



BEHIND THE MASK

**Destruction
and
Creativity
in
Women's
Aggression**

DANA CROWLEY JACK

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Women's Aggression*

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1999

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jack, Dana Crowley.

Behind the mask : destruction and creativity in women's
aggression / Dana Crowley Jack.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-06485-2 (alk. paper)

1. Women—Psychology. 2. Aggressiveness (Psychology). I. Title.
HQ1206.J26 1999
155.6'33—dc21
99-22221

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To Rand, Darby, and Kelsey
and to my mother, Dorothy

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HEARKENING TO WOMEN'S VOICES

In this book, sixty women share their lived experiences of their own aggression. Exploring the territory of aggression with these women, I found a land inhabited by our worst fears but also by possibilities for powerful action and change. Thinking about aggression is always weighted with wariness about its link with hurt and death. As I heard of pain caused by aggression, both received and given, I wondered if I could remain open to listening. How could I sustain an attitude of hearkening, “the most intense wakefulness of wanting to hear . . . the condition of the possibility of hearing”?¹ Listening to a woman’s voice and all that surrounded it—feelings, context, history, reaction to me, my own responses—required both a sharpened, focused attentiveness to the meanings she was trying to convey and, at the same time, the kind of unfocused, gathering-of-sounds listening I do on spring nights when the frogs begin their chorus. In that open hearkening, I hear the wind in the trees, the owls, far-off dogs barking, a distant truck—a widening ring of sound that conveys many different realities that surround the frogs’ pond.

I found it difficult to maintain this unfocused, gathering kind of hearing. Sustaining a listening openness to aggression led to places that felt terrifying, hopeless, filled with the deepest questions, the deepest dread. Listening, I heard not only the woman but the voices in her thoughts that came from her family, her culture, her history. Then I heard past her and into her context. Was she in poverty? In a privileged situation? Was she in violent relationships, or did she face less obvious types of power and aggression? I heard

past her specific context into wider spheres of aggressive acts. I heard into society, where violence is a daily fact in people's lives. I heard into nature, where we ruthlessly invade the earth, annihilate species, rip apart delicate webs of life that took millennia to evolve.

At the college where I teach, a student mounted stereo speakers in the tall cedars that surround our building. Through these speakers came, first, the sounds of a rain forest in Brazil—birds, insects, monkey calls, other animals. Several days later the recording changed: this song of the earth was interrupted by noises of a survey crew, of bulldozers, followed by days and days of chainsaws, the crack of falling trees, the roar of large trucks.

During this time I was interviewing women. The juxtaposition of their stories with the sounds of human assault on nature brought home to me two things. First, history has been brutal to women. Under male domination, the feminine has been repressed and devalued. The earth, long associated in Western thought with the feminine, has also been devalued and brutalized. Second, I learned how painful it is to listen, to hear the sounds of aggression in a sustained way. As we listen, sounds enter through the labyrinth of the ear into the body, into our felt existence. More often, we turn away to block them out. It is difficult to encounter—to come into relationship with—aggression in this intimate, bodily way.

As I walked to my office each day, I wanted to stop the sounds of clearcutting. I wanted to avoid the panorama of awareness opened by the noises, take the back stairs, block the sound. At times I wanted to stop listening to the pain women conveyed about the hurt they experienced and dealt out to others. But, unbidden, my listening grew larger still. I heard past each woman, past her context, past our violent society, past our aggressive relationship to nature, and into the age-old questions about violence and suffering. Why do fear, hostility, and the urge to dominate, which underlie aggressiveness, appear as such human predispositions? How have we become so alienated that we support the destruction of that which gives us life—women, the earth? How do we become so blinded as to destroy others? Why do appalling, seemingly unbearable events happen to some people while others appear to live charmed lives?

Women's lives, including mine, are witness both to the destructive effects of aggression, given and received, and to the transformation of that aggression into positive action. How do some women overcome aggression directed against them and transform it into new life possibilities? Why do others become submerged in hatred and anger, propelled by these feelings to retaliate destructively against the violations of body and spirit they have endured? I realized that the women could tell us; knowledge comes from their stories.

Most students of aggression have not asked such questions. They focus more narrowly, using the scientific method to isolate aspects of behavior or mind associated with the individual and aggression. The bigger questions that evolved from my listening to women are not the questions of psychology alone. They are human questions which we all confront at some point or another. But I have no answers, only the questions and the women's stories.

