A Psychological Retrospective on Power in the Contemporary Lesbian-Feminist Community

Sherry McCoy and Maureen Hicks

This essay represents preliminary explorations on the history of power within the Los Angeles lesbian-feminist community from a psychological point of view. In our interviews with sixteen Los Angeles lesbian-feminists, what began as an attempt to gather current descriptive data about our community evolved into a series of animated discussions of what the community had been and much speculation as to why it had changed. The questions "what happened?" and "why?" began to surface for us as the major critical focus.

Because many of the community issues which have arisen in Los Angeles have been similar to those recounted in feminist publications around the country, we imagine that the interpersonal struggles may also have been similar. We hope that this analysis will aid women in other communities in understanding difficulties in communication, power struggles, and community blow-ups that they, too, may have experienced. It is important to understand these problems not as our personal and unique failings, but as the result of the systematic oppression from which all women suffer in sexist society. This stress on each individual woman is made manifold when she relates to others in the community, all of whom are similarly oppressed.

The lesbian-feminist community of Los Angeles is geographically diffuse, though most highly concentrated in the two areas of Echo Park-Silverlake and Venice. A definition of its boundaries comes from the politics espoused by the women who see themselves as members. Since this is a community defined by consciousness, the historical development of its philosophy is important in understanding those who do and who do not identify as members of this community. Remember that the "second wave" of this century's feminist movement followed on the heels of, and in some ways grew out of, the civil

---

Sherry McCoy grew up in Kansas with naivete, tornados, and several dogs—none of which were named Toto. Later, after spending several years of her early adult life in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, pursuing an identity and a niche, she moved to Los Angeles where she found some of both in lesbian-feminism and the "community." She has been actively involved in both the Women's Studies Program and the Women's Resource Center at UCLA. Currently, she is pursuing her Ph.D. in social-clinical psychology at the Wright Institute, Los Angeles, and is working with battered women and their families in developing more positively based relationships at Ocean Park Community Center and Sojourn Shelter. McCoy lives in a lesbian household in Santa Monica with her cat, where she shares a life of much humor, love, and affection.

Maureen Hicks, a native of Los Angeles, began to discover the Los Angeles lesbian-feminist community in 1971, at about the time it was discovering itself. She was on the staff of the Westside Women's Center and a member of the Radical Feminist Therapy Collective during the years 1974-76. She worked with a collective of lesbian carpenters for the next two years and now has returned to school at the Wright Institute, Los Angeles, where she is working towards a doctorate in social-clinical psychology. She writes, "Collectivity requires an intensity of purpose and a capacity for sharing that few of us can muster, especially not all of us at the same time. We need a new model for feminist organizations." Hicks, her lover, and their daughter currently live in Venice where they study karate together.

FRONTIERS Vol. IV, No. 3

rights and peace movements of the sixties, and that young women who were adolescents during JFK's presidency and came to maturity during the Vietnam War formed women's liberation groups all around the country. Many of these, whose commitment to women included forming sexual relationships with them, subsequently came to identify themselves as "lesbian-feminists." Because the meaning of this term varies with the user, the definition below represents a composite of the views of the authors and of those women who were interviewed.

The lesbian-feminist belief system is a world view or schema through which to organize and make sense out of a brutal and chaotic world where women are consistently abused and destroyed by the values of the worldwide patriarchal superculture. Lesbian-feminists see sexism and heterosexism as being hopelessly intertwined, and the oppression of women and lesbians as the prototype for all other oppressions, since the oppression of women and of lesbians crosses boundaries of race, class, and age. Radicalesbians stated in 1970, "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."[1]

A lesbian-feminist sees herself as actualizing the logical extension and conclusions of feminist politics; that is, she is placing women first in *every* aspect of her life, in contrast to patriarchy's secondary placement of women throughout all cultures. The lesbian-feminist perceives herself as a woman who realizes the political nature of her choice to commit herself to sexual and emotional relationships with women and to live and bond with them in her life. Lesbian-feminists commit themselves to developing nonoppressive ways of living and functioning in the world. They hold a strong belief in cooperation and strive toward role-free, loving relationships placing great emphasis on "process" within the community and within lesbian friendships and love relationships. This reflects a belief in sharing and distributing power fairly among all.[2]

