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## CHAPTER 3

## ISSUES RELATED TO METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This research study is a feminist inquiry, which incorporates gender as a fundamental category of analysis. Feminist methodology is a very broad concept: it is partly about technique, partly about correcting the incomplete canon of substantive knowledge, partly a question of epistemology, and partly about political goals of social transformation (Reinharz 1992, Harding, 1987). Reinharz (1992) observes that a core feminist idea is the insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. Yet there are crucial features of feminist research that distinguish it from traditional, even critical, approaches to the production of knowledge. Understanding feminist methodology involves attending to the linkages between how research is done and how it is analysed. Within the particular case study organisation, this presents interesting and complex dilemmas.

In designing this research I wanted to foreground the experiences and views of women as participants or members of the Catholic education organisation. This was in response to the position that Catholic education takes in inviting teachers to be not just employees, but members of the Church community, and in doing so, to enact the ministry of education which is defined through particular organisational discourses. As a feminist study, I wanted to adopt organisational thinking from a specifically woman-centred perspective in order to analyse the ways in which women are positioned within the discursive arrangements of Catholic education. The analysis of organisational structures is an important element of the research because structures make certain discourses powerful and make others less able to be heard (Davies, 1994). The discursive positioning of women within organisational discourses influences subject

positions available to women as members of the organisation. Certain discourses may misshape women's identities and become the 'truth' as in the case of certain religious discourses. At the same time, however, individuals may re-shape discourses and invent new ways of speaking to reflect their own desires. In considering the notion of the subject, I clearly identify with the need to retain the idea of an active and intentional subject but at the same time, I am conscious of avoiding the notion of free agency or voluntarism. As a researcher, therefore, I can "never lose sight of the mutual determination(s) of agents and structures" (Ortner, p.20, 1996).

In developing the case study as a feminist research project, I was conscious of focussing on the need for mediation amongst subjectivity, intersubjectivity and institutions. Women in Catholic education can act agentially, utilising their skills and strategies, even as they enact the purpose of the organisation. Women are constructed and defined within the organisation's discourses which frame its purpose, but they are not wholly constrained by this organisational context. New structures and discourses such as discourses of equity have potentially powerful effects for women in organisations. The imposition of such discourses and structures, however, does not automatically rule out old discourses and ways of knowing and doing in particular organisations which may appear to overwhelm the individual's ability to be agentic. Whilst acknowledging differences amongst women, underneath these differences, there exists common principles of administration and hierarchy produced and reproduced within institutions that underlie the production of stratified differences. Yet, the structures which support the principles of hierarchy and administration are dependent upon being spoken into existence through the discourses that legitimate their existence (Davies, 1994).

By identifying the impact of personal agency of women in Catholic education, my research contributes to an understanding of how gender may be made and unmade, as well as what gender makes with regard to the career context of Catholic education. Organisational discourses and structures influence the perceptions women hold of the organisation's career outlook. These organisational discourses and structures, with their inclusions and exclusions, do not take account of the multiple discourses that are available to women. Women may occupy certain subject positions in examined and unexamined ways. Within such subject positions, women may perform particular versions of femininity which may shape their perceptions of career outlook.

In foregrounding the voices of women in Catholic education, who work in a variety of roles, I wanted the research to reveal the ways that different women are integrated or not fully integrated into organisational life and the ways women can influence organisational reality. This approach required an examination of the cultures that shape the organisational life and the potential for women to flourish within such cultures. The influence of post-modernist ideas is evident in the understandings I apply to analysing the organisation, particularly the diffuse and web-like relations of power, which permeate the organisation. Post-modernist influences on feminist theorising is also the basis for rejecting any essentialist notion of 'women' as a homogeneous category and in the treatment of 'difference' in discourses within which women and their careers are constituted.

Accommodating the overall research purpose required the delineation of various organisational layers associated with the career context and an examination of the embedded nature of gender within these layers. These layers include the career structures and processes that have been established, the discursive underpinnings that constitute the policy processes and outcomes and the intentional policies that take

account of women as employees. Working within a Catholic education organisation brings a particular emphasis on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the organisation. You are not 'just a teacher' but a participant in the Mission of the Catholic Church. Teaching is first and foremost, however, a form of work, the school is a workplace and teachers in Catholic schools seek similar rewards to teachers in other schooling systems for their efforts through the career context. The potential for contradiction and ambiguity in considerations of career outlook is notable.

Through the process of outlining the recent development and history of Catholic education in Australia, it is possible to see a discursive shift that continues to evolve concerning the work of the teacher in a Catholic school. The movement of the organisation from an essentially voluntarist and religiously staffed organisation to a lay-peopled organisation, and the wider social and economic forces which impact on Catholic education have prompted this discursive shift. Changing gender relations within the organisation is a part of the discursive shift. Along with the discursive element, there is a material reality to the teaching career which includes the particular designated positions within the organisation and the people who fill these positions. Structures are also established such as employment procedures and workplace conditions. The discourses and structures in effect position women differently to men.

Seeking a career in an occupation which may be seen as under-valued and in an organisation that is embedded within a strongly patriarchal church structure, may place women in a position of double jeopardy. As a heavily feminised occupation, teaching is seen as offering limited status and remuneration relative to other professional occupations in which men are more prevalent. And yet women predominate and prevail in teaching and in Catholic education. The researcher is left with the questions of how

individual expectations and organisational realities may become aligned with the influences that shape organisational cultures.

