

## **Transforming Horizontal Violence Globally**

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The Association of Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP) MeaningfulWorld (<https://meaningfulworld.com>) is an international non-governmental organization affiliated with the United Nation's Department of Global Communication. MeaningfulWorld offers mental health education programs and workshops focusing on empowerment, stress management, time management, creating a healthy workplace, preventing burnouts, mindfulness, resolving conflicts peacefully, emotional intelligence, and meaning making. In addition, our humanitarian outreach teams have implemented rehabilitation programs for survivors of traumatic events in over 48 countries and 26 American states. Over the last three decades, MeaningfulWorld has conducted humanitarian missions in 50 countries aimed at transforming trauma caused by human-made and natural disasters. Although the primary aim of such missions is to facilitate healing and post-traumatic growth in affected individuals and groups, the utilization of surveys, workshops and other engagement efforts has provided insight into the individual and institutional factors that influence the ways in which traumatic events are integrated, processed, discussed, and passed on, in various cultural contexts.

Horizontal Violence (HV), also known as lateral violence, is defined as internalizing the aggression of a perpetrator and displacing it onto others within one's own group (Hastie, 2002). HV has been shown to emerge from oppression, discrimination, and colonization. The resulting preference for the oppressor's kind (e.g., their race, religion, color, gender, etc.), leads to oppressed people making negative assumptions about themselves and their own kind. Therefore, in-group individuals may start behaving like the aggressor, feeling entitled and putting other

group members down. This may include attitudes and behaviors such as envy, jealousy, distrust, one-upmanship, negativity, denigration and displacement of frustrations and anger. Instances of horizontal violence have been described in several communities that MeaningfulWorld has served. In the African American community in the Southern United States, this process is called the “Crab in a Bucket” syndrome, where in a bucket full of crabs, when one tries to climb out, another will pull it back down, and as the cycle endlessly repeats, it leaves all the crabs stuck in the bottom of the bucket. Thus, in a fitting allegory for the process of horizontal violence, members of the oppressed group, stuck in the proverbial bucket, disallow other members to overcome their condition.

### **Brief Literature Review**

Horizontal Violence has primarily been examined in studies focusing on workplace dynamics, particularly among nurses in hospital settings. Much of this research was conducted in response to instances of hostility observed among nurses despite ostensibly sharing similar experiences, goals, and workplace status. Studies point out that HV prevalence rates among US nurses ranging from 25.3% (Sellers et al., 2012) to as high as 85% (Wilson et al., 2011). In their 2002 study in this population, Hastie (2002) described examples of gossip, verbal abuse, intimidation, sarcasm, elitist attitudes, and body language such as eye rolling, folding arms, and disinterest. Furthermore, nurses report experiences of HV as both the victim (25.5%) and the witness (29.8%) (Sellers et al., 2012).

Embree and White (2010) identify various antecedents to HV, such as organizational imbalance of power, personal oppression, lack of empowerment, and a professionally dysfunctional culture. Moreover, Bent (1993) suggests that nurses, due to their difficult working conditions, are being oppressed, as the nursing profession is marked by a continual struggle for

autonomy, accountability, and control over the profession. Nurses may, therefore, be responding to a sense of powerlessness associated with restricted autonomy and autocratic leadership, and feelings of powerlessness and insecurity may manifest as aggression either turned inward, or outward in the form of HV.

Until now, the HV model has seldom been applied to understand intragroup conflict and hostility outside of the realm of nursing. One exception is within the Indigenous community, where such concepts as internalized racism and internalized colonialism leading to HV, have been examined (e.g., Canada, Bombay et al, 2014; Australia, Whyman et al, 2021). Indeed, Bailey (2019), examined lateral violence in Indigenous post-secondary students in Canada. Using open-ended interviews, she found that in addition to the complex burden of historical trauma due to colonization and colonized institutions, Indigenous students reported experiencing acts of horizontal violence. Despite recent efforts by the government to address historic oppression, these acts, Bailey contends, continue to negatively impact attainment of community, power, and resources. Other studies on Horizontal Violence in indigenous communities also argue this process affects wellbeing and sense of identity (Whyman et. al., 2019).

Of note, other groups for whom bullying within the workplace, including from peers, has been explored, such as amongst the military (for review see Stuart & Szeszeran, 2021), first-responders (for review see Walker & Stones, 2020) and academics (see Goodboy et al, 2020 for discussion), do not fit within an HV framework, as these are not groups that experience overall oppression and discrimination.

