

From:

**Feminist Foremothers
in Women's Studies,
Psychology,
and Mental Health**

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“Weak Ego Boundaries”: One Developing Feminist’s Story

Paula J. Caplan

Why this title? Because it refers to a key event in my development as a feminist and psychologist, and because it raises a theme that I keep running into as feminist psychology develops and deepens. It comes from my first year of graduate school, from an experience which, when it happened to me, I thought had only ever happened to me, regarded as my fault, and could subject to no feminist analysis until years later. I tell this story not just because it happened to me but because I know that such appalling things still happen to women, and at my age (48) I don’t feel inclined to guard the dirty little secrets of the men who mistreated me. Obviously, I hope that hearing about my experience will reduce the isolation and self-blame of those who have had similar ones.

When I graduated from Radcliffe/Harvard in 1969 and started the doctoral program in clinical psychology at Duke, I had been deeply

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113

affected by the police bust of my undergraduate classmates' occupation of Harvard's University Hall the previous spring. I had opposed the Vietnam War before that, but the bust had jolted me into awareness of such issues as wealthy property owners' treatment of their tenants and the need for an Afro-American Studies program. My awareness of and interest in feminism, however, were still to come. Even so, during that first year of graduate school, I arranged to do an independent study about sex-differences research (remember that in 1969-70, that was considered unusual). In a course about theories of psychotherapy that year, when the time came to choose a term paper topic, I decided that I would take the bits and pieces that Freud and the other "great men" of psychotherapy had written about women, stick them together, and see what that could help us understand about women. I don't recall feeling angry that so little had been said about women except to pathologize us, but I do remember feeling a bit wistful, longing for someone to write about our lives. I had no idea that anyone else felt that way and certainly no clue that feminist critiques of personality theory and therapy were about to surge forth on a massive scale. Recently, I reread my paper, and it is very mild, but when the professor, Marty Lakin, returned it to me, he had scrawled on the front, "How many times in this century is Freud to be attacked for his views on women?" Several pages into the paper, you can still see his pen's indentation from what was apparently the intensity of feeling with which he wrote that comment.

Lakin's response astonished me, but I had no time to try to understand it, because I was kicked out of the clinical program that April. I could stay in the Psychology *department* and take courses in theory and research but couldn't go near the clinical program and work with people, they said. The reason they gave was that I had weak ego boundaries. The first time I ever recounted that publicly was in the Popular Feminism Lecture series at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1986, and when I did, the audience of women laughed. I then said that in 1970 I would not have dreamed I would ever tell that story and hear my listeners laugh, because in 1970 I was devastated. Having been what a Harvard psychologist had described as a Kellogg's Cornflakes, All-American-type girl in high school and much of college, and having profound respect for

teachers, I assumed that my Duke instructors must be right and decided I had better strengthen those ego boundaries. First, though, I had to find out what in the world "weak ego boundaries" meant. I went to see most of the eleven clinical psychology faculty, all of whom were white men, and nine said they didn't know me very well and had relied on the judgment of my two primary instructors. So, I went to see them. One of them, John Coie, was my advisor. I was terrified but walked into his office, slammed his door, and said, "Didn't I come to you back in November and say I was getting funny feelings about how the faculty felt about me? And you said to me, 'That's just first-year, graduate student paranoia.' Well, what the hell happened between then and now?" He replied that my weak ego boundaries had led them to kick me out. When I asked what that meant, he said, "We have the sense that if a depressed patient came to see you, you would probably say, 'Oh, you poor dear' and leave it at that." I asked why on earth they would assume that, when in the interviewing course, he and the co-instructor Phil Costanzo had told me my interviews were good. "Oh," he replied, "that was because we knew you were not able to take criticism." Then I said, "Wait a minute. Do you remember after my interviews, when you said they were good, and I thanked you but said I'd like suggestions about how to improve next time, and you said, 'We don't have any suggestions; you were really good.'" He replied, "You see, we sensed even then that you were not able to take criticism."

I raced back to my apartment and phoned Bruce Baker, the only clinical psychologist with whom I had studied at Harvard, and said, "Bruce, you gotta tell me straight. Did you find you had to be careful about criticizing me?" He said, "No, it's quite the opposite." I had great respect for Bruce's judgment and began to wonder whether maybe, just maybe, the problem was not in me.