### Feminist Perspectives on the Research Process

Framing the research within a feminist perspective requires the researcher to develop a heightened awareness of the relationship between epistemology and methodology, developing critical insights into the efficacy of different methods. In adopting and adapting a feminist perspective, the researcher is able to exercise critical reflexivity about particular choices associated with theory and praxis (Holland, Blair & Sheldon, 1995). Harding (1987) distinguishes between three elements in the research process, which are often conflated - methods, methodology and epistemology. Methods are techniques for gathering evidence; methodology is the theoretical framework employed in research; and epistemology is the theory of knowledge, which underlies the theoretical framework. The epistemological foundation provides a philosophical basis for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and for ensuring that the knowledge is both adequate and legitimate. A feminist perspective allows the experiences of women to contribute to the western canon of knowledge which, in the past, has largely been developed exclusive of women-centred experiences and ideas (Stanley & Wise, 1993). The research questions must be devised and closely linked with these three elements. The key issue is whether the study as framed will allow the researcher to answer the research questions, meeting the demands of a feminist agenda. As Acker (1994) states, "We are drawing upon our immersion in feminist thinking to give us the perspective we need and a set of possible explanations for our findings" (p.67).

I was more interested in a focus on women's position in the organisation, rather than studying the personal career histories of individual women. A feminist critique of

the organisation creates the potential both to express and to uncover relations of dominance, showing how gender relations, as they are created within the organisational context, favour male hegemony (Usher, 1996). Conversely, it can identify the potential for a redistribution of power within the organisation to create genuine acceptance of equality of women with other women and with men. This requires more from an organisation than the compromise position of simply accommodating women by making changes to surface features of the organisation such as ensuring gender balance on interview panels. Using a feminist filter to critique an organisation assumes women are not completely powerless within the organisational context. Rather, it reveals that within the gendered complexity of organisational life, power is linked with consciousness and gender relations (Kitzinger, 1991; Lather, 1991; Maddock & Parkin, 1994).

Postmodernist ideas on power highlight the relational and productive aspects of power and emphasise how “it is exercised. It exists only in actions. It is a complex set of ever-changing relations of force” (Grosz, 1990, p.87). Women exercise power in their resistance and struggle to be agentic within the organisation. The notion of power over individuals, however, which is prevalent in management discourse (Morgan, 1997), cannot be ignored, especially when considering the decision making processes and control of agendas either consciously or unconsciously within organisations.

I limited my concerns specifically to women and their career experiences as these relate to the organisation. I was less concerned with gender and careers in the broader sense. Some clarification is necessary concerning this chosen research terrain. Contemporary feminist research, especially that associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism, may argue that a wider focus on ‘gender’ as opposed to one simply on

'women' is important. Such an emphasis may contribute to an understanding of the shaping of people's (men's and women's) gender identities, experiences and subjectivities into research analysis. This emphasis, however, was not my concern in my particular study. By focusing on 'women' as opposed to 'gender' in the broad sense of the concept, I chose not to focus on men and career outlook. Sexual divisions in the Catholic education workforce are for me so central to its constitution that I chose not to engage in analysis of the conditions and relations of education careers for both sexes. Masculinity, however, is an important concept in building an understanding of gendering in organisations and it remains an important element of my research.

The gendering of the Catholic education organisation is a significant part of the research analysis, and includes the strength of institutionalized discourses, which promote regimes of truth about masculinity and femininity. Men, male-dominated organisations, values and culture associated with a patriarchal institution are central to the shaping of women's careers in Catholic education. The basic career structures of administration and teaching which exist in Catholic education are imbued with their own truth claims which includes amongst others, the association of rationality with masculinity in leadership and emotionality with teaching and femininity (Theobald, 1996).

In designing my research I acknowledged the essentially political nature of organisational processes and structures through which various discourses are articulated and power is exercised, creating and recreating a gendered organisational culture. These discourses include historically produced processes of regulation that enact women's subordination. Within Catholic education, religious and theological discourses associated with both the nature of teaching as work and the 'essential' woman are



situated alongside rational and instrumental discourses associated with corporate managerialism and the evolution of the global market.

Adopting an organisational focus did not mean I ignored the subjective nature of a career. Throughout the research process, I kept returning to my research goal of wanting to adequately describe the complexities facing women in their efforts to make career progress and their desire and potential to change the organisational career context as a consequence. These complexities include, but are not necessarily limited to or limited by, the continuing sex-segregated nature of the teaching workforce. This is illustrated by the view that for some women the articulation of a career has little to do with accessing positions on a vertical career ladder, suggesting a need for the organisation to tap into women's different understandings of career. As Acker (1994) states:

It is an oversimplified view of reality to regard teacher's careers as the unproblematic product of either individual choices or societal constraints. Currently post-structuralist approaches teach us to be suspicious of arguments that give any concept, career included, an essential core. My empirical data support such a view by illustrating how careers are provisional, kaleidoscopic constructions, . . . But it is not sufficient to see the search solely as an individual enterprise. Meaning is negotiated in the culture of the workplace and is constrained by the patriarchal and other bargains available in the society at large. (p. 120)

### Refining the Feminist Research Perspective

In general, a feminist research perspective offers the potential for an analysis and explanation of how and why women have less power than men do, and how this imbalance could be challenged and transformed (Stacey, 1993). Much of the criticism of early feminist theorising relates to generalisations about what women have in common and about the universality of women's oppression so typical of this early

research. The work by Nancy Chodorow (1978) on the development of women's caring work, and the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) on the different responses of women to men in moral dilemmas, whilst important in its challenge to the way knowledge is constructed, tends towards universal and essential assumptions about women. Women scholars sought to speak for and about women as a collectivity and to challenge a similarly monolithic patriarchy, experimenting with gender as a category of analysis. This led, however, to overly uniform and monolithic theories both about women and about patriarchal power.

