

‘Validation Techniques and Counter Strategies ‘

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Methods for dealing with power structures and changing social climates

By

Diana Amnéus, doctoral candidate in Public International Law

Ditte Eile (former Jonasson), doctoral candidate in Pedagogy

Ulrika Flock, doctoral candidate in Biochemistry

Pernilla Rosell Steuer, Ph.D. in German

Gunnel Testad, doctoral candidate in Literature Studies

English Translation by:

Stockholm University

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Introduction

The subtle oppression patterns displayed in interactions between men and women were defined and categorized by Berit Ås as Master Suppression Techniques (Ås, 1992, 1978). These Master Suppression Techniques that we refer to as ruler techniques are, according to Ås, either methods employed to obtain or maintain negative power over other people, or ways to assert oneself by oppressing other individuals. To begin with, Berit Ås defined five such techniques (Ås, 1978) which she called *Making Invisible* - that in this text is referred to as *Invizibilising*, *Ridiculing*, *Withholding Information*, *Damned If You Do*, *Damned If You Don't*, and *Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame*. Later on, in a radio broadcast ("Freja", 2003), Ås also identified *Objectification* along with *Threats & Violence* as methods used by men to gain negative power over – to suppress – women. This paper, however, will not deal further with these last two techniques.

The faculty of Social Science at Stockholm University presented Ås' theories in a series of seminars for female PhD students during the spring of 2003. The women in the audience identified with the problems presented in the material, and we sighed and raged in turn as we realized that we had also been exposed to oppression in the very ways that Berit Ås describes. And we were not alone. Discussions with coworkers and friends made it clear that far too many people had experienced these scenarios. Both women, and men, were familiar with the humiliation involved with being the target of ruler techniques /techniques/, but many were also painfully aware of the fact that they had employed these techniques themselves. Ruler techniques, we realized, are not necessarily gender bound.

Swedish studies have demonstrated (Mählk, 2003) that a comparatively large number of women leave the academic world with the following justification upon concluding their PhDs: "It wasn't really my arena". Mählk showed that even the departments most attuned to gender issues had informal and submerged power structures that efficiently closed the doors on continued academic careers for women. On August 3, 2004, the Swedish national paper *Svenska Dagbladet* contained an article in which female members of the Swedish parliament, using Ås' theories as a starting point, also described a hidden power structure that suppressed and limited their behavior and their ability to express themselves in their workplace. Men also express an awareness of these hidden structures. Many men, for example, feel apprehensive about being too friendly with other people's children these days, because they might be suspected of being pedophiles. This is a

classic double-bind situation, men are both encouraged in expressing their feelings and then subtly discouraged by hidden structures from doing so. In the business sector, the issue of there being too few women in top management positions is discussed from the point of view that there are not enough qualified women around. This shows that techniques that belittle women and make them invisible are prevalent in that sector as well. Within the family sphere, men are perceived as being “good” and “helpful” if they take paternity leave and share parenting duties; duties that for women are expected. This attitude limits men, and keeps them from assuming their natural positions as fathers and as human beings. These few examples clearly illustrate, that the use of suppression and oppression techniques are, unfortunately, far too common.

Once we had concluded how common these ruler techniques were, we decided something had to be done. We asked ourselves what could be done to promote genuine, far-reaching change in social climates. How could people relate to each other without resorting to oppression? Our aim was to answer these questions, and what we ended up doing was developing concrete strategies for meeting the ruler techniques when they happen as well as validation techniques that are basic methods for change. This paper presents the results of our efforts. In order to foster a long-term improvement of the social working climate at Stockholm University, we also founded the Empowerment Network at Stockholm University (ENSU) in June 2004. The network was officially supported and funded by the University in September 2004. The main objective of ENSU is to transform power structures and promote equality at Stockholm University through working with the counter strategies and validation techniques presented below. The findings we present in this paper are thus:

1. **Counter strategies**, methods for dealing with master suppression techniques
2. **Validation techniques**, methods for changing social climates

The object of these techniques is to provide tools for people who feel they have been oppressed or compromised, to empower them to do something about their situation, to take command of their own lives; in other words, to provide them with the power to actually make a difference. The material presented here is not fully comprehensive, and does not claim to be the only correct course of action. On the contrary, our results are meant to be examples of how to deal with unjust behavior in our social lives. It is important to shape new attitudes and to create new patterns for interaction. These counter strategies and validation techniques offer concrete examples of how to

move forward in our interactions, and may provide the means for far-reaching change in both the professional and private social spheres of our lives.

