# COOPERATION

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From the very beginning, cooperation has been central to the theory and practice of Radical Psychiatry. It is a simple idea, and a familiar one. Indeed, we have been accused more than once of being too simple, placing too much faith in something so obvious and naive.

In fact, the longer we work with the concept of cooperation, the more profound it appears, and the more radical. To cooperate is a means to an end, a mechanism for facilitating alliance and intimacy. In the '60s and '70s when we were formulating theory, alliances were politically relevant. The nation was in rebellion, against racism, against sexism, against war. Young people challenged old lifestyles, demanding more love, more ways to love, more freedom of speech and of sexuality. It was widely believed that the old left had failed to make a new world, and radicals in the '60s and '70s understood that they must find new ways to conduct their politics.

Influenced both by that need, and by the Women's Movement's formulation that the personal is political, we set to work to learn how to be together in groups that were both effective in the world and nourishing to their members. We ourselves were a case in point. We needed to find out how to be sweet to each other, to bolster our shared agendas, to avoid draining scarce energies and resources in competitive struggles. We created theory out of very practical and personal experience.

To call for cooperation was a visionary act. But it quickly evoked the realization that we did not really know how to cooperate. When people speak of cooperation in common usage, they often mean something very different from what we were after. "Cooperate!" parents command children. What they mean is, "Do what I want." Too often, cooperation is an injunction by those with power to those without. We were after a means for peers to work together collectively, and we quickly discovered that everything we had so far been taught applied to a very different model — competition (see Chapter 6). We are taught how to fend for ourselves, how to get better grades, how to win the game, how to maneuver the outcome we desire — all perfectly reasonable behaviors where power is unequal. But among people with a commitment to equality, those competitive ways of acting are counterproductive. We realized we needed to invent ways of acting that were straight-forward and empowering.

So cooperation became a concept that was both visionary and practical. The call for cooperation was a stirring contribution in the '60s, very much in the spirit of the times. In the '70s, it took on a more provocative aspect, because so many people were turning inward, looking for personal growth and individual enlightenment (see Introduction). The politics of cooperation became increasingly radical. The '80s have turned the individual quest outward once again. Yuppies are the mythic heroes of the decade. "Strive for wealth" is the slogan, and "May the best man/woman win!" To talk "cooperation" today is to buck a current which runs deep with powerful economic force.

But for that reason, it is all the more important. Paradoxically, as Americans are pointed more and more urgently toward the race, so also do we hear more and more about community. Many people look to churches for a recommitment to values, in an effort to find commonality of purpose. If my own private well-being is the object of life, then what sustains me beyond myself? The quest for community has become a national objective, and religion is one of the few arenas with a language that even begins to articulate the need.

Here once again, people seek to remake the connections between internal life and the external. On some level, we all know that life is richer than the American Dream. ("The American Dream is back!" promise the Cadillac ads.) We want to know who we are, the meaning of life, why we care about others and the world, how to break bonds of

loneliness and connect with others. Radical Psychiatry is one of the few approaches that has consistently recognized the importance of community, as well as contributing practical aids to its creation.

## HOW TO BE COOPERATIVE

Cooperation, as we define it, rests on one basic assumption and the acceptance of three guidelines. These agreements constitute the minimum necessary understanding required for cooperative relationships.

### Equality

The basic assumption in cooperative situations is equality. When we say that everyone is equal, we mean, not that everyone is alike, that there are no individual differences, but that we strive towards equality of rights. No persons or group of persons, by virtue of any of their individual qualities, characteristics, achievements or possessions, are entitled to anything that anyone else within the group isn't equally entitled to as well. This concept of equality means simply that people have equal rights to the benefits that accrue from the association. If there is food on the table, everyone has equal rights to eat it. If there is a financial benefit coming the community's way everyone has equal rights to share it. If an issue is debated and different people have different opinions, everyone has equal rights to have their opinions heard and to have their wishes realized. Neither the person who is oldest, nor the person who has the most money invested, nor the person who can talk fastest or most brilliantly, nor the person who is physically strongest, has rights in excess of anybody else's.

The group may have the option to afford certain revocable privileges to a particular member for some reason. For instance, a person who is sick may be given the right to be served first at the dinner table. Or an especially skilled person will be given privileges to use or operate an expensive machine until others can learn to do it as well. But the main thing that has to be remembered is that those special privileges are assigned by the group, and they are only temporary.

It is important to distinguish groupings in which this assumption is a possibility from those in which it is not. Where power is severely and institutionally unequal, despite the good intentions of the participants, cooperation is unlikely to succeed. A middle manager in a large American corporation, for instance, once set about to collectivize the department over which she wielded power. She promised to share all decisions with her workers, to allow them to set the times they came and left, and so on. But when the employees asked that she also share the power to hire and fire people, and to set salaries, it was clear she herself had no power to do so, and the project halted. People can agree to give up power they have under surprisingly many circumstances. But we caution the reader to be sophisticated in an assessment about the chances of success, and to be very certain that a genuine agreement has been made.

Given a basic assumption of equality, we have found the following three guidelines to be extremely effective in implementing equal relationships between people. All of them are essentially prohibitions of certain behavior which is destructive to equality. The guidelines only imply what you must do, but they state outright what you cannot do if you want to preserve equal, cooperative relationships.

**1. No Power Plays:** Power plays are ways in which people attempt to get for themselves something which is not otherwise coming to them (see Chapter 1). More specifically, a power play is a maneuver; it can be crude like hitting, yelling, banging, throwing things around and making threats, or subtle such as sulking, gossiping, talking fast or interrupting, caucusing and lying. In either case, it is designed to bring about a desired result against the wills of others. Often power plays are used in desperation or as a last resort after trying more cooperative measures. But whatever the provocation, power plays must be disallowed in order for cooperative relationships to continue. A person who is not

getting what she wants has no other recourse in a cooperative situation than to continue to ask for it and to rely on a genuine negotiation. The use of a power play is never justified and should never be accepted in a cooperative situation.

