pickard, J. [1993], The Real Meaning of Empowerment, *Personnel Management, November 1993.*

Portes, A. and Landolt, P., [1996], 'Unsolved Mysteries: the Tocqueville Files II, the downside of social capital'. *The American Prospect, vol.7., 26, May 1996-June 1996.* accessed online 29/8/02 at www.prospect.org.

Potter, J., [1997], 'Discourse analysis as a way of analysing natural-occurring talk', in Silverman, D., [ed.], *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice,* Sage: London. pp. 144-160.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M., [1987], *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour,* Sage: London.

Putnam, R., [1993], 'The Prosperous Community', *The American Prospect, Spring 1993.*

Putnam, R., [1996], The Strange Disappearance of Civic America, *The American Prospect, Winter 1996.*

Putnam, R., [2001], *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community,* Simon and Schuster: New York.

Ranson, S., Hinings, C. R., & Greenwood, R., [1980], The structuring of organizational structure. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 1980, 25,1, pp 1-14.*

Raelin, J. [1999], Preface, *Management Learning, 30, 2, 115-122.*

Reason, P., and Bradbury H., [2001], Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration, *Handbook of Action Research,* Sage: London.

Reason P., and Heron J., (1998), *A Layperson's Guide to Cooperative Inquiry,* retrieved, 6/6/1999, from Bath University web-site, http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/layguide.htm

Reason P. & Rowan J. (eds) [1981], *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of new paradigm research,* John Wiley: London

Reason, P. [ed.] [1988], *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in new paradigm research.* Sage: London.

Reason P., (ed), [1994], *Participation in Human Inquiry*, Sage: London.

Reason P., [1997], *Political, Epistemological, Ecological and Spiritual Dimensions of Participation*, Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, University of Bath.

Reason, P. [2002], Action Research as Practical Participation. Keynote address to the 'Action Research: Principles, Challenges and Future Directions' Conference. Cardiff 1st November, 2002.

Reeves, T., [1994], *Managing Effectively: Developing Yourself Through Experience*, Butterworth-Heinemann /Institute of Management: Oxford.

Reynolds M., (1998), Reflection and critical reflection in Management Learning, *Management Learning, 29, 2.*

Richardson, L., [1992], *Writing Strategies: Reaching Diverse Audiences*, Sage: London.

Ripley, R., and Ripley M., [1992], Empowerment, the Cornerstone of Quality: Empowering Management in Innovative Organisations in the 1990's, *Management Decision 30,[4], 1992, pp 20-43.*

Robinson, R.D., [1997], *The Empowerment Cookbook: Action Plans for Creating, Sustaining or Refocusing Empowered Work Teams*, McGraw-Hill: New York.

Rogers, C. [1961], *On Becoming a Person*, Houghton Mifflin: Boston.

Rogers, C., [1974], In retrospect: forty-six years, *American Psychologist 2: 115-23.*

Rogers, C. [1980], *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*, Merrill: Columbus.

Rowe, D., [1994], *Wanting Everything: the Art of Happiness*, HarperCollins: London.

Salancik, G., and Pfeffer, J., [1974], The bases and use of power in organizational decision-making. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 19, pp. 453-473.*

Saner, R., [1999], Organisational Consulting: What a Gestalt Approach Can Learn from Off-Off Broadway Theatre, *Gestalt Review, vol.3., 1. pp. 6-21.*

Scarborough, H., [1998], The unmaking of management? Change and continuity in British management in the 1990's, *Human Relations, vol. 51, 6., pp 691-716.*

Scheurich, J., [1997], *Research Method in the Postmodern*, Falmer Press: London.

Schon, D., [1983], *The Reflective Practitioner*, Basic Books: New York.

Schratz, M. and Walker, R., [1995], *Research as Social Change*, Routledge, London.

Segal, A.,[1995], *New, Improved? : Exposing the Misuse of Popular Psychology*, Simon and Schuster: London.

Senge, P.M., [1990], *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation*, Doubleday, New York, NY.

Shaw P., [1997], Intervening in the shadow systems of Organisations - consulting from a complexity perspective, *Journal of Organisational Change Management, vol.10, 3.*

Shaw, P., [1997], 'Intervening in the shadow systems of organisations: consulting from a complexity perspective.' *Journal Of Organisational Change Management 10[3]: 235-250.*

Shotter, J., [1993], *Conversational Realities: Constructing life through language*, Sage: London.

Silverman, D. [2001], *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, Sage: London.

Simons, H. [1989], *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences*, Sage: London.

