

Patriarchy: An Experiential Definition

Dr Elisabeth A Horst Dr Elisabeth A Horst is a practicing psychologist in Minneapolis and a member of the ISTI Board.

"What is patriarchy, exactly?" asked a courageous member of the ISTI board at our recent meeting. "We've been using the term as if we all know what it means, but do we?" Good question, I thought. But how do I begin to shape an answer?

The question came in the midst of an intense discussion of gender, power, and spirituality. The ISTI board has made a commitment to educating itself about issues related to sexual misconduct by clergy, the better to focus our efforts on healing and prevention. The board had already identified the relationship between gender and power as a key issue. Our culture's gender-linked imbalance of power does not in and of itself cause sexual abuse; sexual misconduct is the action of an individual who is personally accountable. "The patriarchy made me do it" is no more adequate as a defense than "She was asking for it." Still, we recognize that our patriarchal culture does create a context for the abuse of power. Patriarchal assumptions make it hard to see sexual misconduct and the responsibility of offenders because they blur the distinctions between abuse and consent. Therefore, defining patriarchy is crucial. If we can't define the term, how can we understand how abuse happens?

I wanted very badly to give a clear answer to the question but found myself groping for words. It's not so much that a definition is hard to come by. It's more that a definition does not give us the full meaning. You can define oxygen and still not understand its importance in your life. You can define patriarchy and still not get it. Before I offer something like a definition, then, I want to tell a story.

Several years ago I was working on a qualitative study of intimacy. Qualitative research is risky. You deal with words and nuances and a large amount of written material rather than neat numbers that can be summarized by even neater numbers. The trick is finding some way to summarize the information you've collected while remaining faithful to the interview material. One day I

was looking at the way the people I had interviewed talked about conflict with intimate others. I had decided to alternate between searching for gender similarities and gender differences; this particular day I was looking for differences. I opened transcripts to the pages that contained our discussions of conflict situations and I read and reread them, waiting for some kind of pattern to emerge.

I knew I was finally onto something when I put the transcript of an eighteen-year-old girl next to that of an eighteen-year-old boy. Both were talking about how they handled conflicts with their parents. Both were explaining that they generally avoided open expressions of anger and disagreement. The girl said, "Part of me wanted to be totally honest with (my father), but I knew that he didn't want to hear it, I knew that he didn't want to hear the whole truth." The boy said, "What I want to do is what I want, and what (my parents) want is different, and it's not gonna get anywhere if I just try to convince them that I'm right, 'cause they won't believe it."

The difference, I was beginning to see, had to do with those "wants" — he wants, I want. Who gets to want? I was getting more excited at the prospect of grasping a real gender difference. I looked at more transcripts, and sure enough, the pattern repeated itself. In fact, it was so consistent that there were no exceptions among the forty interviews. In talking about conflict, girls and women talked about the needs of the other, boys and men talked about their own needs.

It turned out that the only males who even mentioned the needs of the other person involved in the conflict were the married men; they talked about their wives' needs as if they were on a par with their own. The married women were the only females who mentioned their own needs; they talked about their needs as if they were less important than their husbands' needs. For a few minutes, I was elated. I had it! It was the most clear-cut, consistent finding of the study. All my hard work had paid off!

As I worked to get this pattern down on paper clearly, I began to feel sick instead. Forty people had all told me the same thing about conflict in close relationships: what men want matters more than what women want. Not that they would agree with so bold a statement. Many of them would probably even be angry at the suggestion. But like it or not, see it or not, they talked as if it was a rule that they followed, a pattern that shaped their lives and relationships. Forty bright, well-educated individuals under the age of thirty-five, people who had grown up with the idea of women in the work force as a natural part of life, people living out the changes brought about by the

women's movement of the 1960s, forty of my peers had told me that when interests conflict, it's the male who gets to want.

For me, that's the essence of patriarchy. It's a system that's as hard to see as the air we breathe, something we do as naturally and thoughtlessly as walking. It's a way we move, a way we talk, a way we present ourselves, that assumes that men's needs deserve priority. In the dance of an intimate relationship, the woman, like Ginger Rogers, moves backward and in heels.

