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some notes about power relationships between women

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The idea for this paper originated in experiences I had and observations I made during a five day lab, the Women's Development Program for the National Training Laboratories Institute summer program at Santa Cruz, California. Especially in sessions involving smaller groups I was startled to hear women participants say, "Don't interrupt me. Don't do that. You are taking my power away." The discussions usually involved familiar topics: how to be assertive, how to get husbands and children to cooperate when a woman returned to school or took a job, criticism from neighbors, uncertainty about goals, and guilt about leaving young children. These themes of needing to achieve, dealing with role conflict, and needing to be loved did not seem, however, to be the crucial variables affecting what was happening within the group. Instead, the interactions between the participants and between the leaders and the participants seemed to be grounded in issues of power: either getting power, wielding power, or attacking those who seemed to have power. That was a stunning insight for me.

Psychologists never write about women and power. In this society we do not associate women with power; women in this culture do not think of themselves in reference to power. The women who came to the lab were a varied group of about fifty. Those who had been sent by their firms were generally employed at the level of executive secretary. Only a few of the participants had unusually high levels of training such as a doctoral degree. Some of the women were students, many were housewives and mothers. The great majority of those who were employed were not especially successful. In general, women came or were sent to the lab in order to explore and share concerns which are of special interest to women today. The great majority of these women did not occupy roles with significant power and very few had unusual skill or personal power. Yet once the interpretation was made that power was the crucial variable, apparently inexplicable events became understandable.

There was one particular incident that especially jarred me and pushed me to reinterpret what was going on. There was a remarkable middle-aged woman in our group of twelve. She was a handsome woman, widowed, now enjoying a relationship with a man she loved, a mother of two sons, one of whom had died, and a woman with a highly successful career. Mature, warm, integrated, intelligent, realistic, not hostile or threatening, she impressed me enormously as a marvelous person. Certainly everyone in our group seemed to respond to her in the same way; we talked about her as an admirable and likable person and role model. On the last day of the lab, group activities began where they had left off the day before and the women seemed to be basking in those earned feelings of mutual trust, intimacy, and self-affirmation. Rather suddenly and without any obvious reason one young woman, who had initially acted passive-aggressively but who had seemed to relax and become more spontaneous, direct, and honest, interrupted the discussion. She turned to the older woman, thrust her arm out, index finger accusing, and said, "I hate you." Others instantly joined her in this chorus of rage. The older woman listened, contained her anger and replied, "I am sorry that you bring this up so late because it is not possible to deal with it now. I do not know how you think I threaten you but I would have liked to have helped you if I could." Later I understood this to be a confrontation between one with and those without personal power.

This is a personal rather than a scientific paper. It is an interpretation of my impressions and is intended as an exploration of hypotheses rather than a presentation of firm conclusions. People who have read the draft have been in surprising agreement about the main ideas and some have told me that they have seen these dynamics operate in similar labs with mixed groups and with all-male groups. That may well be the case, but in this paper I will confine myself to speculations about what I observed.

After writing the draft of this paper, I chanced to reread Abraham Maslow's *Toward a Psychology of Being*, and was taken by some passages which had not made as much of an impression before:

There are certainly good and strong and successful men in the world—saints, sages, good leaders, responsables, B-politicians, statesmen, strong men, winners rather than losers, constructors rather than destroyers, parents rather than children. . . . But it also remains true that there are so few of them even though there could be many more, and that they are often treated badly by their fellows. So this too must be studied, this fear of human goodness and greatness, this lack of knowledge of how to be good and strong, this inability to turn one's anger into productive activities, this fear of maturity and the god-likeness that comes with maturity, this fear of feeling virtuous, self-loving, love-worthy, respect-worthy. Especially must we learn how to transcend our foolish tendency to let our compassion for the weak generate hatred for the strong (Preface to 2nd ed., p. iv).

