

## Horizontal hostility

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# A discussion of the problem of horizontal hostility

[Added November 2003: This paper was not offered for publication nor presented verbally. It was written in response to a friend's request for my own ideas on horizontal hostility, at a time when she felt she herself was struggling with the kinds of things discussed here. I know when I finished writing it—March 1993—because I dated it.]

The term, 'horizontal hostility', was coined by Florynce Kennedy, in her 1970 paper, 'Institutionalized Oppression vs. the Female', printed in the anthology edited by Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful*. (Penelope, 1992: 60) It is a term which dates from the very beginning of Women's Liberation (both in the US and wherever else her paper was read). And if the name is as old as Women's Liberation, the problem is at least as old, if not older.

Horizontal hostility is a form of power-as-domination between and among women. Hence the most appropriate context for discussing it is in terms of relations of power among women. The feminist project of identifying and challenging male domination does not mean that only men oppress women, and that women are automatically exempt from male supremacist values, attitudes and behaviours and never behave badly towards other women. It is important to keep in mind the main enemy, i.e. male domination. But because oppression is institutionalised, and because it constitutes the status quo and the world taken for granted, it is all too easy to fall unthinkingly into ways of behaving which reinforce patterns of domination.

However, because women are subordinate and men are dominant under conditions of male supremacy, the patterns of domination typical of women are systematically different from those of men, i.e. they are less direct, more underhand, less overt and active. Female behaviour which reproduces male supremacist meanings and values will also tend to give evidence of the subordinate position from which women are

acting, even though the actions themselves involve self-aggrandisement at someone else's expense. Hence horizontal hostility between and among women typically involves forms of power-over which spring from a position of weakness not strength.

Horizontal hostility can involve bullying into submission someone who is no more privileged in the hierarchy of male supremacist social relations than the bully herself. It can involve attempts to destroy the good reputation of someone who has no more access to the upper levels of power than the one who is spreading the scandal. It can involve holding someone responsible for one's own oppression, even though she too is oppressed. It can involve envious demands that another woman stop using her own abilities, because the success of someone no better placed than you yourself 'makes' you feel inadequate and worthless.<sup>1</sup> Or it can involve attempts to silence criticism by attacking the one perceived to be doing the criticising. In general terms, it involves misperceptions of the source of domination, locating it with women who are not behaving oppressively (to the extent that they are not, of course). And it is inspired by contempt, that prime motivating force which keeps the motor of male supremacy running.

Florynce Kennedy went straight to the heart of the matter when she placed her discussion of horizontal hostility in the context of consent to one's own oppression.<sup>2</sup> She was not arguing that this 'consent' was the cause of oppression. Although she said that 'there can be no really pervasive system of oppression, such as that in the United States, without the consent of the oppressed' (p.492), she did not mean that if we stopped consenting it would go away. Women do not consent to rape, for example, but that has not markedly diminished its occurrence. She was aware that women were not responsible for our own subordination. She did, however, want to point out that oppression was not only coerced or violently enforced, but that an

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<sup>1</sup> See Russ, 1985, for an excellent account of this latter form of horizontal hostility.

<sup>2</sup> Concepts like 'false consciousness', 'ideology', Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony', and the Frankfurt School's concern with 'the authoritarian personality', were attempts within a Marxist context to deal with the same phenomenon, namely the tendency for oppressed groups, the working class in the case of Marxism, to embrace meanings, values and 'reality' which reinforced the interests of the ruling class while working against the liberatory interests of the oppressed themselves. In particular, the Frankfurt School was concerned to explain how it was that the German working class embraced fascism rather than socialism in the period between the two world wars.

oppressive social order required a certain degree of complicity for its continuing existence.