Skolimowski, H. [1994], *The Participatory Mind*, Arkana.

Smith A. & Mouly V,[1998], Empowerment in New Zealand firms: insights from two cases, *Empowerment in Organisations, vol.6,3, pp. 69-80.*

Smith, J., [2000], *Empowering People*, Kogan Page: London.

Stacey R., [1992], *Managing the Unknowable: The strategic boundaries between order and chaos*, Jossey Bass.

Stacey R., [1996], *Complexity and Creativity in Organisations*, Sage: London.

Stacey, R., [2000], *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics*, Pitman: London.

Stacey, R., Griffin, D. and Shaw, P., [1998], *Speaking of Complexity in Management Theory and Practice*, Complexity and Management Centre, University of Hertfordshire.

Storey, J. and Sisson, K. [1990], Limits to transformation: human resource management in the British context, *Industrial Relations Journal, 21, Spring, pp. 60-5.*

Summerfield, J. and Oudtshoorn, L. [1995], *Counselling in the Workplace*, Institute of Personnel and Development: London.

Taylor, P., [1993] *The Texts of Paulo Freire*, Open University Press.

Taylor, S. [1999], Covert participant observation: unguarded moments in organisational research. *Notework: the newsletter of the Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism. May 1999.*

The Industrial Society, [1995], 'Empowerment', *Managing Best Practice, vol.8., February.*

Thomas, K.W. and Velthouse, B.A. [1990], 'Cognitive Elements of Empowerment: An Interpretive Model of Intrinsic Task Motivation', *Academy of Management Review, Vol. 15 No.4, pp.666-681.*

Torbert, W.R., [2001], The Practice of Action Inquiry, in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H., *Handbook of Action Research,* Sage: London. pp. 250-260.

Townley, B. [1993], *Reframing human resource management: Power, ethics and the subject at work.* Sage: London.

Townley, B. [1998], Beyond Good and Evil: Depth and Division in the Management of Human Resources, in McKinlay A., and Starkey., [eds], *Foucault, Management and Organisation Theory*, Sage: London.

Trochim,W.M.K. , [1999] Research Methods Knowledge Base[On Line] retrieved 1/11/2000, from
http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/measval.html

Truman, C., [1998], *Social Exclusion and Social Research, towards an emancipatory framework*, paper presented to the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Logic and Methodology,

at the 14th World Congress of Sociology, Montreal 26th July – 1st August 1998.

Ulrich D., and Lake, D., [1991], Organisational capability: creating competitive advantage, *Academy of Management Executive, 5[1], 1991, pp.77-92.*

Usher, R. and Bryant, I. [1989], *Adult Education as Theory, Practice and Research: the captive triangle.* Routledge: London.

Vogt, P. [1997], Transfer of Power, *Credit Union Management, 20[6], pp.44-45.*

Watson, T., [1994], *In Search of Management,* Thompson: London.

Watson, T., and Harris, P., [1999], *The Emergent Manager,* Sage: London.

Weil S. [1998], From Dearing and Systemic Control to Post Dearing and Systemic Inquiry: Re-creating Universities for Beyond the Stable State?, *Systems Research, January 1998.*

Weil S. [1998], Rhetoric's and Realities in Public Service Organisations: Systemic practice and organisational learning as critically reflexive action research [CRAR], *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 1 1[1]*

Weil S., (1998), From Dearing and Systemic Control to Post Dearing and Systemic Inquiry: Re-creating Universities for Beyond the Stable State?, *Systems Research,* January 1998.

Weil S., (1998), Rhetorics and Realities in Public Service Organisations, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 11,1.

Wheatley, M., J., [1992], *Leadership and the New Science*, Berret-Koeler.

Wildermeersch, D. & Vandenabeele J. [1998], Learning for Sustainable Development: examining lifeworld transformation for farmers, in Wildermeersch D, Finger, Matthais & Jansen, T. eds. [1998], *Adult Education and Social Responsibility*, Peter Lang.

Whitehead, J., [1993], *The Growth of Educational Knowledge: Creating Your Own Living Educational Theories*, Hyde Publications.

Wildermeersch, D. [1998], "Social learning: a new perspective on learning in participatory systems." *Studies in Continuing Education* 20[2]: 251-265.

Willmott, H., [1997], 'Critical Management Learning', in Burgoyne, J. and Reynolds, M., *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice,* Sage: London.

Zinker, J. [1978], *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, Random House: New York.