The more recent moves in feminist theorising to focus on differences between women have been an important redress to this falsely universalistic understanding of women's oppression. This new perspective, however, brings its own dilemmas especially in relation to the stated practical purpose of feminist theories, namely to provide the tools for improving women's situation. One is the dilemma of how to generalise about women while recognising the inexhaustible differences among them; the other is the dilemma of how to assert the truth of one's claims while recognising that many women may disagree with the given assertion. In relation to the notion of 'difference' I worked on the assumption that in foregrounding gender as a significant analytical focus, the researcher must not lose sight of the diversity of women and the dangers of generalisation. Clearly, gender is neither the only factor, nor perhaps the most important in the lives of particular women teachers but it is nevertheless "a powerful factor" (Milligan et al., 1994) in terms of identity, structural and organisational issues for all women teachers.

My stated intention for the research process of allowing women's voices to minimise the potential of rendering other forms of difference invisible recognises that the research process can erase the consequences of particular axes of oppression

whether this be race, class or gender. Issues such as religion, age, geographic location and sexual preference are other distinctions that have the potential to influence different women's career experiences in the Catholic education system that I studied.

Essentially, I am not trying to cover the full range of variables that may exist in an effort to get to a position where generalisations can be made about women teachers as a category. I submit that the knowledge I generate will be partial and representative of the research participants but not necessarily of all women employed in Catholic education.

The desire to create the potential for change brings forth added dilemmas for the researcher. Some women are indeed interested in challenging the status quo whilst others are not sure 'what all the fuss is about' and have no desire to actively seek change. The apparent ambivalence of some women may appear at odds with the feminist agenda. It creates the opportunity for furthering critical reflection, leading to questions such as: What opportunities exist within Catholic education for women to participate at the level of organisational agenda setting and decision-making? Associated with this question is the desire and ability of individual women to consciously shape the organisational reality. Considering the relationship between structure and agency provokes other questions about women as passive and immobilised victims of the social structures that surround and shape their lives versus women as active agents, seeking to control and change their lives. According to Acker (1994), these tensions in feminism can be productive as well as destructive. She argues that even within the deep conceptual divides, feminist theoretical writing about education maintains a position of constructive criticism and continues to move ahead through exchanges amongst the various feminist frameworks. Likewise, Nicholson (1990) indicates the necessity of melding together the critique of essentialism proffered

by post-modernist and post-structuralist theorists with the social criticism so important to the aims of feminist research.

Through my efforts to distil feminist theory, I became conscious of the necessity of foregrounding the historical and cultural specificity of my research project and the need to adopt a pastiche approach to the question of feminist methodology. This approach utilised critiques of feminism and postmodernism. In the sections that follow, I discuss the ways I have attempted to allow critical feminist thinking to filter and support my research. The first step was to acknowledge that I was operating within an evolving feminist and multi-paradigmatic research field (Lather, 1989). This acknowledgment was a liberating experience as it provided for the possibility of moving within and beyond existing feminist stances, in turn, contributing to the mosaic of feminist research.

### Locating the Researcher

From a feminist perspective, the position of the researcher and the power relations between the researcher and the researched must be transparent. Ensuring that this was the case in my own research, however, was not a straightforward process. As a long-standing employee of Catholic education, I was positioned as an 'insider' in terms of the research. My position as a school principal meant that teachers in the diocese viewed me as someone who could act in particular ways because of certain authority vested in my role. I was in a more powerful organisational position. Being a principal meant that there was the possibility that some women would be deterred from speaking candidly during the research process. There was also the possibility that some women would see me as someone who was in a position of influence and as a consequence, would have high expectations that I could change the organisation in ways that they desired.

Immersion in the many guises of feminist theory encouraged a reflective stance within which I considered the values that I brought to the research project. Feminist research requires the researcher to engage in a process of examining these values and the relationship that is created between the researcher and the research participants. This reflection is a reflexive task. In designing and conducting the research, I was constantly asking myself: Why am I doing this research? How has this research been constructed? What is it silent about? To what extent does the research reproduce gendered and other power relations? To what extent does the research empower or disempower those involved in the research process? My beliefs about what might constitute a rewarding career based on my own experiences were one area for consideration. For example, as a school principal, I was keen to see more women take up principalships but I knew of several female colleagues who stated emphatically that they did not want to be a principal. For many women, the nature of the principal's role and the perceived masculine ethic of management deterred them from considering the option. Others made conscious choices about lifestyle and career options that held different understandings of what success means. My reading of the literature on careers, gender and organisation, however, suggested the need for a contextual perspective which is sufficiently nuanced to debunk any myths about women's lives and attempts to come to grips with the contemporary situation.

Conducting research within a feminist framework implies a commitment to reciprocity and the development of a reflexive stance. Self-reflexivity was an important aspect of my insider status. Reliance on insider knowledge can be severely shaken if it is assumed that women understand women simply because they are women (Kohler-Riessman, 1991). To accommodate this commitment to reciprocity, I sought advice and critique from the members of the Diocesan Affirmative Action Committee, some of

whom became research participants. My membership in this committee provided an opportunity for a degree of reciprocity in that the committee was specifically set up to gather information which could benefit women teachers in terms of their careers and working conditions. The committee suggested interviewing the women teachers in small groups rather than individually. This was in response to my position in the organisation as a person in authority and an insider. It was felt that the participants would feel more secure in a small group situation and there was also the potential for listening to the experiences of other women and developing some sense of empathy and collective understanding. I was also aware of the busyness of women's lives, including my own and I wanted to work with different groups of women without overburdening them or myself. I decided to conduct small group interviews for teachers in their own school settings. The invitation to women to participate in the research included an offer to conduct individual interviews for those who felt this would be desirable. This offer was not taken up by the focus group participants. Individual interviews with other members of Catholic Education who were in positions of senior management such as principals and Catholic Education Office personnel.