We know that men are more physically aggressive and authoritarian than women, that men commit more violent acts and are more approving of aggression than women across a range of realms as diverse as international relations and war, social control and law enforcement, interpersonal relations, and the portrayal of violence on television (Eagly and Steffen, 1986). Acceptance of the "fact" of human aggression forms a cornerstone of our images of the future, even though women's attitudes and behaviors differ from men's. Bringing women's perspectives on their own aggression into larger dialogues about this subject is critical for society.

Almost all of what psychologists have thought and felt about aggression has been shaped by a male perspective. This means that we understand aggression from the point of view of those who have been dominant. It also ensures that men's fears of women's aggression, as well as men's projections and desires, have been built into our concepts and conclusions. Since women's aggression develops within a different social reality than men's, women's accounts may offer a new perspective on this human problem.

Over the centuries, women evolved the shapes, patterns, and strategies of their aggressive behavior in direct relation to male dominance and male violence. Women's social reality has differed

from men's, not only because of inequality, but also because men's aggression against them has been culturally reinforced and approved throughout most of history. Today, the threat of male violence crosses all races, classes, and nations to affect all women, though the actual risk of being attacked varies with women's ethnicity and social class.² The 1997 UNICEF "Progress of Nations Report: Women Commentary" declared violence against women and girls the most pervasive abuse of human rights in the world today.

Despite these realities, the greatest silence around women's aggression has been about the two factors that have most affected its forms, its display, and its consequences for women: the threat of male violence and social inequality. Although I call attention to women as recipients of violence, I attempt to explore aggression beyond the dualistic model of oppressor/oppressed, in which women are powerless victims. Rather, I look at the creative, subversive, and resisting nature of women's practices concerning aggression.

Throughout history, women have been punished for obvious displays of aggression; they have been forced to camouflage their intent to hurt others, their opposition, and even their positive forcefulness, to deliver their aggression in culturally sanctioned but more hidden ways. The lack of available models by which to understand women's aggression has shaped my purpose: to represent the forms and meanings of women's aggression from women's perspectives.

On spring nights, the owls sound different from our front yard than from the path that winds up the forested hill behind the house. Where I stand affects what I hear. I knew that the way I heard these women was influenced by my own childhood pain and adult transgressions. Though my privileges make my life radically different from the lives of many of the women, I have tried to take these differences into account by attending to all the aspects that enter into the space between listener and speaker, such as economics, power, and ethnicity.³

In this work I follow the voice-centered method first articulated by Carol Gilligan (1982) and now used by many others (see

Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock, 1997; Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Brown, 1998). Interview narratives are seen as dialogues generated within a relationship of interviewer and subject; the investigator attempts to listen to the point of view of the subject. Doing so requires taking a reflexive stance in order to notice how we help shape the very texts we study (Fine, 1992; Goldberger, 1996). It requires listening intensely to the unknown of self and other without expecting to hear something determinate. In this model, self-awareness and the ability to hear others from their own standpoints are interconnected.

I entered into the complex territory of women's aggression using six ways of listening to their narratives: open listening (the body's responses and other nonverbal signals are taken into account as part of reflexivity), focused awareness (meanings are not taken for granted; the speaker is asked to explain key words or phrases), and attending to moral language, to inner dialogues, to the logic of the narrative, and to meta-statements, those places in interviews where people spontaneously reflect on something they just said (Jack, 1999b). Used to analyze the interviews systematically, these ways of listening make it possible to examine the unique subjectivity of each woman, the site of her resistance, conformity, and change. They focus on uncovering the speaker's point of view and meanings, a critical first step toward detailing the diversity of women's experiences. As women grapple with contradictory social norms governing their behavior, it is possible to see how changes in women's roles affect their aggression.

Listening systematically to moral language, for example, provides a way to examine what standards a woman uses to guide her aggressive behavior and to judge herself. Such standards can be traced to their cultural and familial origins. Moral language also provides a way to think about the relationship of the general to the particular. It is possible to honor each woman's individuality, in its full richness of personal history, by observing what values she has accepted and strives to attain. The "general," then, is the human tendency to evaluate the self; the "particular" is the specific content of the moral self-evaluation, what gender ideologies or cultural values a woman uses to inhibit or judge her aggression. Analyzing

moral language across all the interviews gave me a deeper understanding of how culture manifests itself in individual lives and at various locations. Each of the other five ways of listening also allows such a close examination of the interaction of person and social context.