Appendix 1

Examples of participant feedback sheets

PhD Research Activity

'Hidden Voice' Feedback

First of all thank you for agreeing to take part in this next stage of our enquiry. Hopefully you have been able to digest the article presented and recognised yourself amongst the characters presented.

Could you now respond to the following prompts and return your thoughts to me in the envelope provided. Looking forward to your responses.

Brendon.

....

1.   Having read the article which section/s made you really think 'yes…that's just how it is'.

I have highlighted these areas.

2.   Is there a part here though that you feel is incomplete where I might have got it 'wrong' or not quite put the right emphasis on something. i.e. Your thinking 'he is part way there but with this part it would be even better…'

I found the article interesting, and it raised several issues / questions in my mind as I read it. Firstly, I would question your statement that "they exhibited the same emotions." My experience was that observed behaviour varied greatly. ████, for example, reacted in a more emotional / shocked way than I think I did.

PTO

PhD Research Activity

'Hidden Voice' Feedback

First of all thank you for agreeing to take part in this next stage of our enquiry. Hopefully you have been able to digest the article presented and recognised yourself amongst the characters presented.

Could you now respond to the following prompts and return your thoughts to me in the envelope provided. Looking forward to your responses.

Brendon.

....

1. Having read the article which section/s made you really think 'yes... that's just how it is'.

yes having read the article - one can emphasise with the feelings of all concerned. However one emotion that is often prevalent, particularly in the early stages of the news - is that of Anger. You go through several stages or phase's - initially characterised by one of Anger ie why me? though a realisation / rationalisation then ultimately a de "positive" whereby you attempt to move forward

2. Is there a part here though that you feel is incomplete where I might have got it 'wrong' or not quite put the right emphasis on something. i.e. Your thinking 'he is part way there but with this part it would be even better...'

I think you have captured most of the various emotions, however on reading your article and relating it back to my own experience - what has struck me is almost the feeling that one is a "casualty" and this definition of casualty - almost serves as a metaphor for the whole experience i.e people demonstrate the traits and characteristics that they would do in classic cases of loss and bereavement. They look at you in ⟶

Appendix 2

Participant Email correspondence: the Agency

Brendan

Sorry I've not responded earlier. I've been at home with flu. Yes I think
this is fine. I don't know if I've told you this, but I have fed back to
▓▓▓▓ the importance of running similar sessions for key people within the
Manchester Office. I've even offered to do a paper for the board if they
require it. That's how keen I am to get this moving. Failing that, I am
going to speak to my immediate boss and see if we can get some funding from
the Manchester budget for the people concerned. There have been
developments on the situation we spoke about before and I will update you
next time I see you. I would like a copy of the tape sending please...what
do you mean by interesting...do I sound like a callous, cold hearted Alexis
Colby?

I hope to be able to meet up again soon. If you need anything else in the
meantime, let me know.

▓▓▓▓▓

> -----Original Message-----
> From: Brendon Harvey [SMTP:Aspects@compuserve.com]
> Sent: 22 February 1999 12:07
> To: ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓
> Subject: Follow-up to recent visit.
>
> Hi ▓▓▓▓▓
>
> Apologies for the delay in getting back to you. Please find the content of
> the document that i want to send now to ▓▓▓▓. If you could just agree it
> by a simple return message that would be great. Thanks everso much for the
> time[admidst all that heightened activity!] you recently provided, I
> found
> it really helpful in respect of my research and it seems that you got
> something from it too. I would like to maintain the contact if possible
> and
> support you where i can.
>
> " When we met last Autumn to follow-up the 'Working Under Pressure' I
> agreed to meet up with some of the participants at their request for a
> follow-up day. However, I understand that maybe circumstances and funding
> availability got in the way of this. So, in order to keep the momentum of
> the programme outcomes going, I agreed to meet ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ and ▓▓▓▓▓▓
> ▓▓▓▓▓▓
> at the Manchester office on 9th Feb. I sent a message to them first and
> focused the enquiry on four questions:
> 1. How you now view the learning from the session we had.
> 2. What things have enabled you to put new thinking/doing into practice?

Appendix 2

Participant Email correspondence: the Agency

Brendan

Sorry I've not responded earlier. I've been at home with flu. Yes I think
this is fine. I don't know if I've told you this, but I have fed back to
█████ the importance of running similar sessions for key people within the
Manchester Office. I've even offered to do a paper for the board if they
require it. That's how keen I am to get this moving. Failing that, I am
going to speak to my immediate boss and see if we can get some funding from
the Manchester budget for the people concerned. There have been
developments on the situation we spoke about before and I will update you
next time I see you. I would like a copy of the tape sending please...what
do you mean by interesting...do I sound like a callous, cold hearted Alexis
Colby?