In a later passage Maslow wrote:

The commonly seen hatred or resentment of or jealousy of goodness, truth, beauty, health or intelligence ("counter-values") is largely (though not altogether) determined by threat of loss of self-esteem, as the liar is threatened by the honest man, the homely girl by the beautiful girl, or the coward by the hero. Every superior person confronts us with our own shortcomings (p. 196).

types of
power

- ① To begin, let us enumerate some different kinds of power. There is the power which comes from a role, is part of the role, and accrues to anyone who occupies that role. For example, in organizational hierarchies those who occupy positions at the top of the pyramid have a great deal of responsibility as well as enormous power in making decisions that affect people below them in the hierarchy. A second kind of power
- ② comes from skill, and with unusually high skill people tend to make decisions, even in the absence of a role which assigns them that responsibility, because their expertise leads others to look to them for leadership. For example, in a group of scientists, if one person is acknowledged as having greater scientific authority, when decisions involving scientific content have to be made, this person assumes the leadership of the group. A third kind of power is exercised for psychologically compensatory reasons. Here, people who are vulnerable manipulate and take power from others in order to protect themselves. The overbearing, overassertive, overintrusive, didactic leader comes to mind. When arrogant decisiveness and certainty are too great, the psychologist must suspect bluff and compensation.

④ There is yet another kind of power, which Maslow described and which I saw in the middle-aged woman. This is personal power, a feeling of power that resides within a person and comes from maturity, ego-integration, security in one's relationships with others, lack of need to gain from others, and confidence in one's impulses. These are strong people because they trust themselves. They hear others but their behaviors and judgments are not dominated by a need to conform, to be liked, or to lead, rebel, or manipulate others. They can be spontaneous and honest, being less coerced than most people are by their past, present, or future needs. Maslow calls these people "self-actualized"; in this paper I use the synonymous terms strong and powerful. Such women have high ego-strength, are relatively autonomous and decisive, and have a strong sense of responsibility. I am not referring to compensatory and aggressive manipulation by those who are not mature, not ego-integrated, not self-actualized.

The main question to be examined in this paper is, why are women who are personally powerful likely to be attacked by those who are not? The second question is, under what conditions is attack likely to take place? The third question is, what are the forms of the attack? Last, what are the likely responses of the personally powerful woman

to those less powerful women who attack her? We may note that there is likely to be considerable overlap because those with personal power are also likely to occupy positions of role or skill power; those who lack personal power are less likely to occupy legitimized power positions. The individual's internal dynamics and real life situation tend to combine, with the result that a person tends to develop toward one extreme or the other.

reasons and
conditions for
attack on
powerful women

Women who are personally powerful, self-actualized, and high in ego-strength and autonomy are simultaneously objects for emulation and hatred by other women. The self-actualized woman is certainly the very ideal of what a woman should want to be; thus it is easy to understand why she is a model. But why is she also an object of hatred? A reasonable hypothesis is as follows: Powerless women, being jealous, become uncomfortable in the presence of a self-actualized woman. Such a person makes it difficult for those without potency to attribute their powerlessness to external forces over which they had no control. The nature of the threat lies in the fact that the stronger woman has prevailed over the same external forces. Thus, denial mechanisms in the powerless, which absolve them of responsibility for their own development, are threatened by the reality of the other woman. The personality, the very being of the stronger woman is the threat to the weaker.

Insofar as the threat is experienced at the personal level and the needs of the powerless are at the personal rather than at the role or skill level, then those who are weaker will feel that they need emotional support and affirmation from the stronger woman. This is intrinsically an ambivalent situation. The needier women experience and acknowledge their feelings of dependence, their lack of secure self-esteem, their resentment of this emotional infantilism, and their pleasure in the personal affirmation that they receive from the stronger woman. There seems to be something especially threatening when power is the result of psychological integration rather than role or skill dominance—much less aggressive manipulation.

An additional reason for the resentment experienced by the weaker women might be in their concept of power. They seem to see power as being limited. Either one has it or not; and if one person has it, then another cannot. They experience the stronger woman as having a quantity of power and therefore blocking the possibility of their getting power and assuming leadership. Thus they can say, "You are taking my power away." Those who are personally powerful do not think of interpersonal relationships in terms of power. Most women are uncomfortable thinking of themselves as powerful. It also holds true that personally powerful women seldom experience the lack of power or helplessness. It is therefore difficult for powerful women to perceive them-

selves as either having power or withholding it from others. If this is true, then those with personal power are likely to be insensitive to power needs of others, since such needs are not a salient issue for them in most personal situations. In addition, powerful women are very likely to withhold the possibility of leadership power from the weak because the strong generally lead, without meaning to, by dint of personality. Thus, weaker women appropriately perceive more potent women as models to emulate and objects to fear.