In the interviews, women defined aggression themselves in response to open-ended questions such as “When you think of your own aggression, what comes to mind?” I asked them to describe their aggressive acts, what led up to their behavior, and their feelings before and after their actions. I listened for their intent, for their expectations of consequences, and for the actual outcomes of their aggressive acts, as well as for changes in their self-experience related to those acts. Though I followed a set outline of questions, I also followed each woman’s lead to inquire more deeply into the meanings she attached to her actions and into the context in which they occurred.

I am most interested in how a woman brings her anger, will, and desire into relationships with other adults, and what her thoughts about doing so reveal about power, gender ideologies, and personal and social change. I asked no questions about aggression toward children other than “What do you teach your children about how to be aggressive?” Probing into a woman’s relationship with her children raises a host of difficulties, including the requirement to report child abuse to authorities if it is suspected. Furthermore, a vast literature already exists on child abuse and its relation to social and psychological factors (see, e.g., Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989; Egami et al., 1996; Milner and Chilamkurti, 1991; and Rodriguez and Green, 1997).

My goal is to delve into a largely unexplored area: the psychology of aggression in women. The kind of exploratory study I have conducted is necessary because we have no reports of women’s subjective experience of their own aggression (Björkqvist and Niemelä, 1992). Further, many contemporary researchers regard aggression as a particular category of goal-driven behavior. According to the generally accepted definition, an aggressive act is “done with the intention to harm another person, oneself, or an object” (Björkqvist and Niemelä, 1992, 4). It is the actor’s intent that defines

an act as aggressive, yet rarely do researchers inquire into intent by asking the actor. The interpretation of an actor's intent often serves as a screen for a researcher's projections about aggressiveness based on stereotypes of gender, ethnicity, and class. At the same time, an actor's description of intent may be self-serving or blinded by denial. Thus intent, the very heart of our psychological definitions of aggression, carries a large measure of ambiguity.

Why, then, should we trust what these women say about a subject that often brings social judgment and shame? Psychology has a long history of bias against self-report and interview data, assuming that people will try to present themselves in a good light in order to conform to social expectations. But since the social expectations or norms affecting aggression are themselves a focus of my interest, they are not unwanted variables. Because my task is to understand women's aggression from their perspectives, interviews, with all their inexactness and saturation by social norms, provide the information I seek. Searching for "objective truth" in narratives is not the goal. Rather, I am interested in mapping the psychology of women's aggression, particularly its relationship to social norms, social contexts, and the experience of self.

Exploring women's lived experiences of aggression sheds light on long-standing problems in women's psychology. For example, many women incorporate the cultural myth that women are not aggressive while their own experience contradicts it. I wanted to understand the psychological dynamic of internalizing this myth while struggling with a lived experience that belies it. Most women say they want their daughters and younger women to be more assertive, even aggressive, in pursuing their dreams and protecting themselves, but don't want to add to the violence and harm in the world. Women want the freedom to be authentic, to move out into the world without fear, but do not want to destroy others in active self-expression. In resisting social authority and convention to become one's own self, how do some women take the path into destruction, either of self or of those they love? How do others use this aggressive force for positive purposes, to push at the outer and inner constraints of their lives?

To look at the interaction of self and society, I chose to inter-

view women from a range of social contexts that endorse differing forms of aggressive behavior. Within these contexts, I sought women whose aggression appeared usual, not extraordinary.

The women whose voices fill this book include rich, middle-income, and poor; old, middle-aged, and young. They include a range of ethnicities within the concentric circles of social power from margin to center. They are police officers, attorneys, a correction officer, a former military servicewoman, the head of security at a major business, athletes (a mountain climber, a marathon runner, the captain of a university rowing team, and a wrestler), a Holocaust survivor, a politician in a state legislature, an administrator in higher education, an international photojournalist, architects, social workers, lesbians in a battered women's group, college students, a legal secretary, elementary school teachers, a Buddhist teacher, and an instructor of tai chi. In addition, I interviewed six women enrolled in the Seattle Birth to Three Project, which works with high-risk, substance-abusing mothers.⁴