I hope to be able to meet up again soon. If you need anything else in the
meantime, let me know.

█████

> -----Original Message-----
> From: Brendon Harvey [SMTP:Aspects@compuserve.com]
> Sent: 22 February 1999 12:07
> To: █████████
> Subject: Follow-up to recent visit.
>
> Hi █████
>
> Apologies for the delay in getting back to you. Please find the content of
> the document that i want to send now to █████. If you could just agree it
> by a simple return message that would be great. Thanks everso much for the
> time[admidst all that heightened activity!] you recently provided, I
> found
> it really helpful in respect of my research and it seems that you got
> something from it too. I would like to maintain the contact if possible
> and
> support you where i can.
>
> " When we met last Autumn to follow-up the 'Working Under Pressure' I
> agreed to meet up with some of the participants at their request for a
> follow-up day. However, I understand that maybe circumstances and funding
> availability got in the way of this. So, in order to keep the momentum of
> the programme outcomes going, I agreed to meet A████████ and █████████
> █████
> at the Manchester office on 9th Feb. I sent a message to them first and
> focused the enquiry on four questions:
> 1. How you now view the learning from the session we had.
> 2. What things have enabled you to put new thinking/doing into practice?

1

Appendix 3

Summary of Research Cycles

Appendix 3   Summary of Action Research Cycles

<u>Cycle One:</u>

My first cycle of enquiry [Jan -October 1998] was undertaken in the context of a consultancy development programme for a leading manufacturing group of companies: Castings. I explored and worked with the narratives of a group of senior and middle managers who were part of this programme. This group provided narratives of their experiences, which chronicled their own choices and assumptions in the midst of the business transformation they were experiencing and the rhetoric associated with this. Through tape recordings and my own reflections on these narratives in a personal journal I was able to note recurring themes and patterns. These were 'played back' to the group, wherever possible, and further responses noted.

Individual interviews were then carried out with members of this group to deepen the inquiry, I was also able, through the opportunity of contact with another company, a major pub retailer – Brewing - to widen the scope of the initial themes and check out their relevance to the brewing industry . I was conscious at this point to identify whether my findings were context- bound or applicable to the settings of both manufacturing and retailing.

The above, therefore, sought to move from initial perceptions, utilise different forms of writing to illuminate differing perspectives of these,

then playback to participants for further inquiry and sense-making.

The Second Cycle Oct 1998-1999

This further cycle was dominated by critical incidents, particularly in respect of Brewing, which I reflected upon and gathered choices and judgements, formulated these into writing and fed back to participants for responses and further new insights. I have accessed literature that has enabled me to deepen this understanding of inquiry, the action researcher and the experience of people in work and the context of their individual lives. But above all I was able to find my own voice through exploration of others voices in the workplaces I encountered.

At this point, my realisation developed through reflection that my own journey and consequent empowerment/disempowerment was both echoing themes emerging from fellow inquirers as well being context-bound by individual circumstance and history. This led to a freedom to explore how I might present data using a variety of written forms in a manner that spoke to all participants and others outside of the workplace. A realisation developed that these forms themselves - literary reviews, descriptions of architecture and artistic performance in themselves shed new light and offered alternative perspectives for themes and insights that were developing through collaborative inquiry.

A Third Cycle: 1999-2001.

Through accessing my supervisory support, engaging with SOLAR1/2 and attending relevant conferences, I presented my tentative findings and encouraging dialogue around them. This enabled me to broaden my academic inquiry bringing insight from complexity science, radical education, discourse and organizations, as well as alternative social research perspectives in relation to management research. Alongside such processes a third inquiry group was formed, which was a collection of employees from a large advertising agency- the Agency. This group served to explore a different occupational sector to manufacturing and retail. Consequently, participants and myself were able to stimulate further sense-making from the themes generated by the earlier cycles. However, this cycle had also generated further complexity of complex systems and connected to one of the study's original objectives: this sought to explore how choices and action of employees is affected by the contexts of both their workplace and social lives.

Appendix 4

Critically reflexive action research [CRAR] model

Reflections on
experience/process of learning,
unlearning in collaboration

Divergences/convergence
in perspective?

Multi-layered narratives,
stories that speak within
and beyond context?

Processes of challengmg
& sustaining critical
reflexivity?

Revised/discarded
assumptions? Noticed
resistances to learning in
self/others?

New insights/outcomes?