Still believing that I needed to work on myself, I went to see Marty Lakin, because he taught the Group Process course. I told him that I needed his permission to take that course the upcoming year. He asked why I wanted to take it, and I said that I had heard that one learned there to see oneself as others see one. I pointed out that my view of myself seemed to differ considerably from that of the faculty, and so I felt it was important for me to try to understand how I came across to others. He responded that he couldn't let me

take the course. "Why not?" I asked. "Because you would destroy the group," he said. Quite a shocking thing for a Kellogg's Cornflakes type to hear. I went to the Veteran's Administration Hospital across the way to ask Arnold Krugman, a psychologist with an appointment in the Duke department, if I could study with one of the hospital therapists. To my amazement, Krugman—with whom I had had no previous contact—said, "I know what you've called me. I know that you've called me a fascist pig." At that time, I had never called anyone a fascist pig. To call this series of events Kafkaesque would not be inappropriate, I think.

Working with Marcel Kinsbourne in the Duke Hospital Learning Clinic, I learned a great deal and managed to finish my Master's thesis, and then I actually got my Ph.D. from Duke through working with the social psychologists. My degrees were in Psychology, mind you, not Clinical Psychology, but I had had a great deal of clinical experience through my work with Marcel. After doing a one-year internship through the delightfully more sane University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I was set to qualify for my official psychologist's registration after some supervised work in Toronto later on. But it took some years of reading DeBeauvoir and Friedan and Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* and after receiving the wonderful support of Toronto feminists like Kathryn Morgan and Jeri Wine, not to mention my parents, Tac and Jerry Caplan, before I finally made some sense of my expulsion from the Duke program. I came to understand that Coie's remark about my allegedly weak ego boundaries reflected the all-male faculty's discomfort with a woman who was expressive rather than detached and formal, as they thought therapists should be. It further reflected, I believe, the traditional tendency of men to feel that expression of feelings is immature and inappropriate in a wide variety of contexts. Thanks to thinkers like Rachel Josefowitz Siegel, Janet Surrey, Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Alexandra Kaplan, Irene Stiver, and Carol Gilligan, hordes of us have now learned that what others call women's "dependency," "neediness," and "overemotionality"—and "weak ego boundaries"—are often instead our capacities for interdependence, connection, relationships, and a life rich with emotions. Understood in this way, I believe that what the Duke clinical psychology faculty called my "weak ego boundaries" were the inter-

est in and relishing of human connections that led to much of my feminist work.

Reading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, I was deeply moved by the awful tragedy of the isolation of the unhappy housewives, each of whom thought she was the only crazily "selfish" stay-at-home Mom who didn't find fulfillment in furniture polish and novel ideas for hors d'oeuvres. The theme of breaking down isolation and finding commonalities among people who believe they are different and who feel powerless, with the aim of empowering them to make political and social change, is dear to my heart. A second theme that I have found deeply absorbing, as well as useful in figuring things out, has been that of myths and Catch-22s. Usually, when I find myself perplexed by an issue, it is because myths are clouding my view. Then, conversely, naming and exploring the nature of those myths leads to clearer vision and often to empowerment: If you can see what is happening, it is easier to change it for the better.

For many years, every time a relationship I was in was ending, I wrote something. For instance, when my first, brief marriage ended, it was my Master's thesis, and when my second marriage ended, I wrote *Between Women: Lowering the Barriers* (1980). As I write this article, it occurs to me that, in part, my writing at those times has been a way to deal with the loneliness, loss, and increased isolation by imagining connecting with people who might later read what I wrote.

Between Women came to be because I had audited University of Toronto philosopher Ronnie deSousa's course on "Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," and in rereading Freud was struck both by the fact that Freud dignified mother-daughter relationships by at least trying to understand them and by how far afield he went in making that attempt. "His writing about women just doesn't ring true, somehow," I remember saying. As a feminist, I was particularly interested in identifying socially caused barriers between women, so that we could overcome them and work together more easily and effectively. After jotting down some ideas on the subject, I spoke to my mother on the phone and asked her if my ideas seemed idiosyncratic. She said they did not. I told her I was thinking of writing a paper about them, and she replied, "Good. But that doesn't sound like a paper. It sounds like a book." My heart pounded with fear, but what

she said felt right. So I wrote it, and it was essentially about my view that most problems between mothers and daughters, or between any two women, are either created or exacerbated by one or more of the myths that our sexist culture purveys about females. *Don't Blame Mother: Mending the Mother-Daughter Relationship* (1989) was an expansion of some themes from that book.

