

Rules, Principles, Policies, Standards and Guidelines: Do We Need Them?

(November 2003): This paper was given at the same Lesbian Studies Weekend where I introduced Sheila Jeffreys.

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In this paper I am arguing against the need for rules (or principles, or policies, or standards, or guidelines—I am using all these terms interchangeably without worrying about the differences between them). I am not criticising principles per se—I'm not against the idea that we do in fact act on principle or in a principled way. I think we do and I think we should. I also think that that is part of what acting with integrity means.

I'm also not criticising generalisations, that is, general statements which account for a number of similar but distinct situations. I'm not criticising generalisations because they are essential in the making of theory—if we can't generalise, we can't theorise.

What I am criticising is the idea that we can control events by means of a framework set up beforehand, when we can't know anything about the events themselves because they haven't happened yet.

I was inspired to write this paper by some trouble I have been having recently trying to get things done. In attempting to work out what the problem is I've come up with the following idea: that the trouble is caused by setting up general principles, rules, etc., which are intended to cover and control any hypothetical eventuality which might arise.

In this paper I will be describing two situations—one involving *Lesbian Network* (LN), the other involving the *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies* (JALFS for short). In describing these two situations, I'm not concerned about the details of what occurred. I'm not interested in arguing about who was right and who was wrong, and who did what to whom and why, and whether she did or did not say or do this, that or the other thing. I'm using the two situations as illustrations of a general point, as concrete examples of the kind of

thing I'm talking about, of the kind of thing 'appealing to rules or principles' might be, and of the kinds of consequences those appeals have for our personal and political lives. My interest in this paper is directed towards the theoretical schema I have devised in order to explain what happened. The details of what happened are relevant only because they provide the concrete data, and because they must be adequately accounted for by the theory.

The first situation I want to describe concerns my using the *Lesbian Network* computer. First, some background: I had been using the LN facilities off and on for months, since March of this year, first to lay out my book, and then to lay out the first issue of JALFS. Towards the end of September, after the last issue of LN was out, I borrowed the key to the LN office again, to start entering and editing papers for the second issue of JALFS. While I was working on the machine, a member of the LN collective arrived and needed to use it, so I packed up and left. Later, this collective member rang me at home and pointed out that I hadn't asked permission. I asked what more was involved in asking permission than the fact that three members of the collective were aware that I was using and had used the facilities and had no objection. I was told that not only I, but also JALFS, had to ask permission from a LN meeting; it was a pity that there was no definite date for the next LN meeting, but there it was. When I asked what I was supposed to do in the meantime, I got no reply. My attempts to use the computer anyway were foiled when the keyholder got into hot water for giving the key out.

With that background in mind, I come to the point of the story. Two weeks ago, I made another attempt to get access to the LN computer. I contacted a member of the collective, who took my request to a meeting. The collective's decision was that a member of the collective had to be present to open the door for whoever wanted to use the machine, and that it was not possible to give the key out to anyone else. This was not a new ruling, it was simply a reiteration of previous policy. The fact that I had used the key all by myself on numerous occasions had been, it would seem, a breach of this ruling. Unfortunately, the collective member given the task of opening the door for me was not available during office hours when I wanted to use the machine, and the policy of door-opening by a collective member only could not be waived for a special case.

It was at this point that I decided to give up. I could have continued the battle, and modified my own requirements to fit in with the collective's policy. But I decided it wasn't worth the effort. I decided that I could do without the LN computer (which meant doing without a computer at all). I decided I was quite capable of writing short pieces by hand (like this present paper); and I decided that I would wait until I could afford to buy my own computer to continue with my next book. I also decided to resign from the responsibility for getting the next issue of JALFS out.

The point of telling this story is not to get into a debate about the rights and wrongs of this LN policy, nor about the actions of individual collective members. What I am concerned to do is to illustrate the stultifying effect of setting up a policy and then applying it across the board, without considering the merits of individual cases, and without taking into account the particular circumstances of each occasion. As far as my own work is concerned, the policy has, thankfully, had very little effect—I can write short pieces by hand, and I couldn't write a book on someone else's computer anyway. But the policy has stopped the production of the next issue of JALFS dead in its tracks, and that has affected me to the extent that I cared about getting the next issue out. Since the next issue has already been put at risk by policy decisions in the JALFS group (which I will tell you about in a moment), I decided to stem the rising tide of panic I felt about it, and stop caring.

I am not criticising the LN collective for not making an exception in my case. I can see that they couldn't—once the principle is in place, it must be applied consistently in every case without favouritism. That is, after all, what a rule is for—to set up a standard beforehand, which must be applied in every case or it loses its purpose. A rule supplies a reason for acting, making decisions and judgements, etc., which applies automatically and hence dispenses with the need to re-think each new situation. It functions to exclude what is particular and special about each situation, in favour of what each situation has in common with others. Since no two situations will ever be exactly the same, a rule sets up a fixed framework into which all situations defined as 'the same'—in this case, all requests to use the LN facilities—must be made to fit. Special considerations, special needs, everything unique, must be excluded from the decision-making process; or be subjected to the laborious process of being referred back to the original decision-makers for justification on grounds

other than those defined by the rule; or the rule has to be broken. What I am criticising is the belief that events can be controlled by rules.

