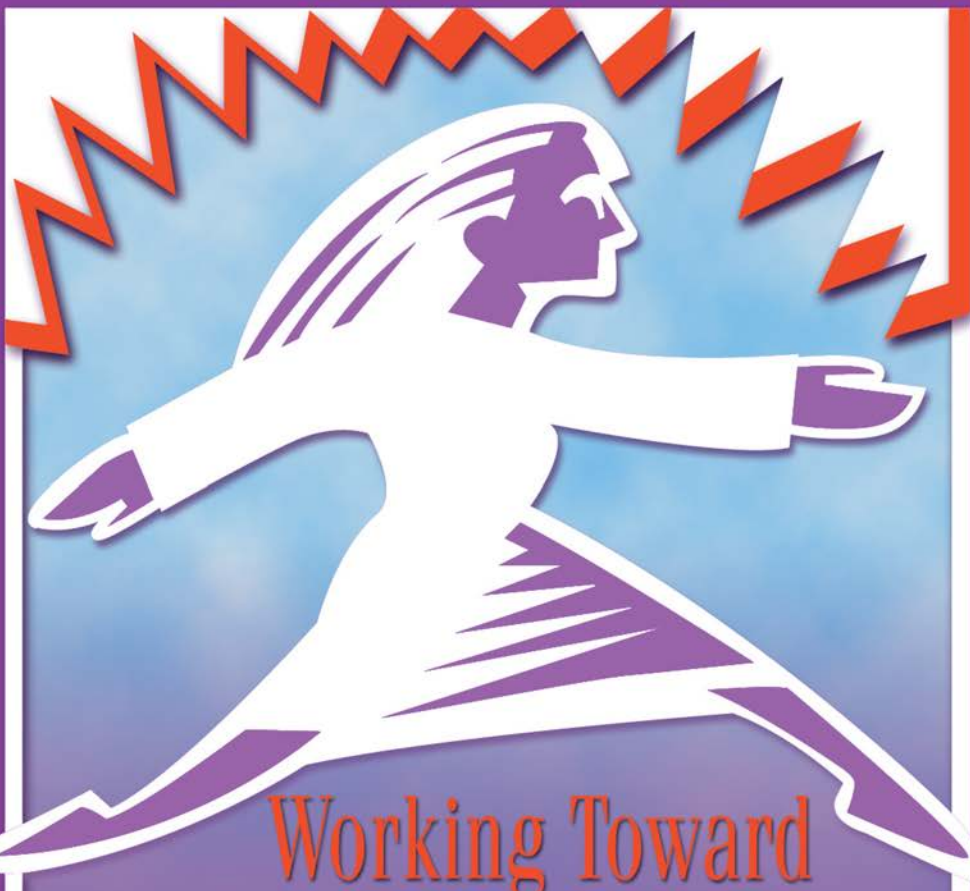


WOMEN, POWER, and ETHNICITY



Working Toward
Reciprocal Empowerment

Patricia S. E. Darlington • Becky Michele Mulvaney

**Women, Power,
and Ethnicity**
*Working Toward
Reciprocal Empowerment*

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Women, Power, and Ethnicity

Working Toward Reciprocal Empowerment

Patricia S. E. Darlington, PhD
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with assistance from
Deana Awadallah, Melody Leite, and Kelly Brill

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We dedicate this book to our families

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Foreword

Questions of women and, most commonly, of powerlessness remain at the heart of gender definitions and practices. For many, the equation of women with power is simply an oxymoron. As no less a luminary than Aristotle put it: "Woman is as it were an impotent male." Potency or power, in both its abstract and concrete connotations, continues to be associated almost exclusively with men and defined as domination and control.

Thus, power in some ways is a veritable dirty word for women. Power is regularly used against women, and in relation to the self it remains variously unimaginable, unmentionable, and hence unnameable. This was driven home to me recently in a class I teach, "Women, Violence, and Resistance." One of our readings spoke of "self-power" as a woman's most intrinsic birthright, and I asked students to address this concept. Several of them told me privately that they were at a loss to define power and asked me to suggest additional readings on the topic. Along with my usual sources, I now have an additional one to recommend most highly: Patricia Darlington and Becky Mulvaney's *Women, Power, and Ethnicity*.

