

THINK. RE-THINK.

Accountable Communities

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For nearly a quarter century, The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse (NW Network) has worked to end domestic violence and create the conditions needed to support loving and equitable relationships. For much of that time, NW Network advocates have endeavored to develop a tenable practice of “Community Accountability” in activist communities.

We knew the need was urgent from our own experiences and from people who sought our services. We watched, over and over again, as the community mobilized unwittingly to defend abusive people. We sat in poetry slams while people who battered publicly degraded their partners in politically charged rants, the activist community swooning at their feet. We endured the petty power plays of batterers rallying activist groups to retaliate against

networks of friends, other organizations, or our organization for helping their partner. We saw popularity and coolness dictate who would be salvaged and who would be savaged. We hoped that by building strong, transparent Community Accountability processes, we could confront some of these pernicious problems of harm and collusion as part of our long-term work toward transforming our communities into spaces that could foster loving and equitable relationships.

As we worked and struggled through the Community Accountability process, we noticed recurring limitations in the application of many of its central principles. Some of these limitations are discussed below.

THE IDEA OF “HOLDING SOMEONE ACCOUNTABLE.”

Community Accountability processes often center on a group holding an individual accountable for their actions. This has contributed to a distorted understanding of “accountability,” i.e., the mistaken idea that accountability is at its most fundamental level an external process rather than an internal skill.

The NW Network is a very survivor-centered place. We understand people who are surviving abuse to be agents—people who are the subjects of their own lives, not simply objects of abusers’ control and exploitation. As survivors, we recognize that being able to think critically about our own choices, knowing that what we do matters, and being able to be accountable to ourselves for our actions (even while locating those choices within the context of abuse and exploitation) are hallmarks of “being in charge of one’s own life.” For survivors, being accountable to the people who are battering them is not a real option. Folks who batter use their partners’ mistakes to further their own control: *Who are you to talk? If they knew what you’ve done, they’d never help you! You can’t leave me, you owe me.* But, like all people, survivors need the products of accountability: release from guilt and shame, reconciliation with oneself and one’s community, being out from under the obligation that comes from harming another. Even when actions are wholly justifiable in their context, folks who have remorse or grief about their actions can benefit from accountability.

Accountability is not something that happens to bad people. Accountability is a human skill. It is a skill that each of us must commit to developing as an internal resource for recognizing and redressing the harms we have caused to ourselves and others. Cultivating deep skills (and community investment) in personal accountability also better equips us to respectfully request accountability from others and to be aware when someone is highly resistant to taking responsibility for their actions. As more people develop these skills, the community becomes better able to expect and support ethical, organic accountability processes.

As long as most people in our community have rotten accountability skills, people who abuse will be able to get away with their abuse. Their lack of accountability will not be particularly noticeable or interesting until it is too late. Folks who abuse will manipulate others with their compelling sense of victimization and entitlement forever—or until the harms of their actions are absurdly blatant, or the community falls apart under the weight of defending or managing them.

WHO IS THE ABUSER?

In heterosexual relationships, sexism privileges men’s power over women and so it is likely in an abusive relationship between a person raised as a girl who is a woman and a person raised as a boy who is a man that the man is the abuser. (This is not true 100% of the time and everyone should have more refined ways of identifying abusers.) But, if you had available only one predicting factor, the gender of the people in a heterosexual relationship would be the most predictive. This is not the case for queer relationships. Gender, on its own, is useless for predicting who is likely to be the survivor, or who is likely to have abused.

In activist communities, who is believed? And beyond that, what is the harm being addressed? Is it abusive power, control, and exploitation? Is it certain violent acts? Is it the exercise (or simple presence) of privilege? A survivor of domestic violence is likely to use violent behaviors to resist the objectification of being abused. A person who is battering can report actions taken by

their partners that are mean, cruel, scary, or confusing. Out of context, they could be seen as abusive. In context, they can be understood as resisting power and control. People have the mistaken idea that batterers are “bad” and survivors are “good.” Battering is bad. Surviving battering is good. But, batterers and survivors are people. Understanding a given survivor’s actions when they confound our notions of the “good victim”—or interpreting a given batterer’s charming manipulations—is not simple. In our experience, folks in activist communities too often end up confused and mobilize against the survivor.