Some of the sixty women were clinically depressed, some addicted or in recovery from addiction. Thirty-six had been abused as children, as adults, or both. The forty-one white women and nineteen women of color ranged in age from 17 to 75. Eight women were lesbian.⁵

By talking to police officers and attorneys, I planned to examine conflicts resulting when socialization for femininity collides with a profession's demands for stereotypic male behaviors. I also chose police officers to clarify how women authorized by society to use force against others think about their own aggression. Whereas certain kinds of aggression are condoned for women in the professions, socially marginalized and lower-class women are punished, even caricatured, for their more overt, often antisocial aggression. In their narratives these women give voice to those who are most often "shut up and shut out" of psychological research (Reid, 1993; Bing and Reid, 1996). While lawyers and police officers reveal how women think about integrating socially sanctioned power into their aggression, women at the margins have fewer options for exerting their aggression through socially acceptable channels. With abused women, who came from all social locations, I sought to explore

how having been subjected to violence or abuse affected their perspectives on their own aggression.

Though I selected women from various social contexts, I found that they often do not experience their power in ways tagged by social markers. Some attorneys, though they have social power, feel marginalized because of gender, ethnicity, and/or personal history. Some women at the margins feel a greater sense of personal power and freedom to use creative aggression than those who wield social authority. In real lives, outer formal structures are only part of what affects how a woman uses her aggression; we must consider her subjective experience as well.

In their aggressive acts and in the meanings they attach to them, no two women reconcile social expectations and personal experience identically. No single woman is representative of her ethnicity, her profession, her class. A particular woman's voice and view should not be considered as speaking for her occupation or her ethnic/racial group, but simply *from* that social, economic, historical context with all its complexities of position and power. Throughout the book, I identify age, ethnicity, and occupation as a reminder that context and subculture affect a woman's view of her aggression, but the narratives also remind us that these are only part of the picture.

Interviews lasted an average of two hours; many women were interviewed twice, some three times over two years. To analyze the interviews I used Ethnograph software.⁶ The process of analysis was like viewing pointillistic paintings. Up close, one sees only little dots, or segments of thought; when one steps back, the dots form a picture. I present some women's stories in depth, using them to convey the patterns I discerned across all the interviews. Another way of describing the process is to return to the metaphor of hearkening. Analysis by Ethnograph allows a different kind of listening—a hearkening to the many voices versus the one. Then, when I return to the one voice, my hearing has been deepened by systematic attention to the many.

During my research, my family traveled the length of Chile, hiking in remote areas of the Andes. In Santiago I interviewed four Chilean women. I wanted to listen for cultural differences in the

perceived costs of aggression and in types of aggressive behavior. The women with whom I talked were all professionals who spoke fluent English, and thus are representative only of a very small minority of Chilean women. Their interviews are similar in themes, perceived costs, and strategies of aggression to those of U.S. women in comparable social positions. They are part of the sample of sixty women.

Two years later my family spent six weeks in Madagascar as Earthwatch volunteers. We helped collect data for Patricia Wright, who is studying patterns of female dominance in lemurs. Watching primates interact heightened my skepticism regarding the innateness of aggression and brought home how easily people have projected human purposes onto other species. Wright (1993) has found that when female primates lead, levels of violence and aggressive interchanges are lower than when males dominate. Strong bonds among females appear to keep males in place not through aggressive dominance but through displays of female solidarity and quick reprimand (de Waal, 1996; Wrangham and Peterson, 1996). Watching the lemurs reinforced my interest in aggression's origins and its relationship to power and human culture.

I was drawn to study aggression by listening to women's experience of their depression (Jack, 1991, 1999a). I learned that silencing the self leads to depression, and that many women attempt to silence their anger and aggression, aspects of self they fear will disrupt relationships. In order to learn more about depression, I decided to approach it through aggression, which felt like a seldom-used back door, much more forbidden for women to move in and out of than depression. Entering there, I found a complexity of which I have examined only a small portion. I attempt to present women's perspectives in ways that allow an appreciation of the links between their aggression and their depression.

When talking about their aggression, women often speak of "crossing the line." In this book I document social and psychological factors that contribute to the line each woman draws between acceptable and unacceptable aggression, and the costs to self and society both when she crosses the line and when she stays within a line too closely drawn.⁷