Susan Weil, 1997, in progress

Nature of
individual/collaborative
inquiries & data collection

Chronicling e.g. Illuminating
incidents? Revealing stories?
Critical incidents?

REFLEXIVE INQUIRY IN ACTION

*3. Broadening/deepening
understandings of inquiry
focus/question*

*4. Re-framing/re-
focusing inquiry*

*5. Planning for
insightful actions
(individual, group,
cross-group,
organisational)*

*6. Critical reflection
in/on actions*

*2. Focusing/framing
inquiry cycle in context*

*1. Appreciating starting
problems/dilemmas*

RE-ENGAGE ?

*7. Communicating/
Learning/
checking outcomes*

STEP OFF ?

Choices/judgments/
rationales?

Possibilities for inquiry?

Starting assumptions,
values, experience,
constructions of
dilemma/problem?

Histories/cultures?

Shifts at individual/group/organisational
levels? Local issues? Wider issues?
Expected/unexpected outcomes?
Next steps?

Appendix 5

Agency-cycles outcomes literature

CONFIRMATION OF RECENT MEETING AND PROPOSAL FOR 'WORKING UNDER PRESSURE' FOLLOW-UP

The following sets out the outcomes from the recent meeting between and Brendon Harvey of Aspects at the London office, 8th April, 1999.

Meeting outcomes:

1. It was agreed that it was important that the momentum from the original 'Working Under Pressure' programmes carried out in Autumn 1998 should be continued. This was seen as fulfilling the requirements of both the regional and London representatives who had specifically requested a follow-up session to be organised after the initial initiative.

2. Learning from the research interview carried out with [Annette] in Manchester and contact with [Paula] in Leeds had confirmed that individual one-to-one meetings, together with a 'whole course' follow-up session, would be a most effective way to facilitate the requirements of individuals on the programme. This takes into account the particular work context of participants, which plays such a large part in forming perceptions and acting on the basis of these. Furthermore, the real added value of bringing together experience from many different offices across the company, which the feedback from the Autumn programme showed was of real benefit to participants, can be capitalised on.

3. It was also agreed that it was vital to involve the participants in formulating the nature of the one-day follow-up session so it met needs and was not seen as a mere 'bolt-on'. The developmental facet of this programme is central to its original philosophy of individuals in different situations dealing with pressure. Therefore, in the individual sessions participants will be asked for specific detail of what they would want from the follow-up.

4. At the group meeting in the Autumn, as well as during our session last week, we discussed utilising Transactional Analysis[T.A.] as a vehicle for possible development for individuals and I would see the one day session as a good opportunity for carrying this forward and offering particular TA learning experiences to the group. You will see from below that I have built this in to a possible framework for that session.

5. We discussed the way in which this programme may also form a particular 'module' of a future management development programme. We could therefore achieve an agreed objective that the programme is not just for those seen to be 'not coping' but is part of the 'toolkit' of successful managing, i.e. developmental rather than remedial.

6. All of this has to take place within budgetary constraints and I have taken heed [I hope!] of your comment that "I like your ideas but cannot afford them"!!
I really appreciate the view you have that the initiative we are working on is seen as reciprocal- benefiting my own doctorate interests and the company's strategic intent. As this progresses I intend to try and ensure that you gain from the potential cumulative learning and the possible networking possibilities with SOLAR and the University.

Proposal for a Follow-Up Initiative
for the 'Working Under Pressure' Programme

This initiative will comprise of two-parts: individual one-to-one one-to-one meetings on-site followed by a whole group meeting.

Part one: Individual one-to-one meetings

Desired outcomes:

1. An opportunity for the individual participant to assess the learning from the original programme over the last six months, applying their individual insights to their own work situation and personal experience.

2. To gain encouragement and support for learning that has been successfully transferred into their everyday activity, as well as challenge and exploration of what they see as continuing blocks to effective working under pressure.

3. To gather input on content and practice for the one-day meet of all participants once the individual sessions are complete.

Part Two: Group Meeting

Desired outcomes:

1. To further individual and group expertise for working under pressure utilising tools of TA; building on prior knowledge from the first session of ego-states and life positions. Introduce the TA concepts of 'games' and 'rackets' as tools for exploring choice and commitment to different behaviour.

2. Build on group feedback from the last session that emphasised the importance of further exploration of individual's dilemmas

using the group process to explore these. So enabling the individual to consider and practice different approaches to current issues by gaining support and challenge from peers.