### The Question of Empowerment

A feminist framework aims to seek ways of creating the space for empowerment of the research participants. Research takes place in the context of power relations exerted both as material and discursive forces within, between and around the researcher and the researched. The research design aims to make space for people's subjectivities (what they want for themselves) and social change (what is to be done 'to' the world) by treating power as a subject of analysis and a vehicle for change. It assumes that someone needs to be empowered, raising questions about the impositional nature of such a research stance.

In effect, the question of research as empowerment is vexed. Rosemary Deem (1994) raises the important point that:

Leaving aside concerns about whether considerations of difference amongst categories, such as women, mean that simple assumptions about powerlessness do not apply across the board, there is on occasion an apparent slippage between thinking that the outcomes of research can critique the status quo and imagining that the critique will have any effect upon the status quo. Here many researchers are also relatively powerless. (p.166)

The question of whether in fact research can empower people, as opposed to merely adding to the stock of knowledge in a given research field is a valid one. As an insider, I have been both blessed and burdened in the manner of conducting the research and in using the research for change. I was given entrée to all sectors of the organisation without hindrance but I had to provide the women in the diocese who volunteered to participate in the case study with a research process designed in such a way that my position as a school principal was not compromised nor were the women threatened by my questions. Throughout the period of conducting the research I resolved to consider how the research process was creating a sense of empowerment for others and myself. I believed that the opportunity to participate in the research had the potential to provide some members of the organisation with some tools to create change/ and or resistance. However, I was uncertain of the ability of this research to directly empower individuals within the study. In the end it is the researcher who must take the major responsibility for finding the leverage for the research to be used for change.

In the process of conducting my research, I adopted Lather's (1989) approach to feminist research which is to maximise the research process as a change-enhancing and reciprocally educative encounter. This involved providing the participants with relevant

information concerning employment policies, the structures within the organisation and sharing my own career experiences.

At a simplistic but nonetheless important level, the feminist framework makes women visible in the organisation through the identification of how and why male privilege continues to exist. It also opens the way to make men visible both to women and to men themselves. The processes that confer privilege on one group and not on another group may be invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred. Understanding the complex ways in which 'man' retains his privileged place in creating texts and meanings about 'his' world and representing women as a reflection of 'his' definitions is an essential outcome of feminist research (Usher, 1996). This is true of other groups too, including white, middle-class women teachers who through their privileged whiteness and/or economic circumstances subordinate other groups including those from other racial, religious and ethnic groups and those in different socio-economic and family circumstances.

Women live with paradox and contradiction, subject to the patriarchal control of the organisation, whilst simultaneously through personal and collective agency promoting a flux in gender relations within the organisation. From an organisational perspective, however, these changes are a political intervention, imposed through public policy. At another level, however, women exploit the discursive gaps and interstices of the organisation (Hearn & Parkin, 1992), that is, the spaces between structures that are often only indirectly controlled by the mostly male managers of organisations. Randall (1995) has described this process as "developing clout" through appropriating power. She outlines some critical aspects of 'power-broking' that could be applied to men or women. These include power from position, knowledge, experience, networking, personal characteristics, participation and practising the skills of leadership and power



from techniques such as positioning oneself in a meeting where it feels comfortable, where you can be seen. I was interested in considering this notion of power-broking from both my own role in the organisation and as a possible consequence of conducting the research whereby other women would also seek to develop clout.

### Method

This case study employs qualitative methods that are commonly utilised as a feminist mode of research. Feminist research in general, however, does not preclude the use of quantitative research where this approach is advantageous. Because theory and method are intimately connected, the design of the research must consider the politics of research. In particular, it should consider how any categorising is an act of power which always marginalises and how the specificity of the researcher shapes the process and product of the inquiry (Lather, 1991). Adopting a feminist perspective requires the researcher to question the frameworks used, to judge how one's own views may be seen by the researcher to be of more value than those of the research participants.

The feminist research process, as I have come to understand it, is to listen well and to seek to understand (which is not the same as agreeing with) interests and points of view unlike my own, to listen for differences as well as commonality, to recognise points of disagreement and understand their roots without suppressing my own self-interest and point of view. Usher (1996) outlines such a position in her analysis of the 'subject/object' dichotomy. Feminism, in her analysis, challenges the claim that valid knowledge is only produced through a commitment to truth and objectivity and that in order to achieve this objectivity, a gulf is necessary between the researcher and the object of research. The need for this gulf presupposes that researchers are subjects in the Cartesian sense: capable of forming rational knowledge, free of personal, social, political and moral interests, and standing outside the social context of the 'objects' of

the research. Feminism does not accept such dichotomous structures that separate subject and object but instead, regards the terms as continuities. A feminist research stance therefore, does not think of objectivity and subjectivity in confrontation with one another. “ Rather, it is a project, a way of trying conceptually and representationally to mimic social life itself as a ‘moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity’” (Ortner, 1996, p.20).