The complicity required of us under conditions of male supremacy is complicity in the ideology of female weakness. Women must be 'weak' so that men can be 'strong'. Male strength is acquired at the expense of women. This ideological requirement of female weakness does not go uncontested even under the everyday conditions of phallocratic reality. Women constantly resist subordination to men in order to carve out some freedom of action and influence of their own. Conventional ways of resisting, however, reinforce rather than challenge the status quo. Beating the oppressor at his own game, for example, leaves the rules of the game intact, even when a woman occupies the top position in the hierarchy. Feminine wiles and enticements inflate the male ego at the same time as they gain the woman some short-term benefit. Tears and tantrums, or coldness and withdrawal, can bring him to heel temporarily, but he usually has somewhere else to go since the world is built in his own image and likeness. Even when an individual woman does manage to defeat an individual man or men, the outcome is not a relationship of equality. The role of the 'dominating' woman is allowed for within the phallocratic form of life, either as a way of intimidating women into subordination—the 'bitch', the 'nag', the 'ball-breaker', the 'castrating female'—or as a way of eroticising male guilt, e.g. the 'dominatrix' in the sadomasochist sexual encounter. Paradoxically, the ideology of female weakness requires a great deal of violence to maintain. Horizontal hostility is the use among women of these techniques developed in the context of resistance to male power. It is intended to beat into submission the other who is perceived as enormously powerful, while at the same time reinforcing the idea that women are powerless.

Kennedy referred to 'women being utilized as agents for oppressors' (p.493), but her discussion of horizontal hostility, which she also called 'trashing', was tantalisingly brief. She did not give any examples of its occurrence among feminists. She had more to say about the control of the self, than about the ways in which we attempt to control each other. 'Women', she said, 'in their brainwashed consensual [sic] condition frequently act out their role of hovering mother without any noticeable pressure from anyone. Note "noticeable"' (p.494). She did, however, refer to the part

played by 'horizontal hostility' in 'wreck[ing] ... some radical political groups, and it must be sadly said, some women's liberation groups' (p.495). She went on to say that it was part of 'the Establishment's divide-and-conquer techniques':

Oppressed people are frequently very oppressive when first liberated. And why wouldn't they be? They know best two positions. Somebody's foot on their neck or their foot on somebody's neck ... even as they huddle together in the cold, damp atmosphere of their new-found liberation ... women ... often clash with each other before they learn to share and enjoy their new-found freedom (pp.495-6).

Her suggested solutions were also brief and unelaborated. She said:

To avoid these destructive effects of horizontal hostility, women need some minimal political and/or social awareness of the pathology of the oppressed when confronted by divide-and-conquer experts (p.495).

She also suggested that we refrain from raging against individuals, and instead direct our anger against more appropriate targets, i.e. systems and institutions rather than people. 'Kicking ass', she said, 'should be only where an ass is protecting the System' (p.499). This comment shows that she was aware that her suggested solution was less than perfect, since institutions function through the actions, attitudes and commitment of individuals. Nonetheless, her recommendation can serve as a warning to us to keep in mind the main enemy. And despite the brevity of her account, it is clear that she regarded horizontal hostility as a form of 'power-over' enacted by women against women, and that it invariably served the interests of the oppressor and worked against the interests of women. In that sense, it was a re-enactment of patterns of dominating behaviour acquired as a result of participation in phallocratic reality.

Julia Penelope is in substantial agreement with Florynce Kennedy. She too sees it as a form of consent to oppression. She refers to it as 'internalized oppression', and describes it thus:

Horizontal hostility is the heteropatriarchy's best method for keeping us "in our places"; we do the work of men and their institutions for them ... [It]

allows us to direct our anger, which arises from our marginal, subordinate status in heteropatriarchy and should be directed toward our oppressors, toward other Lesbians and wimmin, because we know it is safer ... [It] functions to insure our on-going victimization within our own groups, and it keeps us silent when we most want to speak out; it keeps us passive when we most want to challenge, because we don't want to be the target of another Lesbian's anger (Penelope, 1992: 60).

