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Work in Progress

Women and Power

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Work in Progress

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About the Author

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Abstract

Our culture maintains the notion that women do not and should not have power. Yet women have exerted enormous powers in their traditional role of fostering the growth of others, and they have found that empowering others is a valuable and gratifying activity. Empowering other people, however, does not fit accepted conceptualizations and definitions of power. When women contemplate the use of power on their own behalf and for their own interests, many of them equate the prospect with destructiveness and selfishness--characteristics that they cannot reconcile with a sense of feminine identity. Moreover, they feel that the use of power may lead to abandonment, which threatens a central part of women's identity that affirms the need for relationships with other people. Women's views have not been taken into account in most studies of power, but they may contribute to emerging new concepts and future uses of power.

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In recent conversations people have told me stories that raise interesting questions:

For example, a woman came up to me after a meeting and told me that she was supervisor of a large number of sales workers. She asked, "Can you tell me what to do with these women?" Then she went on to say that her company has a big meeting once a month in which all the leading sales workers are recognized individually and asked to say a few words. In the past year or so, quite a few women have been among the sales people who are recognized. The women get up and say things like, "Well, I really don't know how it happened. I guess I was just lucky this time," or "This must have been a good month." By contrast, the men say, "Well, first I analyzed the national sales situation; I broke that down into regional components and figured out the trends in buying. Then I analyzed the consumer groups, and . . . I worked very hard—overtime three-fourths of the nights this month and . . ." The point is, of course, that the women were doing something like that too— or

something in their own style which was just as effective.

Another kind of example came my way when a woman was describing a project she initiated. She said as she starts to work, she thinks (and colleagues and friends have told her) this work might be genuinely significant and good. "Maybe I'm really onto something here," she tells herself. And immediately, almost in the same second, she says, "This is nothing," or "Everybody knows this anyhow."

Those two examples, I think, point to the question of women and power. In recent years there have emerged some writings about women and power, and some meetings to consider it from several viewpoints and disciplines. But if we are really going to build the kinds of institutions and personal lives that allow women to grow and flourish, I believe that we must invest much more conscious, concerted, direct attention to women and power. At the same time I believe that most of us women still have a great deal of trouble with the whole area. The only hope, it seems to me, is to keep trying to examine it together.

I am not implying that men *don't* have trouble with power (just look around the world!), but their troubles are different from those of women at this point in history. As with other major topics, I believe women's examination of power not only can illuminate issues which are important to ourselves, but also can bring new understanding to the whole concept of power. It can shed light on the traps and problems of men, perhaps illuminating those things most difficult for men themselves to discover.

I shall begin this initial consideration by reviewing some fairly common occurrences for women—analyzing them from a psychological perspective derived from clinical work.

Defining power

There have been many definitions of power, each reflecting the historical tradition out of which it comes; also, various disciplines of study have devised their own definitions.² An example given in one dictionary says power is "the faculty of doing or performing anything: force; strength; energy; ability; influence . . ." and then a long string of words leading to "dominion, authority, a ruler . . ." then more words culminating in "military force." I think the list reflects accurately the idea that most of us automatically have about power. We probably have linked the concept with the ability to augment one's own force, authority, or influence, and also to control and limit others—that is, to exercise dominion or to dominate.

My own working definition of power is *the capacity to produce a change—that is, to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B*. This can include even moving one's own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act. It also can include acting to create movement in an interpersonal field as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social, or political arenas.

Obviously, that broad definition has to be further differentiated. For example, one may be somewhat powerful psychologically or personally but

have virtually no legitimate socially granted power to determine one's own fate economically, socially, or politically. Also there's the question, "Power for what?" One may think in terms of gaining power for oneself, or one may seek influence for some general good or some collective entity.