The second situation I want to use as an illustration concerns the process of decision-making in the JALFS collective. What I want to talk about are the guidelines for accepting or rejecting papers for publication in the journal. All along, I have felt uneasy about guidelines, because I was uneasy about setting up rules prior to considering specific papers. I was prepared to accept the ruling that papers submitted for publication be 'lesbian, feminist and analytical', because that was just a restatement of the title of the journal. But I wanted to know when a paper counted as 'lesbian'. Did it have to mention the word 'lesbian' explicitly? Or would a paper be counted as 'lesbian' if it dealt with issues which were relevant to lesbians without actually mentioning the word? I gave the example of some writings of my own which do not mention the word 'lesbian', but which were intended as contributions to lesbian feminist theory. I also knew of other writings by lesbians, which also didn't mention the word, but which were so important for lesbian feminist theory that I could not agree to a rule which excluded them. As well, I could think of any number of writings by, for and about lesbians which I personally wouldn't accept for publication because I didn't like their politics.

The response to my objections was to devise more rules to cover the possibilities I had raised. But I remained uneasy. At the time, I didn't realise that what I was arguing against was not those *particular* rules, but against any rules at all that closed off options before we had even considered actual papers. Changing the rules, therefore, did not make my uneasiness go away.

On the other hand, it did seem reasonable to suppose that we would need *some* guidelines if we were going to be able to decide which papers to accept and which to reject. (The fact that we had already made the decision not to accept all papers received, was never discussed). The case in favour of guidelines seemed even stronger in the light of what happened to one paper, which was excluded at the last minute, after the author had been told that it would be included. If the guidelines had been applied in time, it was argued, such a situation would not have arisen.

In fact, I realise now, the problem arose, not because of the failure to apply guidelines, but because the paper was not subjected to any decision-making process at all. What happened was that one member of the group decided the paper should be included, and the rest of us let the decision stand without discussion. I did object a couple of times, but was told that the decision had been made and couldn't be reversed. It was only when I realised that the decision had not been made by anyone but that single member, that I argued so forcefully for its exclusion that everyone either was convinced, or left the decision up to those of us who were doing the work (or so I naively thought, but that's another story).

The trouble caused by guidelines has recently become so acute that it is hindering the production of the next issue. At the moment, we do not have sufficient material, with the papers we have already accepted, to put out the next issue. But we do have two papers which have not been definitely decided yet, but which together would bring the journal up to an adequate word-length.

One of the papers fulfils all the current guidelines—it is lesbian, feminist and analytical. It also meets with the approval of all the members who have read it. Indeed, everyone is enthusiastic about it. But it is being defined as a test case for further guidelines: whether or not we publish papers which have already been published elsewhere, and whether or not we publish papers by lesbians who are not Australian. (The paper in question is 'Putting the Politics Back into Lesbianism' by Janice Raymond). In vain I have argued that we decide on the basis of the paper's own merits—let's include it because we like it. I have even been prepared to acknowledge the general principle, and answer 'yes' in both cases, since that decision would leave the issues open, and allow us to consider further already-published, non-Australian papers in the future. But that solution is not acceptable because it is seen as setting up a precedent which would have 'a snowball effect'—if we allowed this paper in we would be committed to publishing every paper of this sort, and we could even find ourselves with whole issues entirely devoted to them. My demands to be told why this would happen, and my scathing references to 'domino theories' and 'opening the floodgates' mentalities, are ignored.

What I refuse to do is accept guidelines which commit us to excluding papers on external,

irrelevant criteria, i.e. on criteria which have nothing to do with what the papers actually say. Since we already have a guideline which says that all decisions are by consensus, no decision can be made, nothing can be done, time passes, and we are still no closer to getting out the next issue.

The other paper, 'Feminism As Fruitful Insight' by Beth Pengelly, does not fulfil the 'lesbian' guideline. Or rather, it does not fulfil the 'lesbian' guideline as long as that guideline is defined in terms of the paper having to mention the word 'lesbian'. The paper is written by a lesbian who was one of the women I had in mind when I raised my original objection to the lesbian-specific guideline. The paper is, however, lesbian-relevant, and the author has offered to write a short section pointing out that relevance. The paper as it stands is a radical feminist critique of the use of 'patriarchal method' by a self-defined feminist, Alison Jaggar, to trivialise and dismiss radical feminist politics. The paper also discusses the problems of working as a radical feminist in the male dominated domain of academe.

The other argument for its rejection is that it is 'too difficult', that 'not everyone would understand it'. And it is certainly not an easy read. But then we don't have a guideline about everyone understanding everything the journal prints. Who is 'everyone' anyway? And what does it mean for a paper to be 'easy' or 'difficult'? Hence, to the extent that this paper has been rejected—and rejection can happen through inaction rather than outright decision—the main reason for its rejection isn't in the guidelines.