My interest in *The Myth of Women's Masochism* (1985, 1987, 1994) grew partly from my disgust with the psychoanalytic notion that women suffer *because* they enjoy it—and that if they don't admit that they enjoy it, that only means that their masochism is unconscious. It also grew from feeling fed up with people telling me and other women I cared about that whatever problems we had—with relationships, health, or work—must be because we were “our own worst enemies” and “needed” to suffer and to fail. I considered that theory both to be untrue and to be what feminist psychologist Nikki Gerrard (1987) calls a “terminal” idea. Terminal ideas are those that halt progress, that show no way forward from where one is. If we are in a terrible job or an abusive relationship, and a friend or therapist “teaches” us that our unconscious need for misery is what created that situation, we learn to be helpless, for why should we consider leaving the job or relationship, when our unconscious masochism would indubitably propel us toward yet another job or relationship in which we would be badly treated? In the 1994 edition of that book, I proposed in a preface some guidelines for identifying emotional/psychological abuse, an area that has been explored very little, partly because women are so afraid that they are only feeling emotionally abused because they are overly sensitive and too immersed in the victim's role. I believe that the vast majority of women have been psychologically abused, if only by the deceptively innocuous-sounding “sex-role stereotypes,” and that we have been trained to ignore both the abuse and the soul-killing effects it can have on us.

My friend Kathryn Morgan, the brilliant feminist philosopher, recommended me to the Status of Women Committee of the Council of Ontario Universities, when the Committee was looking for someone to write a “survival guide for women in academia.” That became *Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World* (1993), and as I began to work on it, I began to

see it, too, as an attempt to bring women together, to focus on some commonalities—in this case, the set of myths, ‘Catch-22s,’ and unwritten rules in academia that lead us unjustifiably to blame ourselves when we don't succeed or even when we don't feel welcome on campus.

The next book on which I worked—and co-authored with my son, Jeremy—developed from a seed that had been planted in 1979. Kathryn Morgan and philosopher Ronnie deSousa had conceived of a core course in Women's Studies for the University of Toronto, to be called “Scientific Perspectives on Sex and Gender.” Ronnie was heading the Women's Studies program and asked me to coordinate the course and give the one-third of the lectures that were to be about psychology, the other two-thirds being about biology and anthropology. I said I would do that if the course could be aimed at making the students informed consumers of claims they might hear about research on sex and gender. From the beginning, the other teachers and I emphasized critical thinking, showing students how to use common sense, logic, and some knowledge of the histories and methodologies from the different disciplines to critique research. Through my own experience and those of other women, I had learned that most people teaching psychology of women and psychology of sex differences courses had had little or no training in those areas. Most of us felt it was all we could do to pull together a mass of material and convey it to the students. Most of us were already overworked and had little time to do much critical thinking ourselves about the studies, never mind teaching the students to do so. For years, I had wanted to write a book that would present a lot of sex-and-gender research from various critical thinking perspectives. The summer that Jeremy was 16, I had decided that that was the summer I had to finish the book. Realizing that I could not possibly do it alone, I asked myself who could write clearly, think logically and carefully, grasp the material, and understand what I was aiming for. Jeremy came immediately to mind, but he turned out to be even easier and more fascinating and thought-provoking to work with than I had hoped, and we wrote *Thinking Critically About Research on Sex and Gender* (1994). My daughter, Emily, did the line editing for the book, so it was a family affair.