4) Women who experience themselves as weak or impotent will naturally feel weak and vulnerable in relation to those who are strong. Confronted with the strong woman, those with fragile self-images are greatly threatened, and their anxiety becomes more poignant as they experience the gulf between their real self and their fantasied self. It is less likely that the weaker will be able to express the resentment directly because, in general, it takes a strong ego to confront a strong ego. It is much more probable that the weaker woman will express an exaggerated admiration, a pathologically exaggerated idealization, a kind of ingratiation that says, "Like me. Like me better than anyone." Especially among women we may observe the play of weakness that says, "I need your help. Help me."

I suggest that if we were to compare a male or mixed group with a female group, we would be more likely to see females acting overtly out of high dependence needs and a form of covert aggression involving dependence relations. This would occur because emotional dependence is more congruent with the stereotypic female than the male character. Acknowledgment of emotional dependence is therefore much easier for women than for men. Women tend to be more skilled in using others to promote their own emotional needs.

Under what conditions would we expect either a personal attack by the weaker women upon the stronger or the playing out of the dynamics of the emotional neediness by the weaker? While there is always the possibility of these dynamics occurring, they are more likely when it is easier to personalize the situation. That is, when the situation is not structured as it normally is in work or in organizations, where there are no assigned tasks, roles, or leadership specifications, when responsibilities are not specified, then the dynamics of the people involved are more likely to become personalized. Among women, the acting out of emotional dependency and passive-aggressive behavior also becomes more probable.

Imagine an organization where there are subordinates and a person in charge, and each has a specific job to do. In this case, if one of the group members feels anxious, aggressive, or resentful towards another member, he or she might attribute this feeling to how the group is organized. To relieve it, the person, may try to alter the structure of the organization. This becomes a threat from and an attack upon a relatively impersonal organizational structure. But suppose the set-up

of the organization is not clear or the situation is ambiguous and leaders have emerged on the basis of personality or skill rather than role. Then power is not directly related to the role and anxiety, aggression, or resentment can be experienced personally. In this instance, attempts to make changes must be directed toward other persons. Here, interactions are more totally personal. The encounter group, or T-group, is a deliberately contrived situation where power is distributed as evenly as possible among participants and there is a maximum of emotional response. The encounter laboratory is an extreme situation in which one is most likely to be able to observe these dynamics in an unmodified form.

When someone's personal style makes her emerge as a leader, but that position is not voted on or acknowledged by group consensus or task criterion, when her leadership cannot be perceived as the result of an objective role position or some particular relevant expertise, then leading and following are done on the basis of personality. Very simply, when people become dominant and make decisions without there being a specific and consensually understood role, then followers see these leaders as powerful individuals. This is entirely different from the type of authority that derives from a specific job that has limitations. When an individual dominates, for example, not because she is chairperson, but because she is forceful, then leadership is personalized. In the ambiguity of this situation, those who are led are more likely to feel anxious and thus personally used if not abused. As a result, chances are good that those who emerge in dominant positions will be attacked for taking on the leader role. (This is especially true for those whose personal style is more direct and assertive and may be less true for those whose personal style is softer and more traditionally feminine.)

What difference does the role make? When power attaches to a role, it is relatively impersonal; and there is the crucial stipulation that anyone who takes on the role assumes specific decision-making responsibilities and works within the role's limitations. That is, roles provide specified, limited power and responsibility and they spell out the leader's responsibility to those led.

When the role is less clear, or does not specify limitations and obligations, then the powerless become anxious. This occurs because they are vulnerable to the potentially unlimited manipulations of the stronger. When someone is in a role which basically has no bargaining position, that is, no power, then that individual has recourse only to personal power. Sometimes the relatively powerless are protected by custom or by the law. Such situations include that of pupil and teacher where the law limits the teacher's ability to punish, or the relationship of employee and employer, where the law protects the employee within the working situation. But in more personal relationships, especially now when roles are changing and areas of obligations and respon-

sibility are no longer traditional, then the role no longer has built-in constraints and the less personally powerful individual is dependent upon the beneficence of the more powerful. Such relationships would include that of child and parent, wife and husband, lover and lover. This means that when role definitions are more ambiguous, either because of the nature of the role or because the definition of that role is changing, then the less powerful lose the protection that comes from role constraints and they are indeed in greater danger of being engulfed by those who are more personally powerful.

forms of the
attack and
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powerful woman

Those who are easily manipulated by others who have more powerful roles or especially by others with stronger personalities are not likely to use direct or overt forms of aggression. They are more likely to be overtly fawning or ingratiating but covertly and subtly aggressive. This form of attack makes it more difficult to label their intent as aggressive and to hold them responsible for their aggression. The ingratiating behavior both secures an emotional affirmation from the stronger woman and induces guilt in her because she is responding to the acknowledged needs of the weaker. Thus the more powerful woman is likely to act supportively rather than assertively and the weaker has inhibited the stronger. While this is an ego trip for the personally powerful woman it will probably result in the muting of her leadership, for she will tend to withhold direct contradictory opinion or chastisement. Since the emotional acting out is a plea for support by someone who shows her needs overtly, the needs are acknowledged but the aggressive manipulation is not and is, in fact, very difficult to see. After all, how many people are aware of the fact that when someone says, "I need you," they may also be saying, "I hate you." Not many.

