

Nods That Silence

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I have participated regularly in Anglo feminist groups and Women of Color feminist groups for almost a decade now, and I am still wondering why each engages me so differently. In the Anglo feminist groups, I feel distanced and disconnected from the ways things get done. My relationships with the other women are always smooth and politely managed. I always feel that my presence is welcomed, but I usually don't agree wholeheartedly with the ideas, the analyses and the organizational tactics. Yet I continue to participate because I am concerned with many of the issues these groups address.

In contrast, my experiences in groups with women from many different racial/ethnic groups have been more connected while at the same time more conflictual. I feel much more understanding from these women, and membership in the ideas we pursue together, even though I more frequently find myself frustrated and heated up.

The major disagreement I have with the practices of Anglo feminist groups is the strong message they send out that our discussions need to be smooth, orderly, efficient and supportive. The idea is that we are not going to do to one another what men have always done to us—we are not going to silence one another nor be competitive. Instead, we are going to provide a space which is supportive and respectful of different opinions. We are not going to trash each other. So we tell ourselves to make space for everyone to talk. Nod supportively. We each have the right to speak after being silenced for so long.

But are we being supportive and respectful when we hear but fail to listen to one another? As I sit and listen in Anglo feminist groups, I often wonder if we are silencing ourselves in yet another way. When someone speaks and says something I don't fully understand or agree with, I search the faces of others in the group to see if they understand and are really in agreement with the speaker, or if they are silently acquiescing to the person speaking only to be supportive? I see some heads nodding, yet I see many others still, frozen, holding their thoughts inside because they don't feel it's okay to speak up and ask for clarification or disagree. Every time I try to verbalize my thoughts, I think over and over again in my head how to state my thoughts diplomatically. Yet even with this careful attention to words, after I speak I always end up feeling that I have breached a code of conduct. I always regret ever having spoken. When my over-rehearsed thoughts come bursting out, the sea of heads nods politely, acknowledging my right to speak, but it appears that their souls have failed to listen to what I have said.

These groups seem to gain their strength from a collectivity of women who are generally in agreement with one another. Those are the ones who come back again and again. Others come for awhile, remain quiet and then silently disappear without ever having been missed because they were never noticed. A few attempt to speak up. But they too fade away, silenced and subtly excluded by blank looks of "supportive" listening.

Yet without more interactive discussions in Anglo feminist groups, these "safe" spaces have set limits on how much we can learn from participating in these groups. Little can be carried over to other parts of our lives in an effective way. So if this is all that feminist sisterhood is about—protecting ourselves from any differences, maintaining at all costs an image of solidarity—it's a fruitless practice that leaves us at a standstill.

I worry constantly about this issue of hearing without listening. I have become even more concerned recently because Anglo middle class feminist groups are actively recruiting women of color. Can a sisterhood that has historically provided safe and supportive spaces based on the commonalities between women also provide room for dialogue between women's differences? Thinking about the consciousness-raising groups of the sixties, I wonder how many women came to these groups and didn't stay. I hear that the groups were powerful because women were given a voice and learned strength from finding others who had their same struggles. Or was this an illusion which resulted when those who differed didn't stick around? Did practices of aligning around common experiences silence some women then, too?

I felt tremendous relief when I read Bonnie Thornton Dill's discussion on the problems of "sisterhood" in the women's movement.¹ She wrote that the political practice of sisterhood is based on bonding around common experiences. This concept assumes that all women in all societies experience patriarchal subordination in the same way. The experiences of Anglo middle class women have defined what these commonalities are in the contemporary women's movement and have ignored how race and class dynamics create different experience for other women. She verbalized what I had sensed all along.

We are limited when we organize women's groups around assumed and certain sets of shared experiences. Instead of simply reproducing our past shared experiences, I think that we need to create new shared understandings by working with one another in women's groups. We need to learn more about each other. We need to ask each other, "How are you making sense of this situation?" "What's going on with you?" and "What do you think should be done?" and then negotiate a path we can all walk together. But in order for this to happen we must stop politely and passively hearing one another. We need to begin to actively listen and discuss our differences as well as our similarities so that we may accomplish what this sisterhood stuff is really supposed to be all about.

When I speak, I am tired of getting polite nods which hear me, but don't tell me if anyone is really listening. I am tired of the polite silences and the lack of responses or requests for clarification. I am tired of feeling that my words were given space, but they might as well have not been said because they didn't get built upon or incorporated into the conversation. I can feel the polite bridge built from the speaker before me, over my words, to the next speaker—a useless bridge because the ideas under it are already dried up by the silence from the banks.

The sisterhood I envision would mean *creating* a sense of unity that comes from all of us working together, building on our diverse experiences. But how is this going to happen? How do we learn to listen as well as hear one another? How can we learn to validate one another while at the same time provide room for questioning and expressing disagreement and misunderstanding? How can we do all this without seeming unsupportive and too competitive?

I believe it means that we have to be allowed to “get messy.” A polite nod does not incorporate ideas into an ongoing discussion. Nods of validation simply further silence women by not giving serious consideration to what has just been said. No one is listening when they have no responses. Nor does it help any of us to question our own beliefs. On the other hand, a question or response lets me know that someone is listening to me and working with me to understand. Instead of a patronizing nod, I prefer the query which makes my comments a building block in the discussion. Laughter and disagreements are also responses which help us think further.

In each of the Women of Color groups I have been in, there is always a great deal of confusion caused by disagreements. Our ideas are threads that don't always weave together and colors that clash. Our ideas of how to structure time come into conflict. Some of us are very goal-directed and want to be efficient with our time together. Others of us are more willing to sacrifice efficiency in order to figure things out carefully. The distinction between Anglo feminist groups and Women of Color feminist groups is that differences are more explicitly acknowledged in discussions in Women of Color groups. By discussing them, these differences become less threatening and conflictual.

Our shared efforts to figure out the differences make us feel closer to women whom we each initially perceived as “others.” There is a genuine commitment to work through the confusion no matter how much time it takes. It comes in the form of questions, hurt feelings, taking sides, feeling frustrated, and “aha, so that's what you mean. Okay.” expressions. It doesn't always work out. Sometimes we stop with hurt feelings. But just as frequently we plow through the confusion as a group, putting ideas in order and creating a shared picture which we all can see. And all of this is possible because disagreements and confusion are not received as invalidation of our individual ideas.

As women's groups (especially Anglo women's groups) become more established and more institutionalized, I think we need to be careful of how we are going to incorporate diversity. Especially if becoming more established means becoming more bureaucratized and hierarchical in our way of making decisions. Incorporating diversity, if it is going to be successful, will require a great deal more of active listening, instead of passive hearing. It is going to require more active discussion instead of turn-taking, space-given talking. It's going to mean expressing disagreements, asking for clarifications and incorporating our differences in creating a shared vision together. A "sisterhood" that I want to belong to allows me to be different and still be able to work together. To this sisterhood, I will bring my individual history, listen to others' stories and know that we are building a foundation together.

Notes

1. Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Race, Class and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 131-150.