Women's view of power

While more precise delineations are necessary, I think it is probably accurate to say that generally in our culture and in several others, we have maintained the myth that women do not and should not have power on any dimension. Further, we hold the notion that women do not need power. Usually, without openly talking about it, we women have been most comfortable using our powers if we believe we are using them in the service of others. Acting under those general beliefs, and typically not making any of this explicit, women have been effective in many ways. One instance is in women's traditional role, where they have used their powers to foster the growth of others—certainly children, but also many other people. This might be called using one's power to empower another—increasing the other's resources, capabilities, effectiveness, and ability to act. For example, in "caretaking" or "nurturing," one major component is acting and interacting to foster the growth of another on many levels—emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. I believe this is a very powerful thing to do, and women have been doing it all the time, but no one is accustomed to including such effective action within the notions of power. It's certainly not the kind of power we tend to think of; it involves a different content, mode of action, and goal. The one who exerts such power recognizes that she or he cannot possibly have total influence or control but has to find ways to interact with the other person's constantly changing forces or powers. And all must be done with appropriate timing, phasing, and shifting of skills so that one helps to advance the movement of the less powerful person in a positive, stronger direction.

As a result of this vast body of experience within the family as well as in the workplace and other organizations, I think most women would be most comfortable in a world in which we feel we are not limiting, but are enhancing the power of other people while simultaneously increasing our own power. Consider that statement more closely: The part about enhancing other people's power is difficult for the world to comprehend, for it is not how the "real world" has defined power. Nonetheless, I contend that women would function much more comfortably within such a context. The part about enhancing one's own powers is extremely difficult for women. When women even contemplate acting powerful, they fear the possibility of limiting or putting down another person. They also fear recognizing or admitting the need, and especially the desire, to increase their own powers.

Frankly, I think women are absolutely right to fear the use of power as it has been generally conceptualized and used. The very fact that this is often said to be a defensive or neurotic fear is, I believe, a more telling commentary on the state of our culture than it is on women. For example, in current

times one can read that women are not being strong enough or tough enough. Such statements overlook the incredible strengths that women have demonstrated all through history, and they usually refer to some comparison with men's operations in our institutions. I believe they tend to overlook a valid tendency in women—that is, the desire to enhance others' resources—and to know, from actual practice and real experience, that it is an extremely valuable and gratifying life activity. On the other side of the picture, however, such statements reflect part of a truth—that women do fear admitting that they want or need power. Yet without power or something like it (which may eventually be described by another term) on both the personal and political level, women cannot effectively bring about anything.

When women confront power

Now I'd like to focus on women's fears in confronting power, using individual examples which will further illustrate what may have been going on in the women I described briefly at the beginning of my remarks. I will highlight some women's inner, or intrapsychic, experiences.

Power and selfishness

Abby was a low-paid worker in the health field who sought therapy primarily because of her depression. She had spent much of her adult life enhancing her husband's and her two children's development—using her powers to increase their powers. She then started work and did an excellent job, largely because she approached her patients with the basic attitude of helping them to increase their own comfort and abilities and to use their own powers.

After much exploration, Abby recognized that she tended to become depressed not when things were clearly bad, but when she realized that she could *do* something more—for example, better understand and effectively act on a situation. She felt this especially when she wanted to act for herself. For example, she knew that she was actually better at some procedures than the doctors were—not just technically better, but *totally* better, for she helped patients to feel more relaxed, more in control, and more powerful. She began to feel that she should get to do more of the interesting work, get higher pay, recognition, etc. She also realized that almost at the same moment she felt this way she became blocked by fear, then selfcriticism and self-blame. This seemed to be a complex internal replica of the external conditions. The external conditions clearly blocked her advancement; she was a woman who worked in the lowest ranks of the health care hierarchy. But the internalized forces created even more complex bondage. Initially, for Abby, as for many women, there was the big fear of being seen as wanting to be powerful. This provoked notions of disapproval; but more than that, at a deeper level, evoked fears of attack and ultimate abandonment by all women and men.