I'm not saying that women don't exert influence or that men always have their way. I am saying that we act as if that's the way it's supposed to be. Women do speak up, but they apologize far more often than men do for taking up time or expressing strong opinions. Women do get their own way, but they feel obligated to attend to men's feelings in the process. I'm also not saying that men somehow conspire to oppress women. We all agree to do this dance together, and changing the steps disturbs all of us. Women do have power in relationships, and it's up to us to decide to use it openly and responsibly. In order to do that, we have to see the many ways that we all act as if we are maintaining a comfortable imbalance of power.

Patriarchy as a legal system is being slowly but steadily dismantled in this country. Unlike my grandmothers, I grew up knowing that I would be allowed to vote when I turned eighteen. Unlike my mother, I was allowed to dream of a career besides teacher, nurse, secretary or housewife. As an unconscious rule for defining power interactions in relationships, however, patriarchy has persisted even as the laws enforcing it have been changed. Mail regularly comes to our house addressed to Dr and Mrs Mark Horst, even though both of us hold doctorates and both of us are married. Men who hit men face more direct consequences than men who hit women. Women appear in the newspaper as victims or the subjects of human interest stories; men as experts, institutional representatives, or offenders. A husband is the subject of ridicule if he is "henpecked," a wife if she "wears the pants." Psychologists' definitions of "mentally healthy adult" and "mentally healthy man" overlap substantially; their definition of "mentally healthy woman" differs from both. Patriarchy will persist in our minds and hearts as long as we treat "powerful woman" as an oxymoron.

If you find yourself trying to explain away the facts I am presenting, trying to pretty up the picture I am painting, trying to convince yourself that you and your friends certainly don't behave that way, then try just sitting with it for a minute instead. Most of us, myself included, don't like to think about our own unconscious cooperation with patriarchy. Getting beyond the point of defining

patriarchy as an abstract concept, to the place where we see concrete ways it shapes behavior and influences interactions, is emotionally as well as intellectually demanding work. Feeling uncomfortable, defensive, angry, sick, is all part of the process. Sticking with the project in the face of these feelings requires emotional stamina and generosity of spirit. If you are willing to press forward despite the discomfort, then ask yourself what it does to people, to healthy, mature, human adults, to be expected consistently to resolve conflicts by favoring one gender over the other. Would it make it harder for a woman to say no to a man in a sexual situation? Would it make it harder for a man to understand the destructive impact of his inappropriate sexual advances? If you can feel the sickening tug of injustice in your gut, you're getting it. The next time you're in a room with both women and men present, notice who talks first, who interrupts, who apologizes. Can you see the unspoken rules about who follows and who leads? If you begin to feel angry, you're understanding the impact of an unjust system.

When you're angry enough to want to do something about it, try behaving for a few minutes like someone of the other gender. If you're a man, apologize for offering your opinion. Look down when you speak, and start with a disclaimer: "I know this is only my own quirky way of looking at the world, but...." If you're a woman, interrupt someone. Look that person in the eye and say, "What we all need to do here is...." Pay attention to how this feels. If you feel uncomfortable, exposed, awkward, then you are beginning to understand what victims and offenders have to go through in order to identify sexual misconduct as abusive. And if you can understand that in your gut, then you are on your way to having a useful definition of patriarchy.

A useful definition, you see, goes beyond linguistic and conceptual accuracy to convey something about the impact of patriarchy on human lives and behavior. For those of us working to undo the problem of clergy sexual misconduct, a truly useful definition will help us understand from the inside how people get themselves into abusive situations, and will offer some insight into how to get outside of the system that perpetuates the abuse.

So here is my definition, or, rather, my series of definitions. Patriarchy is a lens that keeps certain things out of focus. It is etiquette disguised as ethics, a system of more or less arbitrary values masquerading as the natural and right order of things. It defines men as the standard for humanity and women as something slightly less than that, and therefore robs us all of our full humanity. Patriarchy is what makes women believe that they are supposed to serve the needs of men, and encourages men to accept this as their due.

In the predominant case of sexual activity between a male pastor and a female member of his congregation, patriarchal assumptions make it hard for the woman to say no, hard for the man to recognize that his behavior is hurtful, and easy for both to pin the responsibility on the woman. Patriarchy allows us to call it an affair rather than an abuse of power, to be titillated by the scandal rather than outraged at the injustice. It keeps us from seeing the extent of the damage and the exact nature of the offense. Patriarchy may not be the cause of sexual abuse, but it is its best friend. Understanding that is what really matters. E.H.