## ***Name-calling***

One of the forms of horizontal hostility discussed by Penelope is name-calling. She says that name-calling is 'a feeble substitute for thoughtful analysis' (p.65). She points out that name-calling is easy. It is easy to do, easy to believe and easy to remember, because, as she says, 'it requires absolutely no thought, no analysis, and no justification' (p.69). Labeling others with names like 'Nazi', 'fascist', 'racist', 'ageist', 'classist', 'sex-police', 'puritans', 'moralists', etc., is also dangerous if it is successful in achieving what it is meant to do, i.e. to intimidate those so labeled into silence and stop any challenge or debate. Those who believe that those names say something accurate about those labeled, without thinking about what the names mean, or without asking for substantiation or evidence, also participate in horizontal hostility, even if they are not the original name-callers. Name-calling attempts to destroy the good reputation of those so labeled, to control their thoughts and actions, and to terrorise them into silence. It trivialises the very real horrors of fascism, racism, class oppression and male supremacy, and demeans the agonies of those who have suffered most under such régimes. It muddies important distinctions between, on the one hand, those who, like white supremacists, neo-Nazis, male supremacist ideologues, rapists, etc., do advocate, glorify and practise violence and dehumanising behaviour towards those they define as 'inferior', and those of us who, on the other hand, might retain racist, etc., attitudes despite our best intentions. And it sets up invidious distinctions among ourselves by emphasising those oppressions which do divide us, at the expense of and to the exclusion of the oppression we have in common as women and lesbians.

## ***Feelings are not enough***

Another kind of horizontal hostility Penelope discusses is the use of 'psychological predicates' (psych-predicates). These are forms of language usage which describe how we feel about and react towards others, in a way which attributes the source of those feelings to someone else. To say of someone that she is 'intimidating', for example, Penelope says, '*requires* the experiencer of the specific feeling named by the verb to describe herself as an object acted upon by someone else's attitude or behavior' (p.73—her emphasis). The use of psychological predicates allows the speaker to avoid responsibility for her feelings, and to place that responsibility somewhere else. It also allows the speaker to attribute intentions to the supposed 'intimidator' which she may not have, to accuse her of a desire to dominate which she may not want, and to assert that her (the speaker's) view is the only possible interpretation. To talk about this process in terms of language use, Penelope says, is not to deny the reality of our feelings. It is, rather, to warn us that it is all too easy to blame others and falsely accuse them—the language is built for it.

Penelope comments that the use of such language 'maintain[s] the heteropatriarchal fiction that we are emotionally dependent' (ibid.). I would add that it also reinforces the belief that we are weak and helpless and completely at the mercy of powerful others. Because such helplessness must be fended off, we tend to attack in order to annihilate those we perceive as the source of that feeling. It is this sense of helplessness which is the real source of horizontal hostility.

This is suggested by something Vera Ray said in her paper, 'An Investigation of Violence in Lesbian Dyadic Relationships'. (Ray, 1991) She said that, although there are many similarities between the abuse of women by men in heterosexual relationships and the violence in lesbian relationships, there is one crucial difference. Whereas the man uses violence to maintain and reinforce his dominance in the relationship, the lesbian batterer uses violence to 'equalise' what she perceives as an imbalance of power. She perceives herself as 'weak' and her partner as 'strong', and she lashes out in order to demolish that 'strength' which she (wrongly) feels is the source of her own 'weakness'. This does not excuse the violence, as Vera points out. No one 'deserves' to be beaten. But it does indicate that violence among women



originates in weakness not strength, As Vera puts it, in this instance women 'are corrupted by a sense of powerlessness' (p.46).<sup>3</sup>

Much the same point was made by Joanna Russ in her paper, 'Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement'. (Russ, 1985) In this paper, Russ criticised what she called 'the great Feminine Imperative', the expectation that 'women are supposed to make other people feel good, to fill others' needs without having any of our own' (p.43). She describes how this imperative is enforced on women by other women by means of the 'Magic Momma/Trembling Sister' syndrome. A 'Trembling Sister' (TS), she says, is a woman who has embraced her own helplessness and ineffectuality in order to avoid the guilt attendant upon satisfying her own needs, exercising her own abilities, and achieving her own successes. A TS elevates to the status of a 'Magic Momma' (MM) any woman who has achieved something that she herself has failed to achieve. She blames the MM for the bad feelings she has about her own lack of achievement, and proceeds to demand that the MM take care of her (the TS's) hurt feelings, and look after her. Since this is impossible, the TS becomes enraged and 'trashes' the MM. The MM, who up to this point may have been oblivious to her 'magic' status, falls into the trap if she accepts the TS's viewpoint. She becomes an MM by reacting with guilt, by attempting to soothe the hurt feelings, by apologising for or belittling her own achievements, by undertaking to fix everything up and make everyone feel good. Given the impossibility of this, her actual response is fear and paralysis in the face of the TS's continuing yells of rage.