A lesbian community is a community first of women and second of persons whose sexual practices are condemned by the dominant society. None of us escapes unscathed from the dual oppression of having our sex and our sexuality derogated by every major societal institution and cultural form. Communities of oppressed people are typically torn from within by the anger and pain that seek an outlet in the closest targets—their own members. Thus, the fact that the contemporary lesbian community has frequently taken on the aspect of a battleground is not particularly surprising. What is disturbing, however, is how the sometimes visionary politics of feminism have contributed to our making unrealistic demands on each other, which have often resulted in disappointment. The concept of "sisterhood" at times seemed to evaporate as we watched.

A painful example of this feminist split centered around the incorporation of leftist ideology and philosophy into the Los Angeles lesbian-feminist community. On the one hand, leftist politics provided the community with the opportunities to expand its consciousness with respect to issues of class, and to work from a stronger and broader base for political analysis. On the other hand, sensitivity and process were often lost when political concepts were taken to the extreme of idealism. Though the terms "radical" and "liberal" can be used thoughtfully to describe qualitatively different approaches to political issues, they frequently were used instead as insulting epithets. Those who came to narrowly define a lesbian-feminist mode in terms of "acceptable" lifestyle, dress, thought, and behavior, or those who drew sharp political lines in their world view, came to be known as "radicals"; those who drew softer, less sharply defined lines in shaping and developing lesbian-feminist politics were identified with labels of denigration such as "liberal" or "bourgeois." An atmosphere of fear began to permeate the community, a fear of being "trashed" for not being "politically correct." Being outcast from the community was a very painful price to pay by those unfortunates labeled "liberal" or "politically incorrect," and it became a political and personal tragedy that affected far too many lives.[3]

This scenario of alienation, disillusionment, and distrust within the community at-large, in the opinion of our informants, left a residue of distrust that still prevails within the community. It contributes to a hesitancy to form coalitions unless some major attack is waged against the community. Rigidity with respect to philosophy and ideology along with a pressure to conform have contributed to a sense of alienation within the Los Angeles lesbian-feminist community.

Although we as feminists are acutely sensitive to the ways in which women are oppressed in society, we have given too little thought to how the internalization of that oppression interferes in our personal and political relations with one another. Because as lesbians we are denied the conventional affiliations of family, marriage, temple, church, or social club —unless we choose to conceal our private lives from disapproving heterosexuals—we have a need to create alternative social support systems. The emergence of the "lesbian-feminist community" which grew out of the women's liberation movement seemed to offer a solution to this problem. In the context of political meetings, women could meet like-minded women and form relationships. Thus, political organizations came to serve numerous social functions in addition to their stated purposes. Political affinity bred friendship networks, which in turn bred political rigidity, since friends can pressure each other into consensus through means other than political persuasion.

To many women, the community became an entity with a life of its own. As such it held the power to pass judgment and, as a new-found home for the homeless, it took on a mighty significance. Women who had been struggling with their sexual and per-

sonal identity found that "lesbian" and "dyke" were positively valued identities within this new community, and they joined in giving each other support. Though this support was invaluable, we have learned since that it is not enough to sustain one through hard times. Rather, a genuine sense of personal identity needs to develop out of the confrontation with one's human condition and its underlying solitude.

In order to deal adequately with problems of personal identity as lesbians, we need to work with both our unique life experience with sex-role stereotyping along with the commonly shared female experience of alienation. Traditionally, women have been denied access to "legitimate" (male) power and authority. The process of excluding females from learning about power and its utilization begins in infancy and is carried out through childhood and adolescent socialization by the patriarchal, heterosexual family and its institutions. When women reach adulthood, they often have little sense of how to go about obtaining direct personal power, let alone what to do with it even if they had it. This societally enforced deprivation of knowledge with respect to power runs so deep in most of us that we are often left bewildered in our search for a sense of wholeness and of control over our lives. Ironically, when we finally summon up the courage to step forward to take personal power, we often become our own worst enemies. It is our belief that the lesbian-feminist community, even though composed of radical women who are committed to a struggle toward consciousness and revolution, is no exception.