This important, closely argued, and carefully researched book demonstrates an understanding that women, historically positioned as subordinate to men and in power-marked class and race relations to one another, approach questions of power differently from men as well as differently from one another. Darlington and Mulvaney provide histories of women's experiences in seven different ethnic groups and survey and interview individual members of these groups about their experiences and beliefs concerning power in a number of spheres. They find that women generally identify with the traditional model of power as domination and control, but immediately appreciate other models when they are presented with an articulated alternative during the interview process. This alternative often is implicit in their statements linking power with respect, equality, and mutuality—forms of

influence that they exercised mainly in the family and in the community. Of significance, this was most marked with Native American women who have a tradition of gender equality and complementarity. Yet women from all ethnic groups gravitated toward respectful and mutual modes of power. As Darlington and Mulvaney comment: "They may not have had a name for this alternative, but they recognized it and appreciated it when they saw it."

Clearly, for women to attain, define, and exercise power in ways that do not recapitulate the traditional model of force, domination, and control, naming and education are essential. Naming is crucial to the social construction of reality, to the validation of experience, to the acceptance of the existence of a phenomenon, and, indeed, to further bring that phenomenon into being. Darlington and Mulvaney name a concept that I would very much like to see brought into wider use, in both the private and public spheres: *reciprocal empowerment* as an optimal understanding of power. It differs even from prior feminist notions of empowerment in that it explicitly embraces *active* mutuality and refuses any sacrifice of a woman's self. They explain: "Reciprocal empowerment is a discursive and behavioral style of interaction grounded in respectful reciprocity initiated by people who interact on an equal footing and have a sense of personal authority." Its attributes include "self-determination, independence, knowledge, choice, action, and decision making with competence, compassion, companionship, and consensus to enhance oneself and others, thereby creating an environment that fosters equality, mutual respect, mutual attention, mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual responsiveness."

Darlington and Mulvaney's careful research reveals that despite recent advances, many women remain uneducated about the ways that alternative models of power exist and can be brought to bear in both the private and public spheres. To address this, they recommend education, both formal and informal, through schools as well as community forums and workplaces. That multitiered education is itself furthered through Darlington and Mulvaney's efforts here in giving voice to women in a male-dominant culture that sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly conspires to silence women. Feminist educational efforts will be enriched by their elucidation of a viable and transformative type of power, one that has grown out of women's historical experiences in both resisting dominance and in creating pri-

vate spheres for growth in the family as well as in a community. A new term—*reciprocal empowerment*—has entered the vocabulary, and that is a gift to us all.

Jane Caputi
Professor of Women's Studies
Florida Atlantic University

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Preface

Are powerful women just men walking around in dresses? This question arose as a result of an experience one of us had while attending a conference on women and power. The keynote speaker at that conference, a well-known business executive, was emphatic in her statements urging women that “to be powerful you must learn to act like a man. Be willing to forgo friendships, especially with other women. Don’t expect to have a family if you want to get to the top, and you better learn how to sacrifice.” Halfway through her presentation, the room that had earlier been filled to capacity with women began to empty rapidly. At the end of her talk, four women remained in the room. All four women—who totally disagreed with the speaker’s ideas—stayed not to offer congratulations on a job well done, but to offer a challenge to the presenter. All four had stories of powerful women they knew who did not epitomize any of the attributes of control and domination to which the speaker alluded.

After the conference, the two of us discussed this incident and realized that we were both concerned that some women may have adopted traditionally male patterns of behavior in an effort to gain and maintain power in the public sphere (in business, industry, politics, academics, and the like). Popular self-help and how-to manuals are replete with evidence to suggest that some women may indeed be assuming or are being advised to mimic traditional power behaviors in order to succeed (Josefowitz, 1980).