And that is in fact the way most of the decisions have happened—papers have been rejected for reasons which are not in the guidelines. The main reason for rejection, and the one which has so far always got a consensus, is that the paper is not competent, it is not good enough. But we have no guideline defining 'competence'.

Which brings me back to my general point about the problem with principles. At best, they are unnecessary. (There may be exceptions, but I'll discuss that in a moment). If we are already acting with integrity, we can always get access to the principles which are guiding us, if we need to justify our actions, decisions, etc., by giving reasons. A Sarah Hoagland said

in *Lesbian Ethics*: 'At most, [principles] serve as guides for those who already can act with integrity' (p.10). In fact, I would suggest that this is the only use for the explicit statement of principles—to assess an actual situation, and to provide a justification, reason or explanation when one is asked for.

At worst, principles (and not just pre-formulated ones) can function as a kind of pseudo-integrity. An individual can justify herself by claiming she is acting on principle, when her real motive is something more disreputable, usually some sort of power game. Because rules are rigid they suit our own rigidities. They seem to provide a way of maintaining control when we are terrified of losing it. They seem to be something to trust when we can't trust ourselves, something to hold on to when our own uniqueness and open-endedness seems more like emptiness than fulfilment. What I am talking about here is not a particular kind of individual. We can all experience fear, confusion, and disorientation at times—there is, after all, a great deal to be afraid of in a male supremacist world which has no place for women. That is why rules are so seductive—they promise closure, finality and safety. But the promise is a male supremacist confidence trick to prevent us creating our own meaning and value.

Principles and rules are a dead weight on the decision-making process, paralysing action. The pre-formulated policy will never fit any particular situation because it was not formulated with particular situations in mind. So it can never do justice to this particular, unique situation, it cannot help in making this particular, unique decision, because the particular and unique had already been excluded. If we cannot take action or make decisions on the basis of what the particular situation offers us, then either we act in ways which do damage to the particularity and uniqueness, or we do not act at all. Either way, we have failed to act appropriately.

The appeal to already formulated principles also enables the avoidance of responsibility. To say 'That's the policy' provides the individual applying the policy with an excuse for not putting herself on the line, for not making her own decisions and judgements or taking her own actions. She ceases to be a unique individual in this situation, since she is merely a mouthpiece for decisions made elsewhere.

I want to come now to the question raised earlier of whether rules and principles are ever necessary. I think they are necessary when there is no trust, or where there ought not to be any trust. I would suggest that we ought not to trust each other where collective money is concerned, and that we should always set up clear and explicit guidelines for the collection, safe-keeping and disbursement of group funds. That will not stop someone scarpering with the loot, or committing other forms of chicanery. But it will provide some deterrent because the chain of responsibility can be clearly shown.

In situations where we cannot trust each other, or someone among us, making rules will not help. The untrustworthy are adepts at bending rules to suit themselves. And rules are the easiest thing in the world to break. And who is going to police them? The only solution I have found to conflict with someone untrustworthy, is to have nothing more to do with her. Not an ideal solution, I grant, but the only one I have been able to come up with.

So what do I suggest instead of rules? I would recommend a variety of what Sarah Hoagland calls 'attending'. Hoagland develops the concept of 'attending' in the context of relationships with one another. Since I am talking specifically about situations, I will use her concept only as it applies to situations, leaving aside what she says about ways of relating to each other.

By 'attending' I mean taking account of each situation as it arises, being open to what is going on without trying to control and direct it, and making decisions and judgements in the light of what is actually happening or not happening, instead of forcing each situation to fit into categories not designed for it. Hoagland says:

when we attend ... something, we focus on ... it and hence we give ... it our energy ...
[I]n attending we ... bring ourselves, our experiences, our perceptions (p.127) ...
attention is focused where ... abilities can make a difference if a difference is going
to be made (pp.129-30) ... in attending, we are helping to create a context in which
our choices can take on new meaning ... even if there is no resolution at first, and even
if there is misjudgment and error (p.137).

Hoagland contrasts 'attending' with control, and says that 'revaluing our energy from control to attending is central to Lesbian Ethics' (p.143). 'There is a difference', she says, 'between controlling a situation and acting within it' (p.137). She goes on to say:

Attending contributes to ... moral agency ... in attending we ... increase our responsiveness. For when we do not accept power as the ability to control, we will less likely shut down and numb ourselves, internalize oppressive ideology, ignore difference, objectify others for a political end, or turn on one another and deny her situation (p.143).

Instead of relying on rules, I suggest that we rely on ourselves, on our own wisdom and powers of judgement. Rather than hiding behind policies, I suggest we come out as the makers of our own decisions and architects of our own actions. Instead of trying to avoid being flawed human beings, I suggest we make our own mistakes, cop the flak, and learn from them. Isn't that the only way to learn anyway?