Many women who have entered the Los Angeles lesbian-feminist community over the last ten years of its development have brought with them a gamut of frustrated psychological needs incurred through years of oppression. It seems little wonder that many lesbians in despair look toward "the community" for magical fulfillment of expectations, dreams, and hopes which have previously been thwarted by patriarchal culture. One such magical expectation is that the community will be a haven or a utopia free of conflict and contradiction, with the capacity to perform miracles—a panacea for the problems of living. This notion clearly reflects a kind of wishful fantasy as opposed to rational awareness that has been systematically fostered by female socialization. Because women have not experienced firsthand the aggregation and utilization of power, we have been left to devise our own concepts of what power is, what it should be, and how it functions. Conceptualizing the community as a bastion of omnipotence reflects the immaturity of our experience with respect to power. As is the case with other downtrodden groups, fantasy becomes a compelling replacement for the brutality of reality.

This tendency of lesbian-feminists to infuse the community with omnipotence can perhaps be better understood by analogically examining mother-infant psychodynamics in human psychological birth and development. Motherhood, though a powerful role, is not truly legitimated as such in patriarchy; rather, it is offered to us as the only legitimate road to "femininity," which by patriarchal definition and turnabout becomes the epitome of powerlessness. In reality, however, since mothers throughout the world have often had nearly absolute responsibility for the raising of infants and children, they do indeed have tremendous power over the lives of their children.

In the early years of our lives we are completely dependent upon mothers for our emotional, physical, and spiritual survival. During this time, mothers appear to us as creatures of overwhelming omnipotence. This is a time when we make no differentiation between the self and other, that is, we are in symbolic "symbiosis" with the mother; we see the mother as the extension of self. Only later when infants become toddlers does awareness of mother as a "separate" and "different" person begin to take conscious form.[4] Awareness that mother and self are inexorably and forever separate and different does not come without great psychological stress. Similarly, infant realization that neither mother nor self is omnipotent brings great sadness and rage; the perfect dream has been shattered by the limitations of the human condition.

Consider for a moment the possible analogy between such a developmental process and the historical evolution of the lesbian-feminist community, as we relate it in story form:

> In the early days of lesbian-feminism, many women looked upon the community as an all-powerful mother who could provide emotional, physical, and spiritual security. Our new and reborn egos were in symbolic symbiosis with that of the community, and vice versa. As long as we vowed homage to the beliefs and values officially espoused by the community as a whole, we were able to experience a common magical union. This feeling of symbiosis was necessary and provided philosophical and ideologial glue for a community foundation, as well as nurturance for a fledgling collective identity.
>
> Later on, difficulties began to emerge as certain community members began to voice dissatisfaction and disappointment with broken promises and dreams. It seemed they felt let down by the community. They were concerned that the sense of power they had once known in the community was beginning to disperse and fade. Additionally, there were others who began verbalizing new and even controversial ideas with respect to what had been deemed "politically correct" by the community. These women were often labeled "politically incorrect" for separating and individuating from collective ideology and philosophy.

In this mythical light then, we see that the community has functioned as a nurturing parent, a critical parent, a friend in need, and an exclusive soror-

ity. Our fondest hopes, our worst fears, all have been projected into our individual fantasies of what "the community" really was. But in time a more difficult task was revealed and laid out before us: the struggle for a stronger, more realistic and workable view of power within lesbian-feminism, one that permits both the individual lesbian-feminist and the community to maintain separateness and individuality while at the same time remaining cooperative as allies. Some of the questions we now face include: a) how do we as a community of lesbian-feminists survive the community's transformation from "symbiosis" to "separation-individuation"? b) how do we simultaneously strike a balance between the need to be autonomous as individuals and political affinity groups, and the need to remain intimate as a community without sacrificing one need for the other? c) how does the community live with differences in a way that is not destructive to individual lesbian-feminists or to a sense of community?