Further exploration unearthed several more sticking points: One was that the prospect of acting on her own interest and motivation kept leading to the notion that she would be selfish. While she could not bear the thought

that others would see her as selfish, it was even more critical that she could not bear this conception of herself. I find this theme to be extraordinarily common in women—often women in surprisingly high positions and places—and, by contrast, a rare theme in men. With this theme for Abby there usually would come the notion that she was inadequate anyhow. She felt she should be grateful that anyone would put up with her at all, and she should best forget about the whole thing.

Eventually, this inadequacy theme gave way to yet another stage in which she felt that she indeed did have powers and could use them, but doing so meant, inescapably, that she was being destructive. For Abby, this stage was illustrated by thoughts, fantasies, and dreams indicating destructiveness.

Power and destructiveness

Another woman, Ellen, was at a different point in dealing with the same problem. She felt able to work and to think well so long as she worked on her ideas and plans in her own house. She could not bring them into the work setting. As she used to put it, ~If only I could bring my inside self outside." Eventually, she said that this fear seemed to stem from the experience that as she went into the outside world or to work, immediately she became attuned to the new context, readily picking up its structures and demands. She felt she couldn't help but respond to that context and those demands.

Again, this kind of feeling is common in women, and again it reflects a very valuable quality. Historically, a woman's being attuned to and responding to her context and to the needs of everybody in it has been part and parcel of helping other people to grow and helping a family to function. Women can bring a special set of abilities to many situations because they are able to attune themselves to the complex realities that are operating. (This perhaps is the essence of what mental health researchers have tried to describe in characterizing mothers' contributions to infant development.)³

But consider the other side: Ellen felt that she could not get her own perceptions, evaluations, and judgments moving from inside her to the outside, although she had important contributions to make. To bring her ideas and action into the outside context she had to overcome her ready tendency to be only responsive.

But that wasn't all. She felt to do so would disrupt the whole scene. In other words, she would be destructive—and that was not a way she felt she should operate.

In each person such a theme forges its specific expression from the individual's history, but the basic theme occurs regularly in many women: To act out of one's own interest and motivation is experienced as the psychic equivalent of being a destructively aggressive person. This is a self-image which few women can bear. In other words, for many women it is more comfortable to feel inadequate. Terrible as that can be, it is still better than to feel powerful, if power makes you feel destructive.

Let me emphasize this thesis: Any person can entertain the prospect of

using her or his own life forces and power—individually motivated, in a self-determined direction. In theories about mental health, this is said to bring satisfaction and effectiveness. But for many women it is perceived as the equivalent of being destructive. On the one hand this sets up a life-destroying, controlling psychological condition. On the other hand it makes sense if one sees that women have lived as subordinates, and, as subordinates, have been led by the culture to believe that their own, self-determined action is wrong and evil. Many women have incorporated deeply the inner notion that such action must be destructive. The fact that women have survived at all, I believe, is explained by the fact that women do use power all the time but generally must see it as used for the benefits of others.

Don't misunderstand me: Using one's abilities and powers for others is not bad by any means. It does become problematic for women and for men, however, when such activity is prescribed for one sex only, along with the mandate that one must not act on one's own motivation and according to one's own determinations. In most institutions it is still true that if women do act from their own perceptions and motivations, directly and honestly, they indeed may be disrupting a context which has not been built out of women's experience. Thus, one is confronted with feeling like one must do something very powerful that also feels destructive.

Power and abandonment

Another woman, Connie, illustrated this dramatically: She had difficulty finishing her work. But she discovered that she would become "blocked" not when she was really stuck, but when she was working well, streaming ahead, getting her thoughts in order, and making something happen. At those times she would get up from her desk, start walking around, become involved in some diversion, talk to someone, and generally get off the productive trajectory. Further exploration of why this happened led eventually to her saying that if she let herself go on when she was working well, "I'd be too powerful and then where would I be . . . I wouldn't need anyone else." For Connie, the prospect was that she would be out in some scary place. She said she would feel like some unrecognizable creature, some non-woman. She spoke of the prospect as if it signified the loss of a central sense of identity. Her sense of identity, like that of so many women, was so bound up with being a person who *needs* that the prospect of *not needing* felt like, first of all, a loss of the known and familiar self.