Russ suggests that the way out of the vicious circle of blame, self-recrimination and paralysis is for women to claim our own achievements and self-worth. The TS needs to realise that, although her feelings of helplessness may be the result of relations of power outside her control, they also may not. She needs to learn that she retains her

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<sup>3</sup> It occurs to me that male violence against women is also a sign of weakness, i.e. of worthlessness, futility and self-hatred. He bashes her in order to reduce her to a level lower than he is. He bashes her because she is a constant reproach to him, because she is always nagging him even though she never says a word, because she fails to reflect his humanity back to him and instead regards him with fear and loathing. The weakness referred to here is as much a result of male supremacist social relations and values as women's powerlessness. However, it is not a weakness resulting from powerlessness, but the moral bankruptcy of those who are deeply entrenched in their role as oppressor, who are firmly committed to their right to a 'human' status based on contempt for others. It is the weakness of an oppressor who believes he can coerce others into giving him the recognition he wants, while constantly failing because recognition cannot be gained in that way.



own moral agency even under conditions of oppression (to use a concept developed by Sarah Hoagland—Hoagland, 1988), that there are still some things she can do, that she still has some responsibility, even though her freedom to act is constrained by objective conditions. She needs to learn that attributing enormous amounts of power to other women is a delusion, as is her sense that she herself is utterly helpless. And she needs to learn that the oppressed can also be oppressive. Not only can the oppressed partake, however minimally, of the statuses and privileges of the dominators at the expense of others of the oppressed, but the oppressed also have ways of manipulating the dominators. The TS needs to guard against using these techniques against other women, techniques of feigned helplessness, of tantrums, of demands that someone else solve her problems for her, and consider her hurt feelings to the exclusion of their own projects.

The MM, on the other hand, needs to learn that she is not infinitely available, endlessly supportive, eternally patient, in short, that she is nobody's 'mother' (in the male supremacist sense of absolute self-sacrifice). She also needs to learn that, as Russ puts it, 'feelings of guilt are not objective political obligations' (p.47). The fact that she feels guilty does not automatically mean that she is to blame for everything, or even anything at all, and must therefore make reparation by putting everything right. Guilt is so endemic in the female population, and functions so neatly in keeping women in service to men, that she may simply have switched into her own share of the generalised pattern. In this case, since there is nothing to atone for, she may simply have to put up with the guilty feelings until they go away.

### ***How to recognise horizontal hostility***

It is important to distinguish between horizontal hostility and genuine criticism, because criticism is often mistaken for hostility. While unfounded hostility is destructive and paralysing, criticism is necessary if feminism is to continue to grow and develop and remain relevant, and not to degenerate into parroted dogma. While feminism needs criticism, it does not need the mindless terrorism of horizontal hostility. While both can feel hurtful and humiliating, horizontal hostility is thoughtlessly cruel, has no other motivation than to hurt. It is a blind lashing out at

and scapegoating of those who are accessible because they are not so very different in power and privilege.

Criticism, on the other hand, is not intended to hurt, but to clear the air and uncover the truth of the matter. It is considered and considerate. It involves a genuine attempt to work out what is going on; and it shows consideration for the other by not being deliberately and thoughtlessly unkind. As far as possible, it is characterised by considered, well thought out and substantiated argument. Although this is not always possible, especially in the heat of the moment, criticism is at the very least sincere in the questions it raises. It is not a competition about who is right and who is wrong, about who wins and who loses. Rather, criticism is concerned to uncover the truth, and is opposed to lies, secrets, silences, deceptions and unsubstantiated rumours. It is not necessary to have everything neatly worked out before expressing doubts.<sup>4</sup> But it is vitally important to know about and evaluate one's own gut reactions. It is important to ask oneself questions like: Am I feeling threatened by what is said? If so, why? Am I justified in feeling uneasy? What is the source of the uneasiness? Is there enough evidence? etc. Sometimes the questions will have no immediate answers. But to reserve judgement is also a form of criticism, and a way of refusing to engage in horizontal hostility.