1 Ruler Technique: INVISIBILIZING

The object of this technique is conveying the message that you do not exist; that what you say or do has no importance or value. This technique can be expressed in many different ways, through speech and by way of body language and other social cues. Depending on the context, it could consist of not introducing you, or that your name is never mentioned, but it could also be that your position or your efforts are discussed in dismissive terms. More indirect varieties of this technique involve distraction: While you are talking, people might scrape their chairs, shuffle papers, cough, or clear their throats. Another approach is a lack of response – no one takes notes or asks any questions that would show they were interested in what you had to say. There could be numerous reasons for this kind of behavior. It could be due to habit, malice, or even ignorance. In all these cases, the object is to make the target of this behavior feel insignificant and insecure.

Counter strategy: TAKING UP SPACE

The Invisibilizing Technique can be countered in various ways. There could be a number of different reasons why this technique was employed, which means it makes sense to be cautious and not be openly confrontational. Avoid turning into a victim and do not allow yourself to feel insignificant. Possibly the most important aspect in such a situation is not showing anger or frustration, simply insist on your right to be acknowledged in a calm and self-confident manner. It is, however, imperative to act immediately. If you hesitate too long, the damage might already be done. You need to show that you will not accept this type of behavior. Depending on the manner in which the suppression technique was applied, there are different ways of doing this.

In a discussion where you have the floor, but the others are not listening, you can stop talking as soon as you notice that they are not paying attention. By clearly indicating that you would like them to listen, and by showing that it is important to you that they do so, your explicit request will make it impossible for them to continue to dismiss you without being rude. Claim the space you need. Demand respect.

In many cases it is important to provide a direct verbal response to cues that make you feel invisible. Alert people to the fact that this behavior is unpleasant by saying, “Did I hear that correctly? ‘Did you say...?’ , or ‘Do you really mean...?’ Responses should be formulated as

questions rather than accusations. Another strategy is to use humor, a light-hearted touch, to disarm anyone using this suppressive technique: “Listen, I know it can happen to the best of people, but you forgot to introduce me.”

However, if you notice that someone frequently employs this type of technique, you might as well avoid that particular person whenever possible.

Validation Technique: VISIBILIZING

Behavior that contributes towards creating a climate where Master Suppression Techniques are not used—a climate of mutual respect—involves taking each and every individual you encounter seriously, and showing them you take an interest in them. By listening to other people, providing them with feedback and constructive criticism, you acknowledge them and validate them. This will inspire respect and indirectly result in your own validation, you gain visibility as well.

2 Ruler Technique: RIDICULING

The second suppression technique formulated by Berit Ås is Ridiculing. This technique conveys a lack of equality, anyone ridiculing someone else dominates the situation at hand. Ridicule diminishes and belittles its victims, reducing the target of this ridicule to a figure of fun. And who does not want to have fun? Only in this case, the laughter stings and could crush the person in question.

Ridiculing women and traditionally female pursuits and traits is commonplace in our society, so commonplace that imprints are even left on the language: Women “chatter” and “gossip”, they’re referred to with words such as hag, whore, airhead, slut, ball-and-chain, and hysterical. Jokes reproduce this atmosphere of ridicule by comparing women to hens, cows, dogs, etc. The number of derisive words for women appears to be greater than that for men. Unfortunately, women have a tendency to belittle themselves as well with expressions such as “I’m such a ditz!”, “Silly me!”, or “How could I be so stupid?”