On the one hand, it was an unnecessary fear. On the other hand, Connie touched on a sense that is present in many women—namely, that the use of our powers with some efficacy and, even worse, with freedom, zest, and joy, feels as if it will destroy a core sense of identity. One feature of that identity, as reflected by Connie's statement, demonstrates how deeply women have incorporated the notion, "I exist only as I need." Again, I think women are reflecting a truth which men have been encouraged to deny—that is, all of us exist only as we need others for that existence—but cultural conditions have led women to incorporate this in an extreme form. Along with it we women

have incorporated the troubling notion that, as much as we need others, we also have powers and the motivation to use those powers, but, if we use them, we will destroy the relationships we need for our existence.

The troublesome equations

With these examples I have outlined some of the inner experiences women have related to me as they confronted the issue of power. They include:

A woman's using self-determined power for herself is equivalent to *selfishness*, for she is not enhancing the power of others.

A woman's using self-determined power for herself is equivalent to *destructiveness*, for such power inevitably will be excessive and will totally disrupt an entire surrounding context.

The equation of power with destructiveness and selfishness seems impossible to reconcile with a sense of feminine identity.

A woman's use of power may precipitate attack and *abandonment*; consequently, a woman's use of power threatens a central part of her identity, which is a feeling that she needs others.

It is important to emphasize again the many sides of all of this: On the one hand, most women are keenly aware of an essential truth that we all need others, need to live in the framework of relationships, and also need to increase the powers of others through our activities. On the other hand, most women have been encouraged to experience these needs as a predominant, central, almost total definition of their personalities. And their experience tells them that change can occur only at the cost of destroying one's place in the world and one's chance for living within a context of relationships. I believe this reflects accurately the historic and cultural place, and the definition, of women.

The challenges ahead

The examples I have cited not only tell about individual neuroses but also reflect characteristics of many women. Right now I think it is important for women to recognize that we do need to use our powers. Many times, I think, women have done things which eventually proved to be destructive, often without being fully aware, because we actually felt so much pain and reluctance even to think about the topic.

Also, we need to help each other in several important ways: First, we can give sympathetic understanding to ourselves if we recognize the weight of the historic conditions which have made power such a difficult concept for most of us. Second, we can consider seriously the proposition that there is enormous validity in women's not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used. Rather, women may want to be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than diminish, the power of others. This is a radical turn—a very different motivation than the concept of power upon which this world has operated.

Out of this, we can see that women already may have a strong

motivation to approach the concept of power with a different, critical, and creative stance. Once admitting a desire and a need for power, women can seek new ways of negotiating power with others in personal life, work, and other institutions.

Certainly this is a large and difficult prospect. It can appear naive or unreal even to talk this way. But the fact that it sounds unreal must not stop us! Once we recognize the undeniable truth that the world has been explained so far without the close observation of women's experience, it is easier to consider that seemingly "unreal" possibilities can become real.

Bear in mind these truths that have not been taken into account: ~1 Women's experience is usually not what it has been said to be. It is not men's experience. It does not necessarily operate on the same bases, same motivations, or the same organization of personality. Cl What we find when we study women are parts of the total human potential that have not been fully seen, recognized, or valued. These are parts that have not therefore flourished, and perhaps they are precisely the ingredients that we must bring into action in the conduct of all human affairs. r~ Certainly these emerging notions must be used for the benefit of women, which is reason enough to pursue them, but they must be used also for the ultimate benefit of everyone.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held so that students and visitors can exchange ideas with each other and with the speaker. Questions, responses, and highlights of the discussion are selected, summarized, edited, and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker's ideas. In this session Dr. Alexandra Kaplan and Dr. Janet Surrey of the Stone Center joined Dr. Miller in leading the discussion.

Question: In my experience, as my sense of self increases, so does my comfort with personal power. I wonder if you would comment on the concept of the sense of self as it relates to being comfortable with power. After all, since half of the population is male and supposedly comfortable with power, do they have a stronger sense of self than women?