Our personal observations and informal conversations with other women, however, led us to believe that not all women are subscribing to the traditional concept of power. We were convinced that women are indeed practicing some form of power and in many cases they consider themselves powerful. We found ourselves faced with several related questions. If women are not subscribing to the traditional concept of power, what kind of power are they practicing? Can women describe this power? If not, can they recognize it if presented with descriptions of it? Do women from different ethnicities living in the

United States use the same forms of power? In what contexts do they perceive power being practiced?

To answer these questions, we first immersed ourselves in the relevant literature on power and, more specifically, on women and power. Thus, we researched social science literature that describes a traditional male-oriented patriarchal form of power that we refer to in this book as *traditional power*. We then looked at some of the feminist literature on power that focused primarily on the *empowerment* concept made popular in the 1970s and 1980s. This led us to later feminist literature, particularly from the discipline of social work, that introduced us to the concept of *personal authority*. The research, coupled with further informal discussions with women, led us to believe that women have definite feelings about identifying with some of these forms of power when they are presented with descriptions of them. They were quickly able to identify what they do not like, but found it more difficult to state coherently what they prefer in terms of practicing power. Based on our readings and initial observations, we constructed an alternative model of power. We then decided to undertake a preliminary investigation into whether the description of this new model would resonate with a small group of women. This book centers on that investigation.

Following a discussion of the methodology used to conduct this investigation, we present in Chapter 1 our review of the literature on women and power. Chapter 1 concludes with a presentation of the model we created to introduce the concept that we call *reciprocal empowerment*. In subsequent chapters, we present the results of our ethnographic investigation.

Using a qualitative methodology, we began the process of examining how women feel about various forms of power. The purpose of our study was to determine what women from different racial/ethnic backgrounds living in the United States think about the attributes that we associated with four different forms of power: traditional power, empowerment, personal authority, and reciprocal empowerment. Pearson and Cooks (1995) suggest that rules governing research have been based in the male perspective; thus, gender research should challenge the traditional research paradigm. That is, generally these rules sustain sexist and androcentric values, do not make research available to those who need it most, create exploitative and elitist relationships between researchers and participants, and fail to acknowl-

edge the political nature of the research being conducted. We agree with Pearson and Cooks's criticisms, and we designed our study in an effort to develop a qualitative methodology which, at the very least, avoids some of the pitfalls of the male perspective. We also followed Pearson and Cooks's advice for a feminist construction of research methods.

Pearson and Cooks suggest that in doing feminist research, women and their experiences should be valued. To do this, we surveyed and interviewed women in their own cultural environments whenever possible, and we asked them to use their own language in talking about their experiences as women in their particular racial/ethnic communities as well as in American society. Furthermore, our use of open-ended interview questions allowed for the kind of transaction between researcher and participant that Pearson and Cooks advocate. Their proposal that feminist research should recognize the constructed nature of gender undergirds the theoretical framework of our entire research project as discussed in Chapter 1. Finally, Pearson and Cooks urge feminist scholars to do research that has value for women. They suggest research should "deal with practical situations that characterize the ordinary lives of women" (1995, p. 343). We have followed this guideline by asking women about their perceptions of power in relation to their positions in American society, in their own racial/ethnic communities, and as women in both contexts. We also asked them about their perceptions of power in terms of their experience at work, in the family, and in relation to their involvement with religion and politics. Our goal in this research project was to begin to determine the type of power women practice or would prefer to see practiced in various contexts. Furthermore, we hoped to determine some of the possible constraints certain forms of power may place on women in these various contexts. We may then be able to use this process to help women recognize the value of an alternative concept of power that, with its emphasis on reciprocity, "frees people from those conditions that are oppressive to them" (Pearson and Cooks, 1995, p. 343).