A closely related phenomenon is infantilization. This involves treating someone like a child, and anticipating a childlike response in return—a rather convenient stance, since the other person takes on the role of adult or parent, and knows what is best. If you are dismissed with phrases such as “Oh, honey/sweetie/my dear girl, what are you doing? How are you going to manage?”, you have been subjected to infantilization. The risk here is that this behavior can be perceived as sweet at first, it feels like the other person is looking out for you. The truth of the matter is, however, that you have been efficiently stopped in your tracks, you have been belittled.

Counter strategy: QUESTIONING

Do not simply accept conventions. Keep your cool and define yourself as a strong person, someone entitled to respect. Never allow yourself to be engulfed by the sensation of degradation and shame triggered by the manipulative behavior of others. Display your expertise and avoid the trap of belittlement (infantilization). Assert yourself. Speak up if jokes are in poor taste. Challenge the use of ridicule. Remain composed and logical, and make it clear that you do not intend to accept this kind of treatment. Never join in the laughter.

The following phrases could be helpful for calling in question certain behavior, and they can provide you with greater visibility as well:

- “What do you mean? I would like you to explain and tell me precisely what you mean.”
- Repeat verbatim the words used, and ask for an explanation
 - “Hang on, what did you say?”
 - “Have I understood you correctly?”
 - “This is what I heard you say: Is it what you intended to convey? Please explain.”

Validation Technique: RESPECTING

The opposite of ridicule and infantilization is respect; to sincerely acknowledge and support the people you interact with, treating them like adults, allowing them to feel important. It is possible to ensure that women are provided with enough space by asking for their input and opinions. In meetings, it's good to have a group that reinforces each other's views. It is also good to really do your homework, making it more difficult for a climate of ridicule to take hold.

3 Ruler Technique: WITHHOLDING INFORMATION

Withholding information is a power play, one that may hold back or limit another individual or group—people are unable to act in their own best interests when they have not had access to the pertinent information. Not being made privy to news items, minutes of meetings, written communications, or invitations could lead to an overly delayed or erroneous response. An example of this could be as follows: Certain work issues may have been settled by the “boys” over a game of soccer after work. At a later date, when the meeting takes place—and the women are present as well—the decision they settled might be pushed through very quickly.

Counter strategy: CARDS ON THE TABLE

It is possible to recognize the withholding information scenario and demand that all “players” put their cards on the table. Raise the question if a decision may have been made (one that requires your consent) over your head. Does “everyone else” refer to certain issues or facts as if they were self-evident? Call attention to the fact that you have not received all the information available. If you have been repeatedly subjected to the withholding of information, point this out to the person in charge (such as your supervisor) and indicate that there are structural issues at work that result in your not receiving the information you are entitled to. No decisions are to be made if one or more members of a project are absent, or if they have not received sufficient information. As a co-worker in a team effort, you can request that everyone puts their cards on the table, and you can remind the rest of the group that, say, “this group consists of four individuals who all have the right to discuss the issues, and I belong to this group.” *Pacta sunt servanda*—a deal is a deal. In addition to this, you can ride on the efforts of others by saying something like: “Oh, so you’ve already discussed this? That’s great! Now tell me your conclusions, so we can make our decision.”

To sum up:

- You are not stupid, someone is making you seem stupid by withholding information.
- Demand that deadlines for important issues are postponed if more time is needed for gathering and assimilating information.
- For major decisions, make being thoroughly briefed a baseline requirement.
- Use your own network to obtain information.

Unless you are convinced of intentional misconduct, always assume that any withholding of information is due to:

- discrepancies in the information structure
- that the person in question is unaware of their behavior and the consequences thereof

Validation Technique: INFORMATION

In order not to practice the withholding of information yourself, you must be scrupulous about informing all pertinent parties and including them in the decision-making process. This applies to both the professional and private areas of your life. If decisions are made over our heads, we may feel overlooked and offended. Quieter individuals must be taken into account; they may not feel capable of speaking up for themselves due to age or shyness issues. Have you ever discussed a problem outside working hours? Be prepared to present your thoughts and account for your conclusions. The guiding principle is transparency. In addition to this, you need to be prepared for the fact that decisions might be postponed. It's the supervisor's job to determine the correct forum for discussion, and he or she should also specify that certain subjects are not to be discussed outside business hours. Remember that everyone—regardless of gender—practices ruler techniques, and 90 % of the time it is not a conscious strategy.