Dr. Kaplan: As "sense of self," or self esteem, is usually studied, measures are made of qualities that are essentially masculine roots to self-esteem—for example, various forms of power such as influence over others, control of oneself, mastery, etc. Those studies show that men have higher self-esteem than women, but we must be cautious about what that means.

Question: Sometimes when I'm acting powerful, I think I'm acting like my oldest brother. It seems to me that a woman can exert power by acting like a man.

Dr. Miller: Sometimes that's true, but not always, and that brings up another complication: Sometimes women in administrative positions do not act like men, but their style, while different, is as effective. Yet when they try to take into account others' feelings and try to act in a more collaborative or more understanding mode, some people who cannot accurately perceive or appraise this new mode of action then describe them as ineffective. Some who are very effective and valuable are seen as not being effective or powerful, when judged by standards set by and for men.

Question: Women are more likely to need other people, or to feel needed—and that is what is expected of us in the female role. Do you believe that traditional sex roles have inhibited women's development of self?

Dr. Miller: Yes, but I don't see it as a deficiency. I believe that women's sense of self develops out of being a person in a relationship, and men's sense of self has suffered from *not* feeling that way. The sense of self as it has been defined for men—and therefore has become the standard that everyone "should" have—warrants reexamination.

Question: Could you enlarge on what you mean by *destructiveness*? If you feel you can destroy, don't you at the same time feel very powerful?

Dr. Miller: Women commonly express the notion that if they exert power, it will hurt or destroy someone. Remember that most of my conclusions come from clinical work, and the "destructiveness" idea typically is made explicit only after a lot of exploration. It usually is said in something like, "My husband won't be able to take it." Maybe the idea is realistic, maybe not; but the notion is persistent.

Dr. Surrey: The destructiveness may also be experienced as breaking a relationship and, consequently, breaking that inner sense of self that is

connected to the relationship.

Question: When you talked about power and destructiveness, you said that by becoming powerful or acting in a positive, powerful way, we fear that we may isolate ourselves. With isolation comes loneliness, then a total dependence upon ourselves, separate from others. When you're sitting there lonely, you can regress and become submissive again, or you can continue to go ahead. How do you resolve that?

Dr. Miller: Certainly there's a fear that we will isolate ourselves. While that shouldn't be so, it is important to note that in many contexts, when a woman acts powerful, the external conditions may really make that come about. Basically, I don't think women are afraid of being responsible for themselves, but I think they have a legitimate fear of being alone and isolated. Nobody can really do it alone; we all need to be in relationships. To the extent that women's power threatens their being in contact with others, that's a very bad but real condition in the world.

Question: Maybe that fear of power involves a fear of disrupting the status quo, thus causing others who are important to have to cope with the change. Something about that seems very threatening to women. I think about what you wrote in your book— how sometimes women absorb a lot of what their spouse or partner is coping with. Do you think that's connected to fearing power?

Dr. Miller: Indeed it's connected. The more one acts in a different or new way, or a more effective or powerful way, it is bound to disrupt the normative pattern. Since women have traditionally done so much of the taking care of everybody and especially not disrupting anyone—it is a difficult thing for them to do. It really demands a new kind of response from other people, and that can be a fearsome prospect. If one is not sure how the reaction is going to go, it's quite a risk.

Question: Is fear of isolation through power inherent in women of all cultures? Or does it have something to do with the stereotypes in movies (where as soon as a woman becomes powerful, her man may leave her)?

Dr. Miller: In most of this discussion we are talking about white culture in the United States. There are variations in kinds of power or effectiveness that have developed in traditions of other cultures. Within our own society, women in some of our minority groups can use power in ways that are different from and more effective than the methods of white women. Nonetheless, I do think the threat that many women feel is that if they are openly powerful or effective, they will end up alone. And there's more to it: Why would a woman need power in the first place? If you were loved, you'd be protected and taken care of; you wouldn't need power. So, by definition, if you need power, you're unlovable. That's a theme.