In conducting our study, we identified women of several ethnicities based on the demographics of our South Florida community. For this study, ethnicity pertains to a racial, national, cultural, or religious group. Specifically, we identified African-American women, Asian-American women, Caribbean-American women, European-American

women, Latin American women, Middle Eastern-American women, and Native American women. We contacted between fifteen to twenty-five women from each of these specific groups, resulting in a total of 136 women. We conceived of this as an introductory study using a small sample size, and we acknowledge that these racial/ethnic groups, or ethnicities, are gross categories that do not represent the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the various cultural groups subsumed under these broad categories. For example, although we recognize the significant cultural distinctions between Cuban-American and Puerto Rican-American women, we chose, for ease of identification, to represent them both using the umbrella term Latin American women. Similarly, the umbrella term Caribbean-American women was used to describe women from island nations such as Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

We conducted our research using two methods of data collection. First, we created a survey consisting of fifty-two statements comprising attributes of the four models of power. We tailored the survey statements to elicit responses about the participants' personal feelings concerning attributes of the four power models. The survey contained fourteen statements representing traditional power, fourteen representing reciprocal empowerment, and five each on empowerment and personal authority. We then randomized the survey statements so that no two statements describing the same power paradigm appeared consecutively. We asked participants to select their responses from a five-point scale in which 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Our second method of data collection consisted of an interview composed of thirty open-ended questions designed to determine participants' perceptions about power. We chose to adopt the open-ended format to avoid participants giving responses influenced by our wording. Although in the survey we wanted to see how our participants would respond to our descriptions of specific power attributes associated with the four paradigms, in the interview we wanted to see what attributes would emerge when the women were free to create their own descriptions of power. We designed the first five questions to elicit responses regarding (1) participants' individual perceptions of power, (2) their perceptions of what power means in American society, (3) in general, their perceptions of what power means in their

own culture, (4) their perceptions of what kind of power they—as women—have in U.S. society, and (5) their perceptions of what kind of power they—as women—have in their culture. We designed the remaining twenty-five questions to elicit responses regarding power in four different areas: work, family, religion, and politics. Specifically, we asked the respondents about their perceptions of how power *is used* and *should be used* in these areas. In order to evaluate ease of comprehension, we administered both the survey and the interview to several groups of undergraduate students in the Department of Communication at Florida Atlantic University. Based on the results, we reworded several survey statements and interview questions before conducting our study. To each survey and interview packet we attached a consent statement that also provided the research participant with a guarantee of confidentiality.

To analyze the survey data, we collapsed points one and two to create an “agree” category, and did the same with points three and four to create a “disagree” category. We then sorted results based on the particular power model to which the women were responding. We documented all interview responses in writing, and generally we transcribed responses verbatim except when editing was necessary for clarity. We interpreted responses in two ways: first, we noted the frequency in the use of particular terms, and then we associated these terms with the four power paradigms under examination. In determining which statements to associate with a particular paradigm, we first looked for a specific mention of an attribute from that model in the participant’s statement; we then did a contextual reading of each statement to determine how the attribute was being used. For example, a statement that read “I think power should be used to assert control over other people,” was interpreted as a traditional power statement; whereas, a statement that read “I like to have control over my own life” was not associated with traditional power. In certain responses, statements that did not technically use an attribute associated with one of the models we identified with a particular model based on our original definition of that model. For example, the statement “I like to have control over my own life” was interpreted as a personal authority statement, again, based on our definition of personal authority. Finally, we made note of words or terms used repeatedly by specific groups of women and which were not part of the original descriptive attributes of the models. We did this because we

began to recognize that significant power descriptors were being used by women of particular ethnicities, but which we had not included in the original list of attributes associated with each model.

Chapters 2 to 8 each begin with a historical context introducing the particular ethnic group of which the women are a part. This is followed by a description of the demographics as well as a discussion of both the survey and the interview results. In Chapter 9, we compare the results of the survey and interview for all ethnicities, and we discuss what these findings say, overall, about reciprocal empowerment and women from various ethnicities.