Among the important problems that we need to confront is the use and abuse of personal power within women's organizations. Feminist organizational ideology has eschewed traditional hierarchical structures, preferring the sense of equality engendered by circular, collective structures. Although Joreen warned against the "tyranny of structurelessness" as early as 1972,[5] our organizations have frequently suffered from the passive-aggressive fighting spawned by the presence of covert, unexamined power structures which, though not formalized, are often as rigid and inaccessible as the oppressive traditional hierarchies. When these power dynamics have been illuminated, our response is too often to look for someone to blame, rather than to deal with the inevitability of unequal power. An ethic which has been accepted in many feminist groups says, "If woman A exerts power in a way that causes woman B to feel less powerful, A shall have committed an error." This leaves very little room for the exercise of power or leadership, because one must be constantly on guard lest efforts at giving direction and offering suggestions be seen as the usurpation of a less vocal woman's power. When battle lines are drawn, A is called intimidating, bossy, a power-monger. She is accused of being guilty of dominating others and steamrollering her own ideas. Whether or not this is true, A's friends will probably say of B's friends, "What is the matter with those women, anyway? Why don't they *take their power?*"

What is not understood is that the decision to take and use power in a group is not purely volitional—one must have the psychological ability. Our personal histories result in our having varying inhibitions and permission to feel powerful. Changing our attitudes toward ourselves as powerful beings can require painful re-examination of those early life situations where we saw ourselves as powerless. We may have to experience the repressed rage towards those who taught us to oppress ourselves, a process that can be long and difficult, but which is necessary if we are to reclaim the power and sense of self that we lost.

"Struggling to equalize power" in a group is a worthy endeavor, but if it is not supported by women's individual struggles to rediscover their own power, it is doomed to become a situation where less powerful women feel frustrated—a situation in which women vent their stored-up feelings of powerlessness on other women undeserving of this rage. Upon closer examination, equalizing power may not be an appropriate goal in every group. An automatic insistence on "nonhierarchical" structures may be an overreaction to our experience with oppressive, institutionalized power imbalances. Real differences in competence, responsibility, and commitment demand acknowledgment, and this may take the form of delegating greater authority to those members of a group who are prepared to accept it.

Our power structures need to be judged by whether or not they enhance individuals' ability to achieve their own potential, not on whether at a given moment some women are given greater authority. The latter will be true *whether or not it is structured;* the former will be true only if we commit ourselves to democratic organizational principles.

Given our analysis of some of the problematic group dynamics, we suggest the following preliminary goals:

1) Recognition that we all have significant difficulties with speaking and hearing anger, being strong and assertive, with seeking or avoiding authority figures, and with assuming authority ourselves.

2) A new round of consciousness-raising and study groups devoted to the exploration of women's alienation from their own sense of personal power. Veterans of "leaderless" groups need to analyze women's avoidance of confronting power issues.

3) Training groups to provide women with the opportunity to confront their conscious and unconscious fears of assuming powerful positions, and their rage towards authority figures of their experience.

4) Further development of feminist theory regarding how we conduct ourselves in workplaces, community organizations, and political networks, paying attention to how the phrase "nonhierarchical" has worked to limit both the scope of our endeavors and the breadth of individual women's contributions to the movement. Though the circle is a powerful symbol, and one from which we draw great strength, we must take care that our ideology does not trap us in a two-dimensional closed figure, but rather leads us to an ever-spiraling and liberating view of reality.

If the community is to survive, we must look hard at what we need and want from our community. For example, is political clout in our locality what we are after? Or is it being supportive of each other's antipatriarchal view of reality? Will our focus be on pooling resources to "take care of our own" (providing jobs, child care, social functions, counseling,

education)? Do we see ourselves as an enclave of alternative culture? Are we ready to receive refugees from the mainstream? Do we communicate with or attempt to influence the mainstream? If and when we do come together again as a community, we will need to develop more rational bases for unity and growth, as well as a clearer understanding of the need for balance between personal and collective power.

NOTES

1. Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York: Quadrangle, 1973). See this article for further expansion of lesbian-feminist politics.

2. For a more detailed description of the politics and lifestyle of a similar lesbian community in the San Francisco Bay area, see Deborah Goleman Wolf, *The Lesbian Community* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979).

3. See Leah Fritz, *Dreamers and Dealers: An Intimate Appraisal of the Women's Movement* (Boston: Beacon, 1979) for her critical appraisal of the effect of "new left" politics on the women's movement.

4. Margaret Mahler et al., *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

5. Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York: Quadrangle, 1973).