While criticism is characterised by a careful search for the meaning of what is being said, horizontal hostility is meaningless, because the information contained in a nasty name is so sparse. What does it mean, for example, to call another feminist 'racist' or 'classist' or 'fascist', without going on to justify it and give reasons? Does the word 'fascist' have any meaning at all applied to another woman, given the history of Fascism and the evils perpetrated under its influence? The accuser must be clear in her own mind about the meaning of the terms she applies to other women, and the particular way or ways in which the accused has offended. It is better to remain silent, than to gain an easy victory over another woman who probably already has a vast store of generalised guilt for the accusation to trigger.

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to my lover, Marg Roberts, for this point—March, 1993.

It might be assumed that these recommendations are relevant only to those with training in thinking, arguing and reasoning, i.e. those with tertiary education. But we can all think. It is not a skill confined to the institutions of 'higher learning'. We can all know our own minds. We can all sort out truth from falsity, the inimical from the friendly, what is merely confused or ignorant from what is deliberately wrong. A good argument is not necessarily a lengthy, sophisticated one. We can all give reasons for what we do, even if we are not initially aware of those reasons and it takes some time to find them. And we are all capable of realising we have made mistakes, acknowledging them and learning from them. We are all capable of deciding whether or not there is enough evidence, and of reserving judgement until we can make an informed one. We are all capable of substantiating what we say, and of fitting our assertions to the evidence. We are also capable of respecting each other's good reputations. And we are all capable of examining our own motives. Far from it being the case that these abilities are confined to a small elite, it is vitally important that all feminists develop them. Failure to do so keeps us trapped in the power games of male supremacist ideology.

### ***How to avoid horizontal hostility***

By 'avoiding horizontal hostility', I do not mean finding ways to avoid being subjected to it, or to protect someone else from being subjected to it. To the extent that it does not originate with me, there is nothing I can do to stop it happening. If it is not my behaviour, the decision whether or not to engage in it is not mine to make. There are, of course, a number of ways I can react once it has happened, and those ways can be more or less appropriate, more or less debilitating, more or less empowering. I can react with shame and guilt, and allow it to silence me; or I can accept the negative things said about another, without thinking and without asking for verification and evidence. Or we can engage in a verbal battle which may or may not end in long-term enmity and a refusal ever to speak to each other again. Alternatively the battle might clear the air and end with one convincing the other, or with an agreement to disagree. Or I can be cool, detached, respectful and reasonable, require that the other give her reasons for what she is saying, and evaluate those reasons to the best of my ability. In the absence of what I feel are adequate reasons, I can suspend judgement until and unless there is enough evidence. But if reason fails to convince, nothing else will work either.

But if I cannot stop others being hostile, I can refuse to engage in horizontal hostility myself. I can take care not to slip mindlessly into automatic patterns of domination. I can ask myself, as Julia Penelope says, if I really mean what I say. I can ask myself if what I say is true. I can ask myself what my motives are—Am I seeking only to hurt, humiliate and demolish, or am I defending what I really believe in, trying to clarify things, attempting to set the record straight? Do I respect the other even as I disagree with her, even though I know (or I think I do) that she is wrong?

We need to be able to decide what is horizontal hostility and what is not. We need to exercise a great deal of care in sorting out behaviour which can justifiably be identified as oppressive, abusive or domineering, from that which cannot. The sorting out process requires self-knowledge, an ability to think problems through, and a certain degree of detachment from feelings like rage, humiliation and revenge. It also requires self-respect and respect for others. And it requires the rejection of violence, physical or verbal, as a way of redressing a perceived imbalance of power. The crucial task in this context is to develop ways of deciding when we are justified in perceiving other women as behaving oppressively and when we are not, and of sorting out the appropriate from the inappropriate methods of dealing with that behaviour. Above all, it involves identifying male supremacy as the main enemy, and recognising that the values and meanings of that social order are the status quo unless we are consciously committed to refusing them.

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