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We are indebted to the many people who assisted us in bringing this project to completion. We thank Dorothy Leland for naming our concept of power and for her substantive comments in the first stages of our project. We thank our department chair, Susan Reilly, for her exuberant support for our work. We also thank Susan and our colleagues Christine Scodari, Noemi Marin, and Enid Sefcovic for their substantial and perceptive comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of Chapter 1. We thank Kate Hawkins, our respondent at the Seventieth Annual Meeting of The Southern States Communication Association, whose comments and encouragement are greatly appreciated. We also want to thank Helen Ross for her patience and careful eye in proofreading the final manuscript. Of course we are indebted to Elaine Stern, our administrative assistant, for putting up with us, providing us needed supplies, and giving us motherly advice. We also thank Elcin Babacan, Jon Wyman, and Jorden Covert for seemingly endless photocopying and much-needed levity. We are ever thankful to our "Ethnicity and Communication" class members, spring semester 2000, whose research and assistance with the design and implementation of our survey and interview were instrumental to the completion of our project. In addition, Blake Reznik refined the first drafts of the survey and interview tables and Lisa Walkowich graphically reproduced the first drafts of the power diagrams. Kelly Brill patiently refined all the final tables and figures for the book. We are indebted to the significant contributions of Deana Awadallah and Melody Leite, who tallied the survey results and transcribed responses from all 136 interviews in a clear format for our analysis. In our meetings with them, they also provided us with their own insights concerning the results they were recording. In addition, Deana did all the background research on the introduction to Chapter 6 on Latin American culture and proofread the Middle Eastern introduction in Chapter 7 for cultural accuracy. We also wish to thank Dan McDonald, communications director of the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation in Hollywood, Florida, for granting us access and making arrangements

to allow interviewers to talk with women at the reservation headquarters. Last, and most important, we thank all the women who participated in our study. Their generosity in giving us their time and in sharing with us their thoughts, feelings, and insights make up the substance of this work.

Chapter 1

Power: Past, Present, and Future

As the twenty-first century opens with women assuming positions of social leadership, the dynamics of the social construction of power need to be examined. Connell (1987) notes that many social scientists viewed power as a socially mediated construct in which particular transactions involving power are easy enough to observe. However, he suggests that it is often difficult to see beyond individual acts of force or oppression to a structure of power, a set of social relations with some scope and permanence. Social science theorists, though, usually present power in ways that can be characterized as patriarchal, a situation typically problematic for women. Feminist writers have tackled the complex problems inherent in configuring a feminist framework for power that does not replicate the problems of a masculinist approach, and two alternatives to traditional power have been presented: an early conception of empowerment constructed as a culturally feminine paradigm, and more recently a perspective variously called personal authority (Rampage, 1991; Miller and Cummins, 1992), self-definition (Collins, 1990), or personal agency (Yoder, 1999). Our review of the literature reveals that scholars such as Collins (1990), Ferree and Martin (1995), Josefowitz (1980), and Reid-Merritt (1996) noted the limitations of the traditional power and empowerment models; however, little has been done in a systematic way to offer alternatives.

We believe that none of these perspectives of power, taken alone, is adequate to address the changing roles of women or the social and political challenges we face in the twenty-first century. We argue that a new model of power is needed, one that in part combines aspects of the existing models, but one that also transcends these previous notions, comprising a whole greater than its component parts.

In this book we propose and describe a new model of power that we call reciprocal empowerment. We also offer an initial investiga-

tion of how reciprocal empowerment and other socially constructed concepts of power are viewed by women of various ethnicities. This chapter introduces and discusses this model and its relationship to discursive and behavioral practices. First, we define reciprocal empowerment and note its attributes. Second, from a feminist perspective, we examine the traditional power construct as a socially mediated, patriarchal model that focuses on the ideas of self versus other. We also examine the early conceptions of empowerment and more recent discussions of personal authority. Third, we propose our reciprocal empowerment model, arguing that, for some feminists, this model may present an alternative preferable to existing constructs of power. In the subsequent chapters, we present results of a qualitative study that illustrate how reciprocal empowerment, as well as other concepts of power, are perceived and experienced by women of various ethnicities.