3. Bring the two original groups of 'London' and the 'Regions' together so collating similar/distinctive learning and enabling individuals to gain a 'company' perspective outside of their own office environment.

Working under Pressure

Pilot September 1998

Individual Learning Outcomes

The following outcomes arose from the 'Working Under Pressure' meetings carried out during September 1998. Two groups took part. The first group was representing the regional offices of Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham and Manchester. The second represented colleagues from the London office.

The following notes form a report back on learning that individuals gained from the 2-day meetings and were put forward by participants in the final session of the day.

In answer to the prompt 'what has been gained from the meeting for you inside and outside of work?' participants put forward the following:

➢ **'I found I was not so defensive**...prior to these meetings I would have reacted to other people's views. Now though I thought about what they said and put it back to them "I felt that....." And added that when my colleague had made an assumption that was not accurate I had calmly said, "No, it was not that..."

➢ **'A common thought trait** I had before the meetings was automatically slipping into a thought pattern that was not very positive when a particular circumstance occurred. Something did occur this week that seemed to be taking me down that route yet again. But I stopped myself, realised what I was doing and started to think differently. For instance, I told myself that there was little I could do about the situation.....stop worrying...its having a negative impact on me if I carry on like this.' Also, of further interest was..

➢ **I had a much better week at home** with my partner. It seems that being different has meant that his behaviour towards me has been 'kinder'. This has resulted in me being more receptive to him'.

➢ **'Reacted differently to different clients.** I found that I was thinking much more about how I was relating to them This led me to start thinking about how different clients affected me. What I was finding as a result of the programme was that I was reacting differently according to the client and being more able to control and adapt my behaviour.

➢ **Have not got immersed in the detail.** One of the learning points for me is to not get so immersed in detail of predicaments or problems. All it has done in the past is just bring me down. The problem seems "horrendous" and much bigger than it probably is. I found by not getting so emotionally immersed in it in this way I was able to almost leave it and it sorted itself out.

- ➤ ' **I found myself in a group situation** where I normally would not ask questions readily if I were unclear what was going on. What tended to happen was that it was like a video that started running in my head with the characters in the room talking bad about me and me ending up looking a fool. This week though I thought "its there" so what s new....just accepting it... and I found myself asking some important questions. People did not laugh and I felt really good.

- ➤ '**Getting into the present more**....up to now I would get carried away with what was coming up, planning and always needing to be one step ahead. I realised though that this was not helping me lead my team. So I caught myself doing this and decided to tell the team about the meetings, what the learning was for me and gave them examples. It made me really realise that perhaps people really do not 'know me' but perhaps have this impression of this 'planner and do-er'.

- ➤ '**Taking more responsibility for my line-manager relationship.** Before the meeting I had this belief that the 'bosses' are responsible for managing and if the relationship is not good then that is what they get paid for so its their responsibility to put it right. But I now have learnt that I need to be more proactive in 'setting-up' the relationship. I am an integral part of it so I need to take some responsibility for this. Not assume purely that the boss will do this for me.'

- ➤ '**I realise the importance of greetings.** Our office is great but I know that in the morning I tended to come in and probably the first thing I would say to people is a request. This is not good I realise because I come across as somebody who only seems to relate to anybody else through what I want them to do. A bit of recognition of them as a person is now going to be more my style'.

- ➤ '**Usually gone in guns blazing**...before this I would work with this person by second guessing what they were going to say if I confronted them over something. I had already made my mind up. But I did not do that this week. I went in asked questions first, had thought through a compromise that would be probably agreeable and it was so different...an alternative way of behaving than one I would automatically use.

- ➤ **Its helped me in the car**...I get pretty heated when something is not right and this week I have not got like that driving around...thought well others make mistakes too and I am no different.....stuck my radio up loud...thought about the weekend...put it into perspective.

- ➤ '**Made me think about myself as a team leader**. Up to now I had really let pressure get to me. As a team leader I have been conscious of what my team is having to do and the pressure that is being exerted to come up with the results. Up to now I have been really shouldering those....probably doing too much of shouldering it for them and taking their pressures as mine. This has, I realise, not helped my team leader role. It's not my job to solve problems for them...to take

them home with me.... taking ownership in other words..

➢ **Its not just me**.....this meeting has had lots of bits of learning that I can apply but the best bit is the comforting one in many ways. That is that it has made me realise that it is not 'just me'. Hearing others talk about the pressure they face day-in day-out and the effects it has on them is 'good' in a strange sort of way. Makes me feel that maybe its not just me not coping sometimes and everyone else doing fine. We are all in similar boats.