

## **A RESPONSE TO THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION**

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"Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights:  
...Setting a Global Agenda"

**This international conference is for all who care passionately about improving women's position in the world, who demand justice and full human rights for women everywhere and who believe that a feminist analysis is essential to defining a fairer globalised world.**

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(see also Everyday Acts of Resistance: Women in Grassroots Movements for more examples of resistance – presented at NOWSA conference which followed Townsville International Women’s Conference)

In presenting the following ideas about the relationship between violence, language and oppression, I want to acknowledge the work of my colleagues in the ORCAS Society based in Duncan, on Vancouver Island, on the west coast of Canada. ORCAS is committed to the dissemination of ideas about collaborative approaches to family therapy, and is comprised of family therapist, psychiatrists, social workers and councilors. I work with them in the capacity of a community organizer who is interested in the social development of rural communities. I apply many of the ideas and techniques explored in our workshops and conferences to the larger context of collaborative approaches to community development. In my thesis I am examining the social and communicative activities of grassroots women who are active in the social development of their rural communities, and I look closely at what these particular women do, how they actually do it, and how they describe their experiences. In doing so, I intend to illuminate the potential for further understanding of the larger issues of how communities respond to and resist their experiences of violation and oppression.

The challenge to create an alternative social discourse has arisen from diverse sectors, including sociologists, who seek to display the complex powers of language at work in the everyday world (Millman & Kanter, 1987), and feminists who look for the possibility of disrupting old discourses and of opening up paths for speaking ourselves into existence in other ways (Davies, 1993, p.12). . Likewise, post structuralists look at the constitutive forces of language and seek ways to invent, invert and break old patterns and discourses (Ibid., 1993, p. xviii), and post-modernists encourage us to re-focus the social sciences on the taken-for-granted, the neglected and those deemed insignificant, and to explore the regions of resistance, difference, complexity and diversity (Rosenau, 1992, p.8).

From the community development field comes the challenge to develop a social services system that is not focussed on deficiency and need, and to identify social forms that are resistant to being colonized by service technologies and industries (McKnight, 1995, p.12).

The challenge also arises from education where a recent Canadian study in adult literacy examined the relationship between learning and experiences of personal violation. Here Horsman (1999) raises concerns for the medicalizing discourses that frame experiences of trauma and violence and urges us to focus on language and notice how violence is a commonly accepted component of social discourse. She urges us to question the status quo and make visible the social nature of the problem of violence (Ibid., p. 224).

Wade (1999) posits that the examination of the everyday use of language is key to understanding the multifaceted social construction of oppression, and the accompanying experiences of violence and domination that arise from living in any inequitable social context. He suggests that there is a pronounced family resemblance between patterns of interpersonal and socio-political violence, which may take the form of physical, emotional or social violations (Ibid., p. 59). Examples include “economic exploitation, harassment, destructive criticism, threats, intimidation, humiliation or discrimination on the basis of gender, race, occupational status, sexual preference, age, illness or disability ( p. 2).

A new framework for analysis and social action has recently been proposed by a team of Canadian researchers and therapists who are exploring the nature of violence and resistance and the connection between violence and language (Wade, Coates and Todd, 2000). This framework identifies the contrasting notions of the language of effects and the language of responses. The language of effects is described as being a diverse repertoire of terms, figures of speech and metaphors that represents subjective experience and behaviour (such as victims) as the effects of a cause (such as violence or oppression) (Todd & Wade, 2002). (See Appendix one). Alternately, the language of responses represents subjective experience and behaviour as responses to particular events and circumstances (Ibid.). (See Appendix two).

An analogy of Wade’s that I find particularly illustrative is of a community experiencing a flood (A. Wade, personal communication, January 12, 2001). The effects of a flood may be the loss of homes and businesses, the

accumulation of mud and debris, and the interruption of everyday activities. The community's response to the trauma may be to build a dam to resist the experience of flooding in the future. Although flooding causes damage in communities, one would not say that flooding causes dams, yet traditional discourse has no hesitation in asserting that traumatic incidents cause depressions in people.