If the group is without leadership, roles, or tasks and especially if it is set up to create as many emotional interactions as possible, it becomes quite possible for the emotionally demanding weaker women to dominate what occurs and thereby become the strongest members of the group. If the group does not confront these issues, then emotional needs instead of coping skills become the focus. Emotional dependence thus becomes a reinforced behavior and the tyranny of the weak is evident.

Those who are characteristically without power, either because they lack personal power or because their role does not call for the exercise of power, seem to be prone to perceive relationships and situations in terms of power. Their lack of decision-making responsibility and mature personality means that they are always a potential victim when others intrude into their real life or their psychological space. In the Catch-22 of their lives, when the stronger speaks only in neutral or positive ways, then it becomes appropriate for the powerless person to be hypersensitive to the possibility of negative feelings.

scanning constantly for the subtlest of cues—"Her smile doesn't look so genuine today. She really doesn't like me." The powerless person suffers from a paranoia; she goes through life with antennae extended to sense even the most subtle acts, attempts, or thoughts of coercion or intrusion into her own lifespace.

This preoccupation with power by the powerless contrasts abruptly with the perceptions of the powerful woman: She seems relatively oblivious of power issues and indeed of her own power. Not being vulnerable to other's power, she is less sensitive. Power is still not a part of the idealized female character and even personally powerful women seem resistant to perceiving themselves as such: having power means having more responsibilities.

It seems that in some crucial ways the experience of power of the haves and the have-nots is fundamentally different. When they talk about power they mean different things. The powerless seem to imagine that having power is the opposite of being without it. They define it primarily in personal terms because it is in the personal sense that they are fundamentally vulnerable. They seem to imagine that having power means to be coercive, potent, and free; and for them, because they feel themselves to be coerced, impotent, and trapped, that is an understandable perception. Thus, in the many situations where power is a salient issue for the powerless, power is understood in personal terms and having power means not being vulnerable, not being impotent.

Those with personal power are much less likely to conceive of power in personal terms and are far more likely to think of power in relationship to tasks or roles. These people can take for granted the fact that others cannot intrude into their space—they have boundaries, they have some control over their vulnerability and certainly over their intimacy, which the powerless do not have. Those who do have power and who characteristically lead, talk about the power to make decisions and be responsible for the outcomes, to lead people and be responsible to them, to make policies, to influence, to guide—in every circumstance the result of having power is to increase the number or the breadth of responsibilities.

Those without power fantasize that having power means being freed from incursions into the self. They imagine that having power, some quantity of it, would protect them from coercion. Since the concepts and the experiences of the powerful and the powerless are fundamentally different, it is understandable why communication between them may totally break down. We can imagine a basic difference in behavior as well: to the extent that the powerful woman experiences the ambivalent feelings directed toward her and to the extent that she must decide whether she is willing to take on more responsibilities, she may well hesitate before acting as a leader. The powerless, unable to

imagine the negative aspects of having power and eager to be powerful is likely to find the indecisiveness of the powerful woman stressful.

Confronted by overt aggression, one would expect the powerful woman to respond the same way. That did not happen in the lab, perhaps for the following reason. Along with the overt aggression, there was an expression of acute emotional dependence similar to the manipulation of a mother by her child. Some of the succorance did take the form of holding, cuddling, and protecting, arousing in the more powerful woman responses that seemed to be maternal. It is hard to label the "bad mother." It arouses guilt. It seemed that the traditional feminine attributes, the habit of helping others, and the determination not to impose personal pain on people who are weak was operating. To nurture and help are not simply aspects of the feminine stereotype; they are also internalized values which are a central part of a woman's idealized self-image. It is also possible that women who are self-actualized have integrated this nurturing aspect of themselves more than those who are weaker because the weaker may experience emotional giving as depleting their own resources. Simultaneously, powerful women are not likely to be comfortable with their own power and may find it far more comfortable to act within the more congruent role of supportive mother.