### **Horizontal Violence in the Field**

As we have learned through three decades of humanitarian work, the HV framework can shed light on both individual behavior and attitudes, and intragroup dynamics in even further

reaching contexts. Indeed, it provides a useful structure to map the relationships between institutional or cultural prejudice, and oppressed groups. Throughout our missions, we have identified several ways in which HV is expressed, including:

1. Minimizing positive behavior, and lack of validation
2. Fear and avoidance of reporting HV behavior
3. Isolation from others
4. Lack of respect and support
5. Organizational chaos
6. Personal & professional bullying
7. Distrust, envy, jealousy, and gossip
8. Discrediting success
9. Undermining strengths
10. Division and conflict instead of collaboration & mediation

These dynamics were observed in more than a dozen missions, including to the countries of Haiti, Sierra Leone, and Armenia. Although these countries have unique histories and cultures, they have each experienced periods of armed conflict, genocide and collective violence, leading to intergenerational trauma, which is compounded by continued societal injustices. As such, these events have had similar effects on intragroup cohesion and horizontal violence in these three locations.

In 2022, during our last mission to Armenia, many Armenians expressed a degree of hopelessness. For example, one individual, when taught the concept of HV, immediately recognized it in her own community and culture, and said to the first author she believed it could not be changed, and that our intervention efforts on the ground were in vain. Examples of HV in

Armenia that we observed included distrust, envy, gossip, jealousy, putting others down, disregarding others' achievements, finding faults in others and announcing these publicly without any corroborating evidence. Additionally, given the complex political situation in the Middle East, thousands of Armenians have been forced to migrate from Iraq and Syria back to Armenia, and we noted instances of HV expressed against the new immigrants who were competing for already limited resources.

Throughout numerous missions to Haiti, volunteers with MeaningfulWorld have observed the previously identified signs of horizontal violence daily. For instance, in a capacity building effort, we worked to connect local organizations working on peacebuilding, to ensure a continuation of these efforts after our mission's conclusion. However, local organizers often refused or failed to cooperate with one another due to a lack of trust and comradery. Instead, they reported wishing to continue working with our organization, despite our missions lasting only a few weeks. When first discussing signs of horizontal violence in workshops, many people dismissed the idea that such actions and attitudes could be indicative of a greater issue, however, after describing HV in detail, they generally laughed and told us "This is a Haitian disease, we all are infected by it."

### ***Interventions Utilized***

According to the literature on horizontal violence, the first step in addressing it, is to increase awareness of its prevalence, followed by proactively addressing its multiple components within each specific environment (Lewis & Malecha 2011). In various context where we have encountered HV, MeaningfulWorld has utilized the 7-step Integrative Healing Model (Kalayjian, 2017; Kalayjian, & Diakonova-Curtis, 2019), in which various aspects of emotions are assessed, identified, explored, expressed, processed, validated, and finally re-integrated.

***Step I Assess Levels of Distress, Disagreement, or Conflict:*** Participants are given a written questionnaire that helps them define the kind of trauma, distress, or dispute they are working on.

***Step II Encourage Expression of Feelings:*** Each participant in the group is encouraged to describe their feelings about the trauma, or conflict from their own perspective and express feelings in the “here and now”.

***Step III Provide Empathy and Validation:*** Each participant’s feelings are validated by the mediator, group facilitator, and group members. Emphasis is placed on understanding others and putting one’s feet in the opponent’s shoes.

***Step IV Encourage Discovery and Expression of Meaning:*** Participants are asked, “What lessons, meaning, or positive associations did you discover about yourself as a result of this dispute?”

***Step V Provide Information:*** Practical tools and information are shared on how to gradually integrate the conflict resolution information that has been provided and care for oneself as a caregiver/mediator.

***Step VI Nurturing Mother Earth:*** Practical tools for helping participants connect with Mother Earth are shared, as well as ways to care for one’s environment.

***Step VII Breath Work & Meditation:*** Participants are guided on how to use breath toward self-empowerment, creating peace within, and engendering gratitude, compassion, faith, strength, and forgiveness in response to conflicts.

This 7-step model is an integrative approach that incorporates modalities from psychodynamic, interpersonal, existential, humanistic, learning-theory, energy theory, electromagnetic field balancing, and mind-body-eco-spirit practices. This model has been useful in addressing the behaviors associated with HV violence by focusing on group-based exercises in developing emotional intelligence through empathy, while also treating the causes through forgiveness, mindfulness and meaning making. This intervention model has been utilized to address horizontal violence in multiple countries with some success. However, additional research examining the efficacy of various components of interventions for HV, would greatly benefit future humanitarian missions in this area.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The prevalence of horizontal violence observed in numerous culturally distinct groups suggests the possible benefits of utilizing this framework in future research on collective trauma, intragroup conflict, and community building in oppressed groups. We believe such an analytic lens has the potential to better identify problematic behaviors and attitudes, as well as address their causes in individual and group settings.

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