4 Ruler Technique: DAMN YOU IF YOU DO AND DAMN YOU IF YOU DON'T

If you're conscientious, people say you're fussy, if you're outspoken, they say you're too dominating, and if you're a good listener, you're dismissed as being weak. If you channel most of your efforts into work, you're accused of neglecting your children or your partner, and if things are the other way around, you're told you lack drive. To top it off, your mate, child, supervisor or gym buddy gets disappointed and upset whenever he or she is not your top priority, or if you do not have enough time for him/her. This double-bind is a suppressive technique that leaves you feeling that whatever choice you make, it will be the wrong one.

Counter strategy: BREAK FREE OF THE PATTERN

Figuring out your own priorities and understanding your own situation will make it easier to deal with the double bind. The objective is to break free of the pattern that produces negative projections by 1) requesting information as to, for example, just how set a certain deadline actually is, and what the consequences are if you fail to complete your work on time; 2) stating your current priorities and discussing the impact of these with your supervisor/family/friend. The next step is for you to assess and define the importance of each aspect at that point in time. When you are confronted with the sensation that everything you do is wrong, you can run this mantra through your mind: "I know why I'm doing what I'm doing; I know what is important to me." You can tell the person in question something like: "I'm sorry you feel that way, but right now my top priority is my health/my family/my own well-being/my work, and I'm convinced that I can still contribute to this situation/relationship/organization. I want to be a part of this group/department, but at this time I also have other priorities. I hope that you are able to accept this. I understand if this situation makes you feel neglected/upset/lonely/less important, but it isn't personal. I respect you/ appreciate you/ love you. Please respect my judgment."

Validation Technique: DOUBLE REWARD

Requirements and expectations that are based on "whatever I choose to do is right", are what the validation technique Double Reward involves: "it is a blessing if you do" and "a blessing if you don't" perspective. It is easier to maintain this perspective if you assume that people always try to do the best they can with regard to their circumstances. This line of thinking makes it easier to fight the use of oppressive techniques, however, even though people try to do their best, that does

not necessarily mean they will not make mistakes. Showing up late for a meeting or at the daycare center is not the right thing to do, but if you keep in mind that this person was trying to do their best to arrive on time, you will be able to discuss the importance of being punctual and discuss how things will be in the future, instead of being upset or disappointed. If I have to rush from one appointment to another, I should be able to alert the group of this and ask, for example, if it is all right if I leave during a break before the meeting is over to avoid disrupting the session. In that case, I could ask for a brief review of the proceedings during the next session to find out what I missed.

In other words, it is possible to influence the outcome of an undertaking or a family situation. If your co-workers/supervisors/family members have any reservations, you need to discuss the matter at hand and clarify your priorities. This helps us understand that when people say they cannot go to lunch/ play badminton/take part in a project, they are simply saying no to the activity at hand, and are not disassociating themselves from the relationship they have with you. This is a pivotal point when we maintain the perspective that others are doing the best they can. It becomes a win-win situation: Whatever we choose to do is the right thing.

5 Ruler Technique: HEAPING BLAME & PUTTING TO SHAME

The fifth suppression technique involves making you feel ashamed and guilty for an action, a trait, a certain development, or a situation, even though you are not the cause of a certain sequence of events. This technique is related to the fourth technique, the double bind, and is also somewhat less tangible and harder to define than the three first categories. However, blaming someone and putting them to shame can be described as the total sum of the preceding techniques: People who do not receive the information they need become invisibilized, and those who are ridiculed and punished no matter what they do finally have no other choice but to internalize this message and feel guilty and ashamed: “I’m a failure, it’s all my fault.” Concrete examples of this can be found in many everyday situations, it could be women who feel guilty because they are unable to complete their tasks, instead of taking a critical look at their working situation; or parents that blame themselves for everything that goes wrong with their children. In more extreme situations, society may, either implicitly or explicitly, convey the message that a woman is “guilty” if she was raped or abused, because she was wearing the “wrong” type of clothing or happened to be in the “wrong” neighborhood. The common denominator for the use of this oppressive technique is that shame and guilt are heaped on people externally, while the feelings are experienced internally - aspects that make this behavior particularly difficult to identify as a ruler technique.