In examining the stock language of researchers, therapists and the public when referring to experiences of interpersonal violence, Wade (1999) found that the language of effects was the dominant discourse. This constructs a deterministic and mechanistic world ordered by relationships of cause and effect. Further, it assumes that a negative cause produces a negative effect, establishing a powerful negative bias (Ibid., p. 325). It likewise constructs the oppressor as the active, proficient expert and the oppressed as the inexpert, deficient, passive recipient of their own oppression (p. 60). The language of effects is not an overtly political discourse, but one that is taken-for-granted and virtually invisible in everyday life (p. 338; see also Coates, 1997). It has saturated the professional discourse of researchers, therapists, and the public alike.

The sense of powerlessness and disorder experienced by those subjected to aggression and dominance erodes the strength of the individual, the family and the community as a whole. In his studies of community in the United States, John McKnight has found that:

if one surrounds any individual with messages and experiences that are always saying to them, what is important about you is what's wrong with you, that that will have a powerful, powerful, depressing, disillusioning and degrading effect upon that person. (1993, p.4)

When dominant sociological and psychiatric standards and discourses define and constrain societal roles, they reinforce these messages of deficiency and give rise to the “false belief that people don't really deserve just and equal treatment” (Lackey, Lackey, Napier & Robinson, 1995, p. 15). As a result, many women find themselves coping with the disjunctures between how they really feel in response to their everyday experiences and how the social construction of women tells them they are supposed to feel and respond. Horsman (1999) found that experiences of discord are often medicalized so that the problem becomes personalized and decontextualized from the social relations of power from which it arises (p. 46).

For example, bureaucratic discourse produces clients, who in turn are officially diagnosed and treated (Ferguson, 1984, pp. 136-137). Accordingly, the client becomes a case and must define him or herself as such if they wish to be heard (Ibid.). McKnight regards such authority as the basic tool of control and oppression in industrialized societies (1995, p.16), where professional discourse encodes and mystifies the language, so that citizens are excluded from the process, and are no longer the problem definer or the solution generator (Ibid., p. 48).

McKnight sees a further manipulation of social services occurring with the endless discovery of new, unmet needs that are then marketed to create a

demand for a new profession (1995). Examples include “tired housewife syndrome”, and “six-hour retardation” (a child who is normal for the 18 hours a day not in school) (ibid., p.23), to which I add “Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome” (a strong urge to stay out late, followed by an inability to wake up on time), and “Pseudologia Fantastica” (a condition ascribed to an American judge with a penchant for padding his resume with tall tales) (News of the Weird, July 5-11, 2001).

Similar constructions are apparent in examining the discourse of helping professionals, psychologists, social workers and those in the legal profession. Here, professional language disguises the inherent political biases that assault people’s dignity and freedom in subtle ways while masking those conditions of the individuals lives, environments and opportunities that primarily need change (Edelman, 1974, p. 305). An example is the use of the term therapy as a suffix or qualifier in order to establish superior and subordinate roles and medicalize a common activity. “Mental patients do not hold dances, they have dance therapy,,, recreation therapy,,, and group therapy” (Ibid., p. 297; see also Ferguson, 1984).

The language of effects conceals responses by decontextualizing and diminishing them, thus mitigating volition and judgement on the part of the oppressor (Wade, 1999, p. 323). Wade identified that this practice is evident in colonialist discourse, which conceals or obscures the atrocities and displacements perpetrated against indigenous peoples (Ibid., p. 248). This oppressive discourse naturalizes domination and dispossession of other peoples

and nations, and justifies the imposition of European culture, language and religion onto the existing societal structures. An example of how the language of effects mitigates responsibility is found in Canada where the language of church and state apologies often state “I am sorry for what happened to you” in comparison to “I am sorry for what I did against your wishes and over your protests” (pp.243-244).

Alternately, the language of responses assumes competency and the presence of pre-existing skills, assets and abilities of people, families, communities and neighbourhoods (Wade, 1999). A microanalysis of an individual’s responses to oppression can contest the representation of their being passive and challenge the assumption that there is something wrong with them as an individual (A. Wade, personal communication, November 10 and December 15, 2000).