The feminist alternative to the Cartesian position, Usher (1996) explains, acknowledges the importance of personal experience and expects researchers to analyse how their own experience is implicated in defining research questions, organising data collection and interacting with others. In this understanding, experience is seen as an asset rather than as a distorting influence. An important aspect of feminist methodology for the researcher, is the need to develop a self-reflexive stance towards the research. Therefore, irrespective of the area of research in which we work, a feminist stance would argue that as a strategy in designing research one should be asking how meanings about gender are implicated in the questions and criteria that guide one’s thinking. For example, in conducting interviews, the process of listening to the research participants constitutes a reflexive exercise when it leads to a questioning of how the research criteria might frame and possibly constrain what I see as acceptable and what are undesirable aspects of women’s responses to the organisational critique.

There is a difference between personal and theoretical reflexivity, the former being seen as the unique thoughts, feelings and experiences of the researcher, the latter a theoretical understanding of the site from which one is working, which creates the standpoint from which one works. I was highly conscious of both theoretical and personal reflexivity because of my insider status and my need to make sense of my own career journey in the case study organisation. In doing the research, however, it became

quite apparent that I was constantly operating from both reflexive stances with my immersion in feminist thinking colouring my personal views and responses to other participants. As the research progressed, I became aware of my changing views about the emancipatory aims of my research and the possibility that this could be effected through my own empowerment resulting from the research experience.

As a woman in a senior position in the organisation, my position brings the opportunity for influencing policy decisions. More importantly, however, the process of conducting the research brought the opportunity to listen to other women and the potential to gain a deep understanding of the unique circumstances surrounding individual women and the organisation. The constructing of personal knowledge creates the potential for decisions on where to apply leverage in creating organisational change.

In applying feminist thinking to an analysis of the career context of the organisation, I was conscious of finding answers to questions such as: how are organisational processes and structures constructing gender? Do women see themselves represented within these structures and processes? In addition, because of the strong association with the Catholic Church, I wanted to identify and interpret how ideas, values, beliefs and actions within the organisation can be described from a gender perspective, as carriers of Catholic Church versions of masculinity and femininity. The question of the discursive positioning of women through particular organisational discourses brings forth the potential for an understanding of how these discourses may encourage certain subjectivities in women at the expense of others. It also creates a sense of what is made possible or impossible by these discourses and attempts to develop resistance against them. The researcher must consider the possibility of being under-sensitive or over-sensitive to gender in addressing such questions. This requires

the researcher to make decisions concerning dominant patterns or alternatively fragmentation, inconsistencies and ambiguity that emerge from the research.

I placed gender at the centre of my research, seeking to understand how gender operates as one way meaning is constructed, produced, circulated and shared within the organisation and especially through the construction of the teaching career. I have adopted the post-structuralist emphasis on discourses and texts as the manner of making meaning through the analysis of the personal narratives of the participants and of particular texts of the Catholic Church. Michel Foucault (1991) provides a useful understanding of discourse as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses are not about objects; they constitute them and in doing so, conceal their own intervention. Foucault explored the connection between meaning and power. He argued that discourses gain power as a result of the ways in which they are institutionalised and written into social practices and cultural products. Discourses can be identical and contradictory. Some discourses are dominant and some are subordinate. I have identified dominant discourses within the organisation. Women, however, are also constituted within the discourses of parenting and caring. These discourses are considered subordinate discourses. However, they are now being incorporated into the organisational discourses.

Working within a feminist framework encourages a consideration of intersubjectivity through establishing the opportunity for a shared or collective response to research with the research participants. This involved consideration of goals such as relations of respect, shared information, joint involvement in the commentary and evaluation by the participants of their own experiences, and openness. Whilst these themes are not without ambiguity and controversy, it is essential that the research participants express what is significant in their own experience and have this faithfully

and respectfully documented. The validity of the research relies on this researcher-researched relationship.

In the life of a research project, not all the words that are heard and documented become significant 'data' to be manipulated in different ways by the interpretive process. Some narrative images are impossible to capture in words. These include the depth of emotion expressed in the words, the body language and facial expressions of the participants. Those images that are captured suffer from the requirement that the researcher and participants alike have to communicate in complete and proper sentences. Nevertheless, the views presented by the participants can be analysed to reveal how gender is a significant factor in understanding the traditional definition of the teaching career and how in concert with church discourse on women and institutional discourses, it shapes how women perceive their careers. Women make use of these discourses differentially. According to Biklen (1995), discourses are central in producing shared meanings in institutions, but people negotiate the meanings they make. This research therefore analyses both the structures that shape the career and the ways, in which these structures are interpreted, negotiated and represented in the experiences of women in the organisation.

#### The Case Study Approach

According to Merriam (1988), researchers use case study design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation in question and its meaning for those involved. As a research approach, the case study approach is especially suitable for my research because I wanted to understand the particular in depth and not what is generally true of the many. The legitimacy of my research does not spring from numbers of participants or quantitative statistics; rather I wanted to seek depth of insight. The case study is a tool of feminist research that is used to explore uncharted issues and pose provocative

questions regarding the circumstances of women's and men's lives (Reinharz, 1992). A feminist approach to case study "defies the social science convention of seeking generalizations by looking instead for specificity, exceptions and completeness" (Reinharz, 1992, p.174). The case study provides an important means of recognising the circumscribed nature of an individual's and, therefore, an organisation's perspective since the organisation has no basis without the interaction of those who work within it. Women enact both compliance and resistance as participants within the organisation. Both perspectives influence the outcomes of this case study designed as a feminist inquiry.