Counter strategy: INTELLECTUALIZATION

It is not easy to identify a clear-cut and effective counterstrategy to this heaping-of-blame-and-putting-to-shame scenario. An important first step is to make yourself aware that these feelings of guilt and shame are being applied by someone else. Expressing your feelings in words is beneficial. As far as possible, try to see yourself at a distance and intellectualize the most recent occasions where you felt guilty and ashamed. What went on, exactly? Why did you feel guilty? Then move on to the surrounding environment: How do you think others perceived the situation? Was the situation problematic or ridden with anxiety for other people, and could it be that someone—consciously or unconsciously—tried to “dump” their problems on you? Was there a *hidden* message, and how would you express this agenda? Since we all rely on being a part of a group, could it possibly be important for the members of the group to “save face” in certain relationships and situations, even if it involves a subconscious decision to surrender your own sense of self-esteem?

A third step would be to look even further, to survey past events and see a particular situation in the light of previous cultural traditions and standards. This step will help you see patterns in the way you and others behave, patterns which may give you insight into how we all learn to assume feelings of guilt and shame.

Validation Technique: SETTING REASONABLE STANDARDS

The opposite route of making people feel ashamed and guilty is to validate them, to back them up and support them. By understanding cultural patterns from a broader point of view, you can get rid of your guilt if you recognize that you have been subjected to an unreasonable level of responsibility. Since people internalize guilt and shame, these validation techniques need to work from within as well. You need to see yourself and others in a new light, and define other, *positive*, standards that suit the life you choose to live. In situations where, say, the standards of a working mother collide with traditional patriarchal patterns, validation by other women in the same situation becomes even more important, helping the mother create a new identity that is not based on guilt and shame from external sources, so she can embrace a positive outlook on life.

Summary

The first step leading to change is *awareness*. An awareness that something that has occurred provides us with a starting point, an encounter to experience and to relate to—and this knowledge is provided by Ås’ theories and definitions. The second step is calling attention by /visibilizing/ being aware of oppressive situations, and intellectualizing them; that is, removing them from ones own internal feelings and seeing them for what they are - techniques to rule and suppress others. The purpose of the counter strategies is to provide concrete examples of how to do this. The third step in affecting change is to do it yourself; /to lead by example by behaving/ leading and behaving by example in accordance with the validation techniques. A summary of the different techniques are listed below:

<u>Ruler Technique</u>	<u>Counter strategy</u>	<u>Validation Technique</u>
Invisibilizing	Taking up space	Visibilizing
Ridiculing	Questioning	Respecting
Withholding	Cards on Table	Informing
<u>/Damned if do or don't/ Damn if you do and damn if you don't</u>	Altering Pattern	Double Reward
Guilt & shame	Intellectualization	Setting Reasonable Standards

There is a word in English that has particular relevance here and that word is “ensue”, which means to go on fighting, to move forward, and to not give up. And this is precisely what we must do to achieve enduring far-reaching change with regard to negative, oppressive social patterns. /“The buck stops here”/or better according to the English experts: / “Enough is enough”, is our motto. This is as far as it goes. We are taking our responsibility to put a stop to this behavior. To change /us/ ourselves /or to effect changes in ourselves/ in order to be able to change our surroundings and make a lasting impact on the next generation of men and women. This means that we will have to work harder and no longer silently accept this behavior or just gripe about it

in private. This is the climate we would like to work in: People should feel good about their workplace, and feel good about their lives. Anything less than that is not good enough. Increase awareness, bring issues into the open, intellectualize and lead by example - these tasks are our responsibility.

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Contact the authors of this paper:

diana.amneus@juridicum.su

ditte.eile@ali.se

ulrika.flock@dbb.su.se

rosellsteuer@hotmail.com

gunneltestad@yahoo.com

For contact with the Empowerment Network at Stockholm University (the ENSU network)

see: www.ensu.su.se