We define reciprocal empowerment as a discursive and behavioral style of interaction grounded in reciprocity initiated by people who feel a sense of personal authority. The personal authority aspect of reciprocal empowerment provides an individual with a level of knowledge necessary to develop a heightened self-confidence that can then lead to action. This action can, in turn, facilitate movement from the private to the public sphere. Reciprocal empowerment enables people with mutual self-interests to rise above obstacles based on social and political structures and to use personal authority to discuss and act on issues openly and honestly in order to effect change. The process of engaging in reciprocal empowerment requires that the participants have enough self-confidence and respect for others to assist them without sacrificing self. The process also requires that participants be skilled in active listening to be sufficiently knowledgeable to mediate reasoned discussions that can create mutually beneficial outcomes. Although the process facilitates reasoned discussion, it does not entail abandoning one's own stance to avoid antagonism. The fact that reciprocal empowerment focuses on mutuality works to provide a process that eliminates the potential for interactions to degenerate into traditional power-over exchanges.

This process transcends existing notions of power that contain tensions embodied in gendered discourse. Typically, power has been masculinized by the public discourse of patriarchy. Reciprocal empowerment offers a degendered form of interaction that transcends

both the masculinized models of power as well as the feminized empowerment model popular during the first wave of feminism.

Reciprocal empowerment combines the attributes of *self-determination*, *independence*, *knowledge*, *choice*, and *action* embodied in the personal authority model with the early empowerment model's attributes of *compassion*, *companionship*, *collectivity*, *consensus*, and *competence* to enhance *oneself* and *others*, thereby creating an egalitarian environment that fosters *mutual attention*, *mutual empathy*, *mutual engagement*, and *mutual responsiveness*. Reciprocal empowerment, therefore, combines the personal authority construct with the early empowerment conception to form a nongendered, nonhierarchical model. The paradigm includes the internal and external, involving both the process of gaining power and the results that are produced by having power, albeit a power that differs from the traditional perspective.

Before beginning our discussion, we feel it necessary to respond to a charge put forth by Dow (1995), who suggests that because feminist approaches and women's experiences cannot be viewed as monolithic, feminist scholars should "discuss the feminist assumptions that fuel their scholarship" and "engage with the implications of those assumptions" (p. 112). Various scholars (Alcoff, 1988; Jaggar, 1983; Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1984; Weedon, 1987) describe different feminist perspectives and discuss their theoretical implications at length. Among these perspectives are liberal, radical, socialist, cultural, and Marxist feminism, as well as feminist poststructuralism, and women-of-color feminism. Jaggar and Rothenberg (1984) note that women-of-color feminist theorists do not utilize any single theoretical framework, and we, too, do not adhere to a particular perspective. We do, however, share assumptions associated with some of these feminist approaches. These assumptions direct the character of our reciprocal empowerment model. For example, we embrace the values of individual dignity, equality, and autonomy postulated by the liberal theory of human nature (Jaggar, 1983). This view accepts the potential for personal agency which we realize has been questioned extensively by poststructuralist feminists and which we discuss later. However, we do not subscribe to the separation of the public and private spheres historically fostered by liberal theory. In addition, we agree with black feminists (among others) who note the ethnocentricity of

liberal feminism, a perspective that historically ignored the interrelations between racism and sexism.

We also share the concern of women-of-color feminists whose writings "reflect a concern that the complexities of race and gender (and often class as well) be explored simultaneously. They caution us against hasty over-generalizations about women's situation, generalizations that have often reflected only the experience of white, middle-class women" (Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1984, p. 89). We acknowledge that the different experiences of women are significant. For example, Humm (1992) states that "a black woman's family and labor market experience might shape her economic inequality but also, and often, the family might be a source of succor and collective support. Therefore, the strident feminist calls in the 1970s for abortion on demand could not adequately address these black understandings of the family and of sexuality" (p. 122); furthermore, it must be recognized that race, class, and gender are "*interlocking* systems of oppression not additive systems . . . [and that] most [black and Asian feminists] take feminism to involve a recognition of 'multiple identities'" (p. 122).