**2. No Lies:** The concept of lies covers not only bold-faced untruths, but also lies of omission, the withdrawal or keeping back of information which is relevant to others. Included in lies of omission are all sorts of secrets. A secret can be a negative feeling (or even a positive feeling) about another person. Secrets and lies deprive others of vital information, and information is a source of power. For example, one lover hides from another that she is bored in his company; she is afraid to hurt his feelings, but if he doesn't know, how can he change? Many of us have experienced the fireworks when lovers keep sexual affairs with other people, or even flirtations, secret. The humiliation that occurs is a direct outgrowth of the ways in which power has been imbalanced by the secret. A desire or wish for something that is not expressed is also a secret and must be avoided. In short, everything that occurs in a person's consciousness which has importance for others must not be kept secret.

As a consequence, people need to say how they feel about others, especially if the feelings are strong, whether positive or negative, and they must also "ask for 100% of what they want 100% of the time" (see Chapter 7). To what extent people should truthfully share their lives with others without omissions — their joys, their sexuality, their concerns, their fears and hatreds, their shameful secrets, their loves — is something that cannot be set down in a rule. Let us say, however, that to us the largest possible amount of truthfulness is desirable and that even though this is difficult for most people, true cooperative relationships are not really possible until complete truthfulness is included.

This guideline is a necessary complement to Guideline I (No Power Plays) since if one is not to use power plays to get what one wants, the only alternative is to ask for it and to say how one feels. On the other hand, the absence of power plays paves the way for a mutual agreement between people to be truthful. Very often people lie because they fear power plays in response; Guideline I creates safety in which Guideline II can be respected.

**3. No Rescues:** The third guideline for cooperation seeks to avoid the establishment of inequalities through another process, called Rescuing. Power plays establish inequalities because people are selfish and try to get what they want by grabbing it. Rescues operate in the opposite way. That is, they establish inequality in a situation by the process of giving unwisely. A Rescue is a situation in which a person is either doing more than her share of work, or doing something that he doesn't want to do. We discuss this concept more fully in Chapter 7.

By doing more than one's share, one is giving up equality voluntarily. While this may please the recipient or the beneficiary of that inequality (and maybe even the donor), it doesn't necessarily work to their advantage in the long run. Rescues implicitly insult the recipient, who grows resentful. Moreover, they exhaust the donor, who also begins to be angry. In addition, Rescues tend to proliferate. If A does more than his share for B, then B is liable to feel that she ought to do more than her share, also. In a group, C may then assume that doing more than her share for F, G and H is acceptable. A pattern of Rescues is established throughout the group which is likely eventually to result in major inequalities.

Some people argue that this policy of monitoring people's responsibilities is picayune, and that it interferes with the nurturing, loving feeling that one desires in relationships and communities. In fact, when people are first learning the skills of cooperation, they do sometimes become involved in petty minutiae, but as they become more skillful, the issues become clearer, and the avoidance of Rescuing becomes easy and automatic. The important instances of people doing more than their share are not difficult to detect and rewarding to alter.

The second aspect of Rescues occurs when somebody is doing something she doesn't want to do. This behavior is associated with keeping secrets and lying. Many times people will do things that they really don't want to do out of a sense of obligation or duty, or because they are not capable of stating their preferences clearly. To do something that one does not want to do without stating that one doesn't want to do it, is a violation of the guideline about lies and

should be avoided on that account. In a reasonably large group of people, there is likely to be someone willing to do any given task. When numbers are fewer, in couples, friendships or families, some tasks are often disagreeable to everyone. Nobody wants to take out the garbage. But if Sister does it without reporting her reluctance, she is likely to rebel at some point. Better that she state her distaste, learn that everyone else hates the job equally, and negotiate a generous reward in return for doing it anyway. Perhaps it can be shared around month by month. Perhaps in return for Sister's doing it, she can be relieved of washing dishes, a job she hates even more. Perhaps somebody will just have heard of a wonderful new robot for taking out the garbage. Creative and equitable solutions can generally be found.

Several of these guidelines seem to encourage what, paradoxically, could be seen as very selfish behavior. For instance, we are recommending that people ask for everything they want all of the time and resist doing things they don't want to do. On the surface, anyone who behaved in that way would seem to be a self-centered bore. In fact, if that's all that a person did, he in all fairness could be called selfish. However, these expectations are imbedded in a set of others: the fact that I ask for everything I want all of the time does not mean that others will do it, since the injunctions against doing what one doesn't want to do, and not doing more than ones share, apply equally to everybody. If everyone asks openly for what they want, speaks honestly about their feelings, and negotiates compromises rather than power playing, these three guidelines balance each other out. They create a situation where the wishes and needs of people are expressed and negotiated in a fair and equitable way.

In many of the chapters that follow, we talk about a variety of situations in which cooperation can be productively established: problem-solving groups, friendships and couples, families with children, and so on.

Sticking to the guidelines of cooperation clears the way for the full exercise of people's powers. An atmosphere of equality where everyone is treated as a full, worthy human being and is given complete opportunities to express themselves as best they can without infringing upon other people's rights, is ideally suited to the development and growth of people's powers. Protected from the abuses of power that oppress us, we are then in a position to be fully loving, to develop our intuition, to communicate, to exercise our wisdom. Cooperation is fertile ground for the development of power in the world without taking advantage of others.