The weaker group members act out their emotional dependence and arouse anxiety in the stronger about not imposing personal pain. When this happens they cause the stronger woman to withhold her assertiveness and leadership, and the dynamics of the group become particularly feminine. The phenomenon called the "Queen Bee Syndrome" may occur not only because women in leadership roles want to protect their position from competitors. In addition, the followers may keep the leader from acting on her strength because it is potentially destructive to them. In this case the leader must distance herself from the weaker first because they cause her to blunt her behaviors, and second because the leader does not want to identify herself with weakness.

implications
for role models and the
women's liberation movement

There is a good deal of discussion within the Women's Movement about role models. Somehow the focus has been on the positive to the neglect of the threatening aspect. Surely those who are already somewhat confident but just a little timorous can respond to those who have achieved personal integration positively—but even here I begin to suspect an unacknowledged ambivalence. I discussed with a former Ph.D. student the nature of our relationship. We agreed that I was a combination of mentor, friend, sister, and mother. Perhaps the fact that the relationship was more than a mentor/apprentice one is partially because it was between two women, and women characteristically operate on affective personal levels even when there is an objective task to accomplish. Also, I suspect, it is because in the stress of the

task situation the female mentor responds to the support needs of the younger woman. Emotional support is probably a necessary condition for competitive risk taking for many women, at least in the beginning of a career. While the psychodynamics of men may be similar, it seems that emotional needs are far less likely to be expressed by either man nor responded to by the mentor, since the stereotype of male ego-strength has characteristically precluded expressing anxiety and dependence. But if we take the model of this feminine mentor as including (objective) mentor, (peer) friend, (intimate) sister, and—(ambivalent) mother, then the relationship is operating on both a task-related objective level and a quite personalized, intimate, emotional one. It is then very likely that even when the younger woman is basically strong, she will necessarily respond to the older, stronger woman with many of the same affects she experiences with her own mother. And as in her relationship with her own mother she will have to introduce some level of distancing, some amount of ambivalence, some quantity of rejection of the more powerful figure, before she can experience herself as her own person. Of course, exactly the same dynamics can operate with men, but since they are more likely to avoid the overt expression of this more personal and emotional interaction, this kind of intimate relationship is more characteristic of women.

Who would be experienced as the strongest of the strong? Who is the greatest model and therefore the greatest threat? I suggest that it will be the woman who has personal power, who is confident, able to be assertive, who is likely to achieve, and who simultaneously conveys empathy, warmth, and caring. When might the threatening qualities of such a woman be lessened? Only when roles are specified, therefore, limiting power, and when all members of the group have a known task which contributes toward the group goal will the threat subside. Under which circumstances could the individuals in a group work without known roles and a given hierarchy of responsibilities? Perhaps when members of a group are peers in some sense relevant to the group goal or when the members have previously established trusting relationships with each other then, we will be able to work without role definement. When these conditions are not fulfilled, when trust has not been previously established, or when roles or responsibilities are not acknowledged, the probability is that power dynamics in the personal sense will dominate the group.

The organization of women's groups and especially the hidden hierarchy of leadership is an important issue in the Women's Movement because one of the objectives of the movement is to break down the traditional organizational pyramid which assigns leadership and power responsibilities only to the few who rise to the top.

The traditional values of women, in which the welfare of the people with whom they interact and for whom they have responsibility, might

boundaries are
clearly established
to
the person

be able to modify the norm of organizational structure and the fairly unidirectional flow of power. In the literature of the Women's Movement there seems to be a naive and extreme point of view which is an emotional reaction to the coercion and manipulation of the traditional organizational pyramid. The solution proposed is the predictable reverse of the rigid role structure of the traditional organization. That is, the solution is to have no organization, to have no leadership, and to have no specified roles because specification is constraining. Leadership means hierarchy. When it exists, some people will exert the leverage of power over others. Since women have traditionally been the victim-recipients of that manipulation, the ethos is that women will or should not join in creating new organizations which perpetuate the same old destructive dynamics. Individuals are protected in roles where limitations on power are specified. There is too high a probability of anxiety and anger in the ambiguity of a real but unacknowledged differential in power or leadership. So the solution might be not to give up roles or leadership or organization even if they are heirarchal, but to modify those structures so that constraints on power are specified and the breadth of shared decision making is greatly increased.