Although women-of-color feminists highlight the influence of culture and ethnicity, they should not be confused with cultural feminists, some of whom, Alcoff (1988) suggests, advocate essentialism. We, too, wish to avoid the essentialist perspective, which, according to Foss, Foss, and Griffin (1999) is "the view that women and men are biologically determined" (p. 171), and instead suggest that previous models of power, early empowerment, and personal authority arose out of or developed in response to patriarchy, a set of structural relations existing in "the institutions and social practices of our society . . . in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men" (Weedon, 1987, pp. 2-3). Weedon defines patriarchy as a structure embedded in social institutions and practices, and suggests that it should not be confused with any so-called inherent qualities of individual men and women.

We also wish to avoid charges of relativism that may be raised about the concept of reciprocal empowerment by stating that its practice does not necessarily or always involve questions of moral or epistemological relativism. The attributes or characteristics inherent to the process of reciprocal empowerment do reflect certain values, such as equality and respect; hence, reciprocal empowerment can be

used fully only by participants willing to abide by such values. As such, we take a stance in developing our model that lies between absolutism and unbridled relativism. Alcoff (1996) describes this position in her discussion of Putnam:

We have reason to doubt specific claims and to take issue with other cultures' beliefs on specific issues, but because these doubts are based on specific reasons (such as lack of evidence, failure to cohere with our other beliefs on the subject, and so on), they do not lead to the all-encompassing suspension of belief that a total relativism implies. (p. 180)

Similarly, we agree with the rational relativistic view articulated by LaFollette (1991):

Thus, we should instruct each other in the basic principles inherited from the past (respect for persons, reverence for human life, etc.) and act upon those as circumstances warrant. Then, we must listen and talk. We must non-defensively hear other's evaluations of our actions and non-condemnatorily offer reactions to theirs—all the while acknowledging our and their fallibility. (pp. 152-153)

This discussion, then, defines our position as feminists who embrace the potential for personal agency, are sensitive to the differences in women's experiences, do not subscribe to the separation of the public and private spheres, are mindful of patriarchy as a set of structural relationships enacted via discourse, and are unconvinced by arguments espousing essential differences between women and men.

POWER: ITS VARIOUS FORMS

To address issues related to power, empowerment, and personal authority, it is important to discuss the historical and social use of the terms as they relate to men and women.

Traditional Power

Power as a construct has been around since the emergence of humans in society. Numerous writers and researchers have examined the term and detailed its various uses, meanings, and implications. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1993) offers as some of its definitions of the term *power* the following: (1) possession of control, authority, or influence over others, (2) physical might, (3) political control or influence, and (4) the ability or capacity to exercise control. The dictionary gives the following words as synonyms: authority, control, sway, command, and dominion. These synonyms indicate that the concept of power has historically not been intended to connote a female's position in many aspects of society except, perhaps, within the family structure.

Social Science Perspectives of Power

Merriam-Webster's popular definition of power as "the ability or capacity to exercise control" differs little from social science definitions and conceptions. A review of the social science literature shows that, until recently, very little usage of the term related to women, with most discussions using men as referents and emphasizing influence and control. Furthermore, definitions of power are based on wealth, resources, influence, control, and physical strength. They characterize power as the ability to get someone to do what you want despite initial resistance, and they discuss power as a form of control over resources. Lips (1991) suggests that these definitions view power as a commodity, but she argues that "Power is the process of bargaining and compromise in which priorities are set and decisions made in relationships" (p. 4). Similarly, Janeway (1980) sees power not as a commodity, but as something we *do*. Power, then, is not a thing available only to the elite, but rather a process we all engage in.

Connell (1987) posits that power may be a balance of advantage or inequality of resources in a workplace, a household, or a larger institution. According to Goodrich (1991), "those who dominate have much more power-to than do their subordinates, and thereby they have the means to increase their domination. Key for that purpose is the power to name and define things" (p. 8). This ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideas and define morality—