People who batter can use their own vulnerabilities (such as their own experience surviving racism or homophobia, dealing with a mental illness or a previous assault, or facing exploitation in their family of origin or in the workplace) to control and manipulate friends, lovers, family, colleagues, and comrades. They set up loyalty tests. They believe that they are the victims. Often their vulnerabilities are real—and everyone’s vulnerabilities matter and merit reasonable attention—but their sense of persecution and entitlement is devastating to their loved ones and the community. Activist communities may believe that we are immune to such manipulations, but that’s simply arrogant and wrong of us. We are the least immune because we are the most compelled by the interplay of the individual condition with the systems of oppression operating in our world. Activist communities are particularly susceptible to manipulation by abusers because we are most likely to have compassion for how abusers experience institutional oppression and to understand how they are victims of unjust systems. Our empathy confounds our ability to see people who face oppression as people who could also be capable of, and should be accountable for, abuse.

On the ground, when choosing whom to support in a conflict, people tend to believe that their friend is in the right and that the person they are less connected to is in the wrong. For example, if my friend is screaming at their partner, I may reflexively identify with the anger that they are expressing and assign responsibility for it to frustrating behaviors from their partner, behaviors I may be more willing to consider as manipulative, exploitative, or hurtful.

On the other hand, I am more likely to see someone screaming at my friend as abusive, and may be less open to the possibility that the yelling could be a strategy of resisting abusive power and control. Choosing sides based on “natural alliances” is not sufficient.

The ability to get clear about who has abused is additionally complicated by the fact that survivors often blame themselves for the abuse. Many batterers blame their partners for everything that goes wrong. Over time, survivors may internalize that blame and begin to hold themselves responsible for every problem, concern, or mistake that comes along. When a survivor is willing to “take responsibility” while a batterer is happy to blame their partner, an abusive situation can be even more confusing for the community to sort out and understand. That self-blame can feed into the batterer’s attempts to mobilize the community to their defense.

Still, we know that even an accurate assessment of which person’s behavior is abusive does not guarantee a positive outcome or an ethical process.

FRAMING COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY PRIMARILY AS AN “ALTERNATIVE TO THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM” IS A PROBLEM.

Community Accountability has been presented in activist communities as an alternative to accessing law enforcement or prosecution in response to harms within the community. Some activists are interested in Community Accountability processes primarily as a rejection of the criminal legal system. “Not calling the cops” becomes a litmus test for radical realness. Community Accountability processes are rarely convened to address late rent payments, someone driving drunk, stealing or other such harms. Instead, these processes have been applied almost exclusively to “gendered” violence: sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence. The mix of Community Accountability as a rejection of the criminal legal system and as a test of realness has at least two significant consequences: it creates the false idea that we can eliminate the harms of the criminal legal system through Community Accountability, and it requires women to bear the brunt of the Community Accountability learning curve.

While the mainstream anti-violence movement has participated in the massive criminalization of intimate partner violence and developed an absurd over-reliance on the criminal legal system, most folks in every community avoid law enforcement and prosecution. For most people, whatever their circumstances, the criminal legal system will suck and be consistent only in its stunning failure to meet survivors' needs or expectations. From our experience, most queer folk—activists or not—just don't expect the legal system to be safe, relevant, or useful. And, across the board, folks are more likely to tell a friend or family member that they have experienced an assault than to seek police or prosecution, or even civil court remedies.

It's just that most of our friends and family fail at helping survivors, too.

Community Accountability tries to replicate the helpful functions of law enforcement (interrupting harmful acts) and prosecution (determining responsibility for and redressing harm), but outside the framework of the State. The thing is, good intentions are not enough to avoid replicating the harmful consequences of the criminal legal system—for victims or for those accused of doing harm. The criminal legal system is desperately flawed. But Community Accountability processes are humbling, for while in our experience it's proven nearly impossible to achieve the idealized outcomes of the legal system (justice, restitution, rehabilitation), it is fairly easy to replicate its "re-victimization" of survivors. We have seen this happen again and again with Community Accountability processes: survivors are exhausted, the community divided and angry, and the folks who caused the harm suck up the attention, community resources, and all the air in the room.

Meanwhile, without the important protections of due process that exist in the criminal legal system—the right to face your accuser, the burden of evidence, the right to a timely trial, and other basic protections for defendants—it's easy to cause harm to the accused as well. Despite the limits they impose, no justice system process can function absent protections for the accused. In turn, though, those same protections make it difficult to substantiate charges of domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, harassment, and stalking. The prosecution has the burden of proof, even if it is very difficult to

prove that an assault happened when there are no eyewitnesses beyond the accused and the victim. The accused has the right to cross-examine evidence brought against them, even if that means a victim is re-traumatized by the public discussion of the violence committed against them.

Whether in our family room or in a court room, these harms are hard to prove and hard to prosecute. Another framework is needed. Instead of being used as a way to reject the criminal legal system, Community Accountability could be used to transform our friends', our families' and our own frail and sometimes harm-compounding responses to violence into something useful.

COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES CAN FEEL CONTRIVED & IMPOSED.

People may experience the language, frameworks, and priorities of these processes as drawing more from therapy or professional nonprofits (i.e., "middle-class ideas") than from diverse sources of knowledge. If we experience something as contrived and imposed, it's easy to attack or dismiss it, even if it has a lot of merit. But, when we attempt to salvage something more "authentic" from our various cultures of origin, we face challenges as well. For one, the various cultural practices for Community Accountability created by our diverse communities have been largely lost to the vagaries of assimilation. Perhaps trickier still, many of the cultural models we have for accountability were never fully realized in their original contexts. Many of the methods that communities have devised over time to curtail the harm caused by its members have been largely theoretical, and have had less success in practice than in establishing broad cultural perspectives on how accountability should be done. They may have been as flawed or aspirational or simply as mythical as the myth of the US justice system, or the myth of activist "community accountability." Our hope is to find something usable, but we can be fairly certain that there is not much to simply revive and replicate.

A little over a thousand years ago these observations were codified in the Jewish canon; Rabbi Elazar said: "I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who is able to accept reproach." And Rabbi Akiva answered: "I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to

give reproach.” It’s both chilling and oddly comforting that these words still resonate so powerfully today: chilling, because so many smart and committed people have failed at this task for so long; comforting, because we can be assured that we are asking a meaningful and enduring question. All this to say: at least we join most groups of people throughout time in being frankly mystified at how to get folks to do right, and in being equally confused about how to do right while trying to get folks to do right.

LIMITATIONS IN ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES’ ANTI-OPPRESSION ANALYSIS.

While “reverse isms” are not possible because of the lack of institutional power to subjugate folks in privileged groups, oppression (and the intersections of its various manifestations) does not operate in the linear or binary manner frequently represented in “power and privilege charts.” This can present challenges to activist groups attempting to apply ideological frameworks when evaluating and responding to abuse in intimate relationships. The personal is political, but the personal is frankly a lot messier than our dogmas can articulate.

As our praxis learning around Community Accountability grew, we realized that we rarely designed, implemented, or participated in processes that worked in the ways they were intended to or with outcomes on par with the huge input of time and energy and human endurance that they seemed to require. A satisfying, useful resolution was much rarer than generating a new hot mess that needed its own accountability process! Even with our best work, most critical thinking and deepest commitment to sound practices and fierce compassion, our attempts felt more like hauling millstones than creating liberation. We know that there have been some incredible triumphs through Community Accountability processes, but we found those successes very difficult to achieve reliably.

With a lot of love and humility, it became clear that our activist communities do not presently have the skills, shared values, and cultural touchstones in place to sustain Community Accountability efforts. Instead of continuing to struggle with (and frankly, suffer through) Community Accountability within

these limitations, we have been experimenting with an alternative framework. This framework, which we call “Accountable Communities,” may be a precursor to Community Accountability models, or perhaps it will grow in a new direction that will result in different goals. We certainly hope that, as an idea or practice, it can also be helpful to current and future Community Accountability projects undertaken by our allies.

accountable communities: a different approach

Accountable Communities shifts the emphasis from a collective process for holding individuals accountable for their behavior to individual and collective responsibility for building a community where robust accountability is possible, expected, and likely.

An Accountable Communities approach promotes the individual and collective ability to assert choices (self-determination) and take responsibility for one’s actions within their full context. To understand one’s actions in their full context, a person must understand that systems of institutional oppression and privilege, personal challenges and aptitudes, and situational conditions profoundly impact the options s/he has to choose among.

The limitations themselves do not exempt one from taking responsibility. However, the context matters. The context shapes what it looks like to “take responsibility” for the choice.

A survivor of battering, for example, might evaluate her decisions to pressure her abusive partner to have sex. The tactic of pressuring her partner for sex may have prevented a violent attack by her partner, earned her money that she needed to pay for childcare, helped her demonstrate her attraction to her partner and allayed accusations of infidelity, or stopped her partner from targeting someone else for sex. The community and the survivor should understand that choice in its context of surviving abuse. But, there is no reason to minimize or deny it as a choice, or to minimize the possible cost to the survivor for having acted outside of her values, in this case by not respecting others’ boundaries. Being “accountable to” the batterer is not a useful

solution here. But, support for affirming her own values of respecting sexual boundaries and taking steps to create the conditions in her life that would allow her to act consistently within her values while staying safe might be. Some hallmarks of an Accountable Communities approach might include:

- The shared expectation that people develop their individual accountability skills as a precondition of collective accountability processes.
- Skill building for individuals and groups to better understand the complex dynamics of abuse beyond a list of concerning “behaviors.” By increasing a community’s ability to consider the context, intent, and effect of observed or reported behaviors, people may be less vulnerable to misidentifying resistance as abuse.
- Raise the expectation of loving-kindness in our communities. Do not collude with trash talking, gossip, and the false sense of being an “insider” that comes from participating in isolating someone else. This will help reduce incidents of unwitting mobilization against survivors.
- Promote “engagement before opposition.” That is to say, when confronted with negative information about people in our communities, we should commit to reaching out to them instead of acting reflexively based on reports about them. For both individuals and organizations, the impulse to react with opposition (whether a passive cold shoulder or an active boycott) is strong. We want to show our loyalty to the harmed party, we want to demonstrate that we are aware of the issues, that we don’t tolerate harmful actions, or we just want to show that we “get it.” But we could try a different approach and resist fracturing relationships by taking an engaged stance toward people or projects with whom we take issue. In other words, we can start from a place of curiosity: What do you mean? What happened? How are you being responsible for this choice? Can I explain our position on this issue? By placing direct engagement like this ahead of automatic opposition, we may learn new information that will change our assessment of the situation AND be more effective in moving the community toward a positive solution.

- We can understand Accountable Communities to include the work of engaging friends and family to strengthen their response to abuse and violence and to create the conditions that would promote loving and equitable relationships. Beyond potential abusers changing their own behavior at the source, survivors, along with their friends and family, are best positioned to recognize signs of emerging abuse. Friends Are Reaching Out (F.A.R. OUT), a NW Network project discussed later, activated support networks as both assistance for survivors during an abusive relationship and as a way to create shared values and agreements that would promote self-determination and caring relationships among friends and family groups. Our best use of these resources then is to begin intervention as early as possible to interrupt isolation at the first opportunity and build new models for relationships that reduce the likelihood of future harm.
- We can invest in recovering and advancing culturally relevant practices for fostering Accountable Communities. I offer this knowing full well that folks have already worked on this for a long time, from many traditions, but we continue to need to lift up and share these perspectives. For example, when I think about the essential tasks involved in creating Accountable Communities/Community Accountability, I am reminded of the Jewish principles of *Tshuvah* and *Tochecha*. The first is difficult to translate: connoting repentance, accountability, and redemption, *Tshuvah* literally means “to return.” It is a set of progressive steps required for a person to be fully reconciled with her/his community. Only after all these steps have been successfully completed has a person “returned.” And only after all the steps of *Tshuvah* have been completed can one ask for forgiveness. In a very illuminating cultural twist, it is only permissible to forgive someone after they’ve made *Tshuvah*, not before. *Tshuvah* is considered a vital human experience that is necessary for the person who has done the harm to heal and become restored. If we go around forgiving people (which includes holding them blameless and removing the obligation of restitution), we are de-mechanizing the process that is necessary for someone to internalize positive change.

One can complete Tshuvah out of fear—fear of a beat down, or fear of incarceration. (If one desists from the wrongdoing, even motivated by fear instead of true remorse, Tshuvah can be achieved.) And, one can complete Tshuvah out of love—love of community, of the harmed other, of the self—or out of a desire to return. Tshuvah out of love is better than Tshuvah out of fear, but either is better than continuing the harm. However, if one does not desist from the wrongdoing, no matter how aware, sorry, up to date on restitution payments, or any thing else that they are—they have not made Tshuvah. *Not doing the harm is the most critical expectation of the return.* *Tochecha*, on the other hand, means “to rebuke”—to correct or to call for accountability in another. While we are obligated to rebuke others who are missing the mark, we are commanded in no uncertain terms to carry out the task of rebuke with humility, love, and careful attention to the experience of the rebuked person. If we rebuke someone and embarrass them, we have harmed them. But if we do not rebuke someone and they continue to cause harm, we become implicated in that harm. If we had rebuked them, perhaps they would have stopped; we are then responsible for the transgressions that our rebuke could have prevented.

At the NW Network, our work with the Accountable Communities framework is evident in various organizational “artifacts” such as our Values Statement. But our efforts in this area are perhaps most widely known through two specific Accountable Communities projects: our Relationship Skills Class (RSC) series and our F.A.R. OUT framework.