Yin (1989) describes the case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. Case study is a useful approach when a "how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (p.20). The case study can also capture the complexities that move research from a contingent to a qualified position. Theory simultaneously informs and is informed by the case study by the grounding of analysis of the ways gender is represented by larger social and cultural systems in the experiences of women, urging away from grand theories and the search for universals, towards a more partial but nevertheless generalisable position.

The purpose of my case study is interpretative and evaluative with regard to specific elements of a Catholic education organisation's career context. The career context is formed within the various arenas of the Catholic education organisation including the state and national Catholic Commissions and the local diocese. The Catholic Church embraces these arenas. The organisation exists by the actions of the

many people who develop and interpret policies and who carry out the purposes of the organisation. The women who form substantially the teaching workforce of the organisation are also participants in shaping the career context of the organisation. Essentially the case study makes a judgement about the organisation against the data that is gathered to support this judgement. This data is drawn from policy documents and other discursive arrangements relevant to the career context and includes an analysis of the historical development of the present organisational structures and practices. The perspectives provided by women who have chosen to pursue a career in Catholic education within a specific diocese and the interpretation of the organisation's career context, garnered from personal interviews with key people in a range of roles in the various organisational arenas, provides the 'thick description' that can allow for transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Because the organisation is dynamic not static, the process of change is included within the case study description. This position acknowledges that Catholic education and its sponsoring organisation, the Catholic Church, are in a continual state of becoming which requires the researcher to ask different questions than if describing or explaining 'what is' (Angus, 1987). It must be noted, however, that the timeframe of concern to the case study organisation delimits the historical period in which it is set. This period is set within the last half of the twentieth century with a specific focus on women who have been employed for a period of time that varies from the past twenty-five years to three years.

## Conducting the Research

### The Participants

To address the research questions adequately, the participation of classroom teachers and other educators in different positions within the different arenas of the organisation was required. The participants included women teachers who participated within focus groups. Personal interviews were arranged with five key personnel in positions of authority in the Diocesan Catholic Education Office, in the State Catholic Education Commission and in the National Catholic Education Commission. One of these positions was the Affirmative Action/Gender Equity Officer in the case study diocese. My relationship with these various participants ranged from that of being a friend, a 'boss', an authority figure, a colleague, a subordinate and a stranger working in the same organisation, in certain instances geographically far-removed. These differing relationships influenced that way I chose to conduct the research, particularly in regard to the relative powerfulness and powerlessness of the researcher and the various research participants. I was conscious of the setting in which the interview was held as I had control of this aspect in some instances but not others.

Where I did not have control of the setting, I provided some suggestions to the interviewee for the selection of a suitable setting. As an example, I suggested to the Director that the interview not be conducted in the Director's office. I chose to interview the Director who was a male because I wanted to determine the extent to which he felt the organisation was addressing career development for women and his role in assisting this process. A similar situation occurred with the National Commission Office because men held all the key leadership positions. The interview with the male Executive Officer of the National Catholic Education Commission was designed to examine the relationship between this arena of the organisation with the



State Commission and the Diocese. I also wanted to explore the contents of the National Commission's statement on Gender Equity in terms of the anticipated actions that may result from such a document for women in Catholic education. I also interviewed the woman Director in a nearby diocese because she had a role on the Catholic education commission and could influence the position of women in the case study diocese.

### Planning and Conducting the Individual Interviews

The individual interviews with key personnel were conducted over a period of two years. Interviews were conducted in a range of locations, some requiring long distance travel to meet with the interviewee. Timing of the interviews was organised to suit the busy schedules of each interviewee. Throughout the duration of the research, the procedure I adopted was to be responsive and adaptive in allowing for each interview to have a unique agenda because of the positions that each interviewee held, their experiences and my purpose in choosing the particular interviewee. This required open-ended questioning rather than specific questions used for every interview.

Through a process of critical reflection throughout the research process, the potential for change and redirection of the research was made possible. In the case of my research, my reflection led to a decision late in the research to interview three women who had left the organisation. I felt their particular stories would add a necessary dimension to my analysis, particularly in providing a perspective that was unencumbered and less constrained by employment in the organisation and my own position. In all I conducted eight interviews, including two men. Each interview was of a two-hour duration. I chose not to conduct telephone interviews with those interviewees who were located in other towns and cities because I preferred face-to-face interviews which I believed had the advantages of the full process of communication,

including body-language and eye-contact. I also wanted the opportunity to allow each interviewee to be more than a supplier of answers. Each person had stories they wanted to tell and I wanted the opportunity to encourage collaborative exploration of salient issues that emerged from the stories. This required note taking to assist in identifying specific issues during the interviews in addition to the standard tape-recording of the interview.

In terms of the different arenas of the organisation, I set out to invite women in different senior leadership roles in the different arenas to participate in an individual, open-ended, semi-structured interview. At the time, I was unable to interview a woman within the National Catholic Education Commission because there were no women in senior positions within this arena. The women interviewed were asked to share their 'career journey' in the organisation and the significant issues that they recognised as barriers and opportunities for women in the organisation.

In approaching the individuals for the interview, the first contact was made by telephone and, depending on my prior relationship with the potential interviewee, I introduced myself and gave a brief overview of the research I was conducting, including the requisite ethics approval provided by the university. I then explained to the participant why I wished to interview him or her and the nature of the interview as a collaborative exploration of issues that may impact on women's careers in the Catholic education organisation. Each of the people I approached agreed to be interviewed and expressed views on the nature of the research that indicated their personal interest and enthusiasm for the project. Further plans were negotiated on receipt of a letter from myself providing an overview of the research, a list of issues to be considered and the standard permission letter asking to tape-record the interview and stating confidentiality clauses. As an employee of the Catholic education organisation, I did not experience

some of the dilemmas other researchers may experience associated with establishing a relationship with the potential interviewees. There were, however, other dilemmas for me associated with my position in Catholic education such as choosing to be cautious with certain interviewees when questioned about my own views on the Catholic education organisation.