Question: Do you think that the equation of power with destructiveness is more common among women? Or that feeling destructive is more unacceptable to women than to men?

Dr. Miller: First of all, the equation is more common in women than in men. Men don't seem to think that to be powerful is to be destructive. In

contrast, they seem to develop the assumption that it's okay to be powerful, and the more powerful you can be, the better. Secondly, I think it is more acceptable for men to be destructive.

Question: I think that men know that they can beat someone without destroying them. On the playground they learn competitive camaraderie, where beating someone does not destroy a relationship.

Dr. Kaplan: As they are socialized through play, boys learn about the limits and stages of power—that you can use a little power and it's not totally destructive. Girls don't have as many chances to test and try the nuances of power.

Question: How can we begin to help women feel comfortable with power? How can I help my daughter to feel that it is okay and valuable to use power?

Dr. Surrey: A subtle issue is that sometimes we don't even see ways to be powerful or to change our lives. We tend to accept a certain way of doing things or a certain way of being. Yet watching someone else, or talking with someone else, or just reflecting on a problem leads to new ideas that might involve change. Just recognizing that it's not necessary to feel unhappy and that it is possible to change something for one's own benefit is a first step.

Dr. Kaplan: Part of the dilemma involves changing what we do, but a lot of it calls for doing exactly what we are doing now, but giving ourselves credit and permitting that to become a positive part of our self-image!

Dr. Miller: The first step is indeed being together and talking together, clarifying and checking out with each other, and giving support as much as we can; then comes action for ourselves and our children. I think we cannot expect to do everything tomorrow when we realize how deeply conditioned most of this is, and how many subtle ways one can discourage a girl and encourage a boy to exert power. I hope that some things happening today are having an effect. Probably some of the younger women don't feel the things I talked about. There are already changes—for example, encouragement for girls to actively use their bodies in sports; the sense of physical power is an important contributor to overall power. Still we must recognize that for young women to go out and be powerful in most of our institutions is going to make trouble in the near future. Their power will not be easily or readily rewarded—not even accepted.

Question: Earlier you made a distinction between covert and overt power, and I think this is crucial. I don't think it would be so hard for women to change just to take on power. The problem is that it also means giving up power—an intense covert power. While little girls don't get to play sports on the field, they get to shop in fancy stores and look pretty; it's a different hierarchy of power. And the woman who is afraid to go out and seek leadership for herself gets intense gratification from her husband's position as the corporate executive. She shines in that derived power, and it is hard to give up.

Dr. Miller: I agree. Women have had no legitimate roots to overt power, but some women have developed a whole system of indirect power.

We should "give it its due." It takes a lot of skill to develop the system well, and it can feel very threatening to give that up, especially when the external work world is not welcoming your having or using direct power and when you are confused about whether it's right.

Question: Since these forces are so insistent in women, I wonder if you postulate some early psychological "crucible of fire" that molds women to follow such a developmental line?

Dr. Miller: More and more I appreciate and see the tremendous weight of the whole historical and cultural tradition. As we view the forces of power, arranged as they are in the world, I understand why certain kinds of psychological constructions are built up over time. Children start getting the messages very early, and then they are reinforced in many ways. I don't think the phenomenon is built on an intense moment or "crucible" at one stage in life. I think it goes on continuously, transformed and elaborated at each stage, so that the concepts grow into powerful forces that are fiercely resistant to change.

Question: I think women often equate change with loss, and women making change fear that they may lose a lot. Somehow we need to develop a way of making change without personal loss and disruption.

Question: Why assume that we must do this on our own? Such an idea makes me angry. Is it not a reciprocal thing? Women are not the only ones who have to change!

Dr. Miller: I sympathize with your being angry, but no group in power has ever (as a group) initiated change to voluntarily relinquish that position of prominence. One does not look to the oppressor to change the conditions. We who feel hurt or wronged must bring about change, and men of vision will become our allies.

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