RSC is a six-week skill building class that explores all forms of relationships—including but not limited to intimate partnerships—using the lens of “personal agency” (making choices and being responsible for our choices) from a number of perspectives. The RSC series originated in a support group for queer domestic abuse survivors held at our organization. After spending a long time working together on issues of power and control, signs of abuse,

ways to safety plan, and so on, group members asked for more information on building the skills they needed to create the relationships that they wanted to have. They had learned a lot about relationships that involved abusive patterns of power and control, and now they wanted to shift their focus to what kind, loving, sustainable, relationships would look and feel like, and in particular, how to envision such relationships relevant to their diverse cultural backgrounds and personal identities. For instance, when sorting through information in a new relationship, how do we decide when it’s right to compromise, and when we should stand our ground? The support group provided the initial content for the RSC series, which has been offered regularly since 2002.¹ Designed and implemented by and for queer women of color, F.A.R. OUT organized friends and family to support domestic violence survivors in their social networks and to build a shared critical analysis of violence. Close friends and social networks discussed relationship values and goals, how to get (and give) support without putting one’s business in the street, what being responsible for one’s own choices in context might look like, what agreements they wanted to make about open communication and resisting isolation, and how to respond when abuse occurs. Some people hosted large dinner parties, others met for coffee one on one.

As the project developed, the organizers realized that F.A.R. OUT’s approach would require continuous tweaking and adaptation to fit specific friends’ needs; their methods of implementation would work best when “made to order.” Across the board, participants felt they had developed more awareness about relationships in their communities generally and the risks for abusive relationships specifically. Through the F.A.R. OUT framework, they also reported gaining new tools for reaching out to loved ones who might be in difficult relationships and for supporting themselves and others in their efforts to live in congruence with their values. Whether in a “Relationship Skills” class, a domestic violence support group, or around a friend’s kitchen table, cultivating an awareness of how we show up for friends and family—and ask others to show up for us—has become a basic building block of our work.²

Our work in conceptualizing an “accountable community” is still new and continues to evolve and challenge us. We have been joined in this work by many individuals in our community who have attended RSC, participated in F.A.R. OUT, or otherwise contributed to the realization of these ideas. We have been so grateful to be supported in this work by colleagues and comrades from many activist communities. We hope that by implementing the same thoughtful approach that so many have used in examining Community Accountability, we can continue to develop practical tools and skills that will be of benefit to both projects.

Our work toward liberation challenges us to think and rethink our approaches to change. Revolution requires that we continuously ask ourselves what it would take to stay here, to work toward the liberation of the person across the room, across town, across the globe. Such revolution does start at home, where our beliefs are formed by the daily practices of our lives. At times, this work feels overwhelming: how can we transform a violent world, call mighty governments to account, and repair generations of injustice when we are still unable to stop activists committed to liberation movements from abusing their partners, sexually harassing their comrades, or otherwise harming people in our communities? Accountability, understood as a human skill, offers each of us a path forward when we miss the mark.

notes

1 Over the years, many people have worked on the various classes by adding content, refining ideas, expanding the perspectives, and so on. From the beginning, class instructors drew from their own experiences, from their families and diverse cultures of origin, from the unique culture of queer people, and from the wisdom shared among abuse survivors. *What have we always known? What have we learned? What did we wish we knew then? What do we still need to know?* RSC’s consistent theme is one of becoming aware of our own values, goals and dreams, and of deciding how to live in alignment with this self-awareness, which is the basis of solid relationships. In the end, being “in charge of ourselves” is the foundation to connecting—meaningfully, sustainably, and lovingly—within an accountable community.

2 Over time, F.A.R. OUT became formally integrated into the NW Network’s approach to direct services and community engagement. For example, “safety planning,” a staple of anti-violence advocacy, has now become “safety & support” planning at the NW Network. Part of the task of safety planning was to bring into consciousness all the things a person does to assess vulnerability and decrease exposure to harm, as well as surface new or missed opportunities to increase safety. By bringing a similar focus to “support” planning, folks can consider the effect of isolation on their lives, evaluate how they access friends and family, and make and execute plans to ask for specific types of help. A person might practice how they would explain their situation and ask for assistance, or consider the limits they might want to assert on the assistance they receive. Survivors can also think critically about how they want to reciprocate support to their friends.

In our community organizing work, the principles of F.A.R. OUT and RSC are congruent with our commitment to “engagement before opposition.” Whenever we notice that we are complaining about or avoiding or just hating some group or individual, we know we have to reach out and engage with them. We have to try to understand them better, establish some common ground, or simply agree to disagree. We in activist communities can spend all our time ever refining our critiques of one another and ever-fracturing our potential for a cohesive movement. It can be compelling to join in hating someone or some group because they have failed us or a friend, but we have to choose to engage with them instead. It’s the difference between eating lentils with brown rice or a Hostess cupcake: the sugar rush might be more fun, but we need complex carbs to sustain us for the long haul.