In and through these and other pieces of writing and my teaching

on campuses and to community groups, as well as through various kinds of clinical and court-related work and political and social action, I began to notice a recurring theme over the years. Again, it turned out to involve isolation and powerlessness. The theme was that, in more than 25 years of participating in a wide variety of systems and institutions, sometimes as a so-called authority or expert, sometimes as a consumer, and sometimes as both, I had observed that the experts in all these areas use many of the same techniques to make consumers feel stupid and powerless. This is not news to us children of the '60s, but what worried me was the way we could see so clearly when these techniques were being used against other people, but when they were used against us, we often couldn't see. And then, we would blame ourselves, wondering, "Why is my mother's doctor treating her so badly? Have I been too aggressive with him? Have I not been assertive enough? Have I been too ill-informed to know what questions to ask him? Or have I been so well-informed that he thinks I am trying to tell him how to do his work?" It occurred to me that making a simple list of (what turned out to be 20 of) the most commonly used techniques, naming them succinctly and giving examples of each could make these techniques more accessible to our consciousness. That is what I did in *You're Smarter Than They Make You Feel: How the Experts Intimidate Us and What We Can Do About It* (1994). My goal was for readers, after inspecting the list and reading some examples and then feeling stupid or powerless in relation to a doctor or therapist or lawyer or plumber or government agency official, would *not* blame themselves but instead would check the list and realize, "Oh, that person is using technique number 14 on me." At the very least, I hoped that that would prevent people from indulging in unwarranted and ineffective self-blame, and at most, I hoped it would lead some of them to organize for social and political change.

As I write this paper, I have just finished *They Say You're Crazy: How the World's Most Powerful Psychiatrists Decide Who's Normal* (1995). It is an exposé of the way the American Psychiatric Association's handbook, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which has been called the mental health Bible, is purported to be based on solid science but is actually the product of scandalously unscientific and political, including sexist, decision-

making processes. In this case, too, my wish is to empower consumers and potential consumers of mental health services with the knowledge that "normality" and "mental disorder" are constructs that are laden with value judgments and political content, so that if anyone decides they are abnormal, they will be in a position to question the how and the why of that decision. These issues are especially important to women because of the systematic tendency for the producers of the handbook to pathologize women far more than men.

I want also to mention an early piece of research that I did. As an undergraduate, I had taken a course with Erik Erikson and thought him quite wonderful in many ways. But sometime later, after Emily was born and Jeremy was starting nursery school, something Erikson had said came back to my mind. He had said that his research had shown that girls build enclosures and boys build towers, that this was evidence that the shape of our genitalia affects the way we perceive and organize space, and that a woman cannot have a sense of her identity until she knows who will fill her inner space. Goodness, I thought, if that is true, it is very important, and someone must have tried to replicate it. For the first time, I read the original article in which Erikson reported the tower-enclosure research. For his class, we had only been assigned the book in which he referred to his "discovery." In the original article, I found that children of both sexes had built far more enclosures than towers, that hardly anyone of either sex had built a tower, but that of those few who had built towers, slightly more had been built by boys. I tightened up his methodology, redid the research with my son's nursery school class (Jeremy was the only child who refused to participate), failed to find what Erikson had claimed (wrongly) to have found, and wrote a paper about it (1979). That experience was important to me because, although I hated criticizing Erikson, I learned that, if one reads research carefully, one often finds that what are taken to be truths often have no basis in fact, especially if the truths are asserted by famous, respected people. That, plus the encouragement and training in critical thinking that I received from my uncle, Bill Karchmer; my parents, Tac and Jerry Caplan; and my teachers, Jack Bush (Greenwood High School, math), Donald Stanton (Greenwood, speech and debate), and Bruce Baker (Harvard, psychology).

have led to my relishing of the process of thinking questioningly about what I am told.

The editors of this volume asked me to describe how my life has changed because of this work. One profoundly important change has been that work in feminist psychology has been deeply absorbing both intellectually and emotionally. It is a joy to do work with which I feel connected on a daily basis and which is intended to bring about social and political change. And as more new work about women appears, it becomes increasingly necessary for me to keep abreast of what is happening in a delightfully huge range of fields. This helps me feel alive and fresh. Very much related to those feelings is the joy of getting to meet and work with so many interesting women—and to some extent, increasingly—some men who care about the kinds of issues that matter to me. But another consequence is that, at parties, I am often having perfectly lovely conversations with men, but as soon as they learn that I am a feminist and/or a psychologist, they need to go freshen their drinks and never return. Just being a psychologist—even though I almost never do therapy—seems to endanger me in relationships with men, and I have heard similar tales from other women therapists. The typical scenario is that the woman psychologist is voicing a legitimate concern or grievance to the man, and he narrows his eyes suspiciously and says, “Don’t you psychologize me! Stop analyzing me!” These are what Nikki Gerrard (1987) would, I suspect, call terminal orders.

In closing, I want to thank Phyllis Chesler, Ellen Cole, and Esther Rothblum for honoring and surprising me by considering me a feminist foremother.

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