### Planning and Conducting the Focus Groups

Within the case study diocese women teachers who, in the first instance, had attended a forum on careers for women organised by the Diocesan Affirmative Action Committee, were invited to self-select for participation in the focus groups. A great deal of effort had been taken to ensure that women from different backgrounds and geographic locations in the diocese and in various careers phases from early to late were given the information about the forum. The focus groups reflected this diversity in terms of age, marital status, religion and length of time in teaching. One group of women who participated in my research had been unable to attend the forum because they lived a long way from the venue for the forum. They were, however, informed of the forum and provided with the summary and recommendations that resulted from the forum. I travelled the nine hundred kilometres to conduct the focus group in their particular school. Focus groups were held in four different locations over a five-month period with at least four weeks between each forum. Because I was employed as a full-time principal at the time, it was necessary for me to allow enough time to plan effectively for each focus group and continue to work full-time. The schools in which focus groups were held were very different: they consisted of a single sex girls' secondary school, a very large metropolitan primary school, a remote, medium size primary school and a large primary/secondary metropolitan school. The differences in

the schools were apparent in the comments made by the participants in terms of the opportunities and barriers they perceived to career development and career experiences.

Thirty-two women in total participated in the focus groups. Group size varied from six to ten participants at the different locations. Child minding was offered as the interviews were conducted outside of school hours. Three weeks prior to the group interview, I sent a copy of the questions I wanted to address and an outline of the research process to each person. The research issue was described in succinct terms as: “To understand from the points of view of different women, what the Catholic education system is like, as a place in which to pursue a career in teaching”. I made it plain that I wanted women to consider not just what happens in the workplace but how their career as an integral part of their life was experienced with some reflection on the alignment of individual expectations and organisational realities. In preparation for the focus group, I asked each woman to complete a journalling exercise at a time of convenience prior to the interview. This exercise asked them to reflect on reasons why they chose to work in the Catholic education sector, their views on career and ministry in teaching and some ideas on where they thought their career was heading and why. I asked that these journals be provided for my project. It eventuated that some completed the journals and others apologised for not doing so. For those who did not complete the exercise, I suggested that it could still be carried out and sent to me in due course. Less than half the participants returned the journals. Although I followed up with a further request, I did not receive any additional journals.

During each of the group sessions that lasted for 2½ -3 hours, the participants were asked to talk about how they experienced their teaching career. This included their views on the organisation’s response to women and women’s capabilities and desires to contribute to the totality of the organisation, albeit in different degree and manner.

Specifically, the women were asked to critique the organisation from the perspective of perceived opportunities and barriers to career progress that contributed to a consideration of the construction of organisational career outlook.

Because of the interactive nature of the focus groups, I felt that tape-recording was not appropriate because of the nature of conversation in which people often speak concurrently. I had thought that videotaping the focus groups would alleviate this difficulty, however, several women expressed their concern at having the videotape present. Subsequently, I designed the focus group activity as both a written exercise and a discussion and sharing exercise. Throughout the focus group discussions, I recorded the main issues in point form. The most important data came from three written exercises that I gave each participant to complete during the focus group activity. The exercises asked the following:

1. List the opportunities that you believe the Catholic education system offers for a woman interested in a career in teaching.
2. List the barriers that you see in the Catholic education system to a woman in experiencing a satisfying career.
3. List your ideas that the Catholic education system should consider to improve the career experience for women.

The raw data from the interviews was a combination of written responses and my own comments taken in dot point form throughout the duration of the focus group discussions. Because of the interactive nature of the focus group discussions, it was difficult to document every comment. Although the written material provided many useful comments, the reflections and suggestions were often written in shorthand form rather than in first person narrative style. This created some difficulty in writing the

data into the thesis, as it was not always possible to quote material in the style of thick description. The process of writing ethnographic notes proved very helpful in clarifying the data.

### Ethnographic Notes

Following each interview and focus group, I spent time writing notes on the process and outcomes of the sessions. There were several purposes associated with these notes:

- To note any difficulties that had arisen during the interview
- To note any non-verbal features of the interview or focus group session
- To note questions for further examination
- To assess the tone of the participant's responses
- To reflect my own reactions to the interview and the person/s being interviewed
- To consider the physical location, the particular arenas of the organisation and links that appeared to exist between the organisational arenas.

These notes proved very useful in identifying contextual factors and as a vehicle for analysis.

Anonymity was a necessary requirement of this research in order that the participants could feel free to express points of view which may not be seen as loyal to the organisation or may have been contrary to Catholic Church teaching but, nevertheless, reflected the participant's feelings and views on issues relevant to the research. In honouring the requirement to safeguard anonymity, any commentary detailed in the case study report has been coded. Interviews are coded as 'IT' with numeral 1- 8 identifying a particular transcript. Focus groups are coded as 'FG' with the numerals 1- 4 identifying a particular group. The comments of individuals were not

identified separately within each focus group but each person had been given the opportunity to participate in an individual interview.