A microanalysis of language can reveal the tendency to pathologize discourse by creating nouns from verbs as in “I am depressed”. This shifts the focus from one of enacting agency and control in response to an experience of violence or oppression (i.e. acting in a depressed way) to one of having no agency and actually becoming the pathology (i.e. I am depressed) (A. Wade, personal communication, February 2 and 8, 2001). By linking up actual events with the feelings elicited in response to the situation, the individual’s feelings, say of frustration or sadness, may be normalized. For example, many people respond to trauma by behaving in a depressed manner, or in other words, by refusing to be content with the injustice of the situation. The language of

responses reframes such depression as a flagrant sign of mental health: “Given what you have experienced, it is not unusual to act in a depressed way” (A. Wade, personal communication, February 2, 2001). When one’s experience of being wrongly treated is honoured, a corollary of assumptions follow, such as that the individual has the right to be treated well and that respect is important to them (A. Wade, personal communication, November 10 and December 15, 2000). By identifying the offensive incident as an ethical or spiritual offence, the individual is assumed to have agency, competency and the ability to discern and respond to oppressive behaviours.

The language of responses also reframes individual, volitional acts of resistance by “eliciting detailed accounts of individual’s responses... and elucidating the intelligibility of some of those responses as forms of resistance” (Wade, 1999, p. 360). Individual acts of resistance may be neither violent nor reactionary, and many show a combination of extraordinary persistence, informed prudence and tactical acumen on the part of the individual (Ibid., pp. 14-15).

Oppressed people often behave in a deferential or docile manner in public, while disguising their resistance to misrepresent their response to the violence. At the same time, the dominators misrepresent their oppressive actions as well-intentioned, while proclaiming their rights to authority over others (Wade, 1999, 1540). Both parties have an investment in suppressing the true nature of the interactions, so that public appearances can be highly misleading and provide an inaccurate depiction of the actual relationships of power (Ibid.).

The need to conceal one's defiance is a taken-for-granted understanding for subjugated people, and this wisdom is expressed in the Ethiopian proverb "When the grand lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts" (Quoted in Scott, 1990, p. v.). In doing so, the wise peasant pays homage to the oppressor while providing no reliable reading of the subordinates real intentions, and creates a façade "that both conceals his contempt and enables its silent expression" (Wade, 1999, p. 156).

In response to violence and oppression, small acts of resistance can be enacted by individual people, families, communities or neighbourhoods. Examples range from the woman who always manages to burn her abusive husband's favorite dish to the marching Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. For 25 years these women have gathered in front of the presidential palace every Thursday at 3:30p.m. with white handkerchiefs tied around their heads that are imprinted with the names of their lost sons and daughters and carrying photographs of some of the more than 30 thousand people who have disappeared under a violent and oppressive military regime (Roy, 1999, p. 96; see also [www.yendor.com/vanished/madres.html](http://www.yendor.com/vanished/madres.html), July 01/02).

By understanding these actions as responses to oppression, we can challenge the dominant discourse of the language of effects and use the language of responses to reframe the stereotype of the passive victim. In examining the language of responses, small acts of resistance can be elucidated as volitional responses to oppression and violence, and can promote positive

change while enhancing individual's and community's on-going pursuit of justice and security.

(Note: this brief section is in addition to the presentation given, but may be helpful to those seeking further understanding of the application of these principles)

Some of the techniques that Wade employs in order to achieve a shift from a deficiency to a proficiency model of service are as follows:

1. Get specific: stay away from abstractions; pay attention to alternatives and exceptions; identify concrete, specific behaviours (the details are where the richest meanings are found); and focus on responses
2. Reengineer the discourse: develop alternate discursive machinery in writing, reading, and personal interactions; and translate language of effects into language of responses
3. Assume competency: recognize and maximize the opportunity for agency; perceive behaviour as an intelligible and rational response; form a positive connotation by redefining problems and players more accurately; embed assumptions of progress and competency; and contest representations of passivity and deficiency
4. Contextualize: reveal social networks that pathologize and conceal violence; de-professionalize and de-expertise language; and identify misinterpretations or misrepresentations or actions or behaviours (i.e. problems are in the social world, not in the individual's mind)

(A. Wade, personal communication, November 01, 2000 and January 12, 2001).

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