A significant limitation of the study which prevented some women from feeling open to speak freely about their experiences within Catholic education was the potential impact the Catholic education lifestyle clause. Some women, by virtue of their lifestyles are in a more vulnerable employment situation. This clause states that certain lifestyles are unacceptable for those who choose to teach in a Catholic school and include such circumstances as co-habitation and remarriage outside the Catholic Church. Although an unstated position, this lifestyle clause would also apply to women living in lesbian relationships. In my role as researcher, I felt personally compromised in choosing not to openly invite women in such circumstances to participate because of my employment status as a school principal with its attendant role requirement of upholding the 'company code'. As circumstances turned out, however, a number of women disclosed their concerns within their written focus group comments about the lifestyle clause because of their personal situation regarding either irregular marriage, de-facto relationships or non-practising status as Catholics. I was also provided with the perspective of lesbian women. The irony is that, within the Catholic education organisation, it is known by some members of the hierarchy that there are women who do not fit the unspoken, yet preferred organisational view of the woman teacher in the Catholic school. She should be a practising Catholic who is single/virgin or married/heterosexual. Diversity is only acceptable within certain religiously determined boundaries. The response from those in authority to lifestyle difficulties in the case study diocese is generally that, provided there is 'no public scandal', there is no action taken.

At this point it should be acknowledged that there are other women who are in precarious circumstances related to lack of career opportunity in Catholic education. These are the many women employed within the support staff sector of the Catholic education system and whose position was not a part of my research. Their positions in the organisation contribute to the sexual division of labour, and to the gendered arrangement of the organisation based on casualisation and low-paying jobs filled predominantly by women.

### Data Selection

The selection of data for the case study was based on my structuring of the case study as an organisational study. I have chosen to see the organisation as being composed of various layers that constitute the career context. Particular data was selected in order to illuminate the nature of each organisational layer and contribute to a picture of the complexity of the career context of the Catholic education organisation. Data includes particular documents written by the clerical hierarchy of the Catholic Church that support the development of policy within the organisation associated with careers. Other data includes an analysis of certain discourses that have the potential to be counter-hegemonic and create spaces for women to be integrated within the organisation. Feminist Christian scholarship and gender equity discourse associated with public policy provides such discourse. Because policies are developed by people in key positions in the organisation who adopt particular approaches to the utilisation of the skills and knowledge of people across the organisation to support the policy process, data from individual interviews with people in key leadership roles also provided valuable perspectives. Because the organisation is animated by the participation of women, women in a variety of positions in the case study diocese were invited to participate in the research and provide an individual perspective on the organisation as a



place for a career. Together with the other types of data mentioned, the perspectives of women help create an understanding of career outlook for women in Catholic education and the gendered reality that underpins it.

### The Analysis

The analysis was grounded in the texts I had chosen from the organisation's policies, in the texts provided from the transcriptions of the interviews and the written focus group response sheets. The theory of gendering in organisations was predominant in my thinking as I examined the texts to provide a woman-centred perspective on the Catholic education organisation as a place for a career. I adopted several analytical stances: a process of immersion in the texts and discussion of emergent themes; deconstruction of the policies to examine the issues of masculinities and femininities that these texts constructed; and coding, categorising and exploring themes in the participants' texts.

Immersion in the texts allowed me the degree of familiarity necessary to stimulate thoughts about themes, questions, and issues. Discussion of emergent themes with my colleagues in the Diocesan Affirmative Action Committee and in the post-graduate support group set up by my supervisor were a critical part of the analytic process. The former group assisted in identifying how issues were visible and invisible to them as women in the case study organisation. The latter group, which consisted of six to eight post-graduate course candidates, allowed a focus on issues of method and the theories being created, paying particular attention to issues such as gender over-sensitivity and under-sensitivity.

Through the analysis of the case study data, I planned to illuminate the character and links between gender, knowledge, self, power and justice through the use and

understanding of a feminist framework to critique the organisation. The term ‘justice’ is especially pertinent in researching a Catholic organisation as it is used so frequently within Catholic discourses. The New Testament which is the definitive but still contested gospel text of the Catholic Church uses the word righteousness or justice, to speak of the nature and will of God. Feminist liberation theology and ethics employ a discourse of justice as the power of mutual relations or the power to ‘act-each-other-into-well-being’. Gender justice is an important perspective for Catholic organisations as indicated in the following statement taken from the National Catholic Education Commission document, Towards Gender Equity in Catholic Education (1997): “Gender equity challenges us to be witnesses to the gospel message. We are challenged each day to work for justice.” The position of women within the Catholic education organisation constitutes a justice issue and this research is designed to assist me in working for justice as I am called to do within the gospel imperative.

The challenge that the feminist framework provides for this case study is (a) to take apart the gender dynamics that make things the way they are within the organisation, remembering our location in history and context in making any claims (b) to address the need for women to name their own experiences and (c) to provide further testimony to the challenge given by women in different ways to continued forms of patriarchal power.

This perspective is further developed in chapters 4, 5 and 6. These chapters provide the detail necessary in explaining the elements I have delineated for the case study. These elements are addressed through the analysis of what I refer to as organisational layers. Together, these chapters demonstrate the interpretative and evaluative purpose of the case study by illuminating the various organisational layers that constitute the career context of the case study organisation. Chapter 4 deals with the first layer which

entails an examination of the historical, social and political developments which have shaped the career context in Catholic education and the discursive underpinnings which provide a Catholic point of reference for career. Chapter 5 examines the second layer which consists of the discourses which circulate about women within the organisation and the impact such discourses have for different women in their construction of career outlook. A third layer of the organisation is the animation given to the organisational reality by the participation of different women as members of the organisation. This layer is explained in Chapter 6 and reveals how women exploit discursive gaps and interstices within the organisation to accommodate the lifestream and feel integrated or otherwise within their versions of organisational reality.