

Workshop report: Flourishing with Feminism

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Creativity and joy thrive in environments where people create collaborative, caring, inclusive cultures. In this workshop we explored practical ways that patriarchy – a toxic culture of dominance, fear and control – manifests in the workplace, and steps we can take to counter it. We facilitated a process of storytelling and listening to mine for the problems caused where patriarchy manifests in the workplace as microaggressions (or worse) to protect the social order and to mine for interventions, where people act with intention to bring about more collaborative, cooperative, egalitarian modes of interaction. Our goal was to spread awareness and understanding of the destructive impacts of patriarchy and assess the viability of developing a pattern language on this subject.

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Additional Key Words and Phrases: Patterns, software development, critical theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

Creativity and joy thrive in environments where people create collaborative, caring, inclusive cultures. In this workshop we explored practical ways that patriarchy – a toxic culture of dominance, fear and control – manifests in the workplace, and steps we can take to counter it. We facilitated a process of storytelling and listening to mine for the problems caused where patriarchy manifests in the workplace as microaggressions (or worse) to protect the social order and to mine for interventions, where people act with intention to bring about more collaborative, cooperative, egalitarian modes of interaction. Our goal was to spread awareness and understanding of the destructive impacts of patriarchy and assess the viability of developing a pattern language on this subject.

2. SESSION GOALS

This session was designed to raise awareness of the problem of gender diversity in software and its historical context, while also exploring the potential for pattern mining for healthier behaviors. As long-term (20 years+) members of software development communities, both session facilitators (the co-authors) had both been on both sides of toxic power dynamics based on fear and domination. One of the facilitators had previously facilitated a workshop to reflect on the systemic manifestations of patriarchy [1]; the core activity in this workshop was story sharing and listening. That workshop proved to be a restorative space for lower-power people, generally women, to share their stories and be heard.

The facilitators saw an opportunity to improve the workshop design to capture the commonalities of the stories. In particular, they aimed to focus on what works - according to marginalized people themselves - to support, encourage and uplift everyone on a software team. The session started from a position that patriarchy, that is, a social system ordered by domination relationships, is not conducive to human flourishing. By equalizing power imbalances, the facilitators hope to disrupt the compounding power accumulation, and thereby promote healthy work environments, in software organizations.

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3. SESSION MECHANICS AND PREPARATION

In order to prepare, we reviewed the structure and results from the prior workshop that Matt had run with Diana Montalio [1] and immersed ourselves in patterns literature [2], [3], [4], [5]. We began constructing materials including a workshop precis and rough structure. On finding that the initial draft of a precis was too negative in centering the patriarchy, we reframed towards the positive aspect of “flourishing with feminism.” We were aware that “feminism” can be an alienating term, but ultimately decided that part of endorsing the perspective was not to shy away from the word. It became an opportunity to demystify the term alongside the concepts.

With two hours for the workshop, we decided to set context with a slide-based presentation on the patriarchy, then transition into two rounds of group discussions. The first round of discussions would focus on recognizing the problem, the second round would be focussed on solutions. We prepared a large set of discussion-prompt questions in advance, then selected from among them on the day, immediately before the session.

Conference participants self-selected to attend this workshop, and no additional pre-registration or pre-work was required.

4. CONDUCTING THE SESSION ITSELF

When participants had assembled, the facilitators opened with a presentation on how patriarchy manifests in society at large, and in the workplace specifically. The concepts of patriarchy as male-identified, male-dominated and male-centred were explored, with examples, many drawn from the book *The Gender Knot* [6]. It was proposed that patriarchy is a culture of fear, dominance and control; characteristics that many people can agree on and identify as toxic in the workplace.

The presentation then shifted to addressing the problems of patriarchy, and the facilitators drew on prior feminist work. They defined feminism as a family of movements dedicated to gender equality and liberation. Taking an intersectional perspective, they expanded the scope beyond gender to all forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and classism. They introduced a framing that originated with management theorist Mary Parker Follett of building “power with,” rather than “power over,” [7] to break the assumption that a shift in power is zero-sum.

The facilitators then invited the participants to reflect on a question that resonated with them or add their own.

The problem exploration seed questions were:

- Can you think of a time when you saw someone being sidelined? What happened?
- Can you think of a time when someone behaved in a dominating way? What happened?
- What do the words “fear,” “domination,” and “control” mean to you?
- How have you experienced the patriarchy at work?
- What processes in your workplace promote competition over cooperation?

Questions were posted around the room, and participants were invited to walk the room and gather around the question that most interested them. They were invited to find a table in their groups, which had been set up in advance with pens and post-it notes.

They were instructed to reflect on the question quietly, then discuss their thoughts and experiences with the others at their table. Tables were made up of 3-5 people at a round table with the question at the center. Table participants were encouraged to capture notes on the post-its as they went. They were given 20 minutes to discuss and then encouraged to circulate among the tables and explore the captured thoughts.

After the first round of discussion, the facilitators seeded some questions about interventions:

- What are some appropriate uses of power at work?
- Are there typical behaviors you associate with a sexist workplace? What is a counter-move?
- Consider a time when you felt well-supported at work. What happened? What was made possible?
- Consider a time when someone built power with you, rather than exerted it over you. What happened?

Again, people had selected a question and explored it with others at a table. Then, they circulated among the tables to explore what other tables had covered.

At the end, the facilitators got reactions from the group in its entirety, which included:

- “A highly nuanced discussion that allowed us to open up about several things in several ways”
- “Wonderful topic. Really powerful discussions”
- “Amazing session. Hopefully the start of a book”

5. WHAT WE LEARNED

Feminist action in the workplace is amenable to pattern mining

Workshop participants engaged easily with the framing and were able to have meaningful conversations that several participants subsequently described as “cathartic.” A large number of “pattern seeds” were collected from each group.

These topics are sensitive, bring up bad memories for people and could potentially be retraumatizing

It was clear from the participants’ feedback that the experience of sharing stories had been meaningful both for those who told the stories and those who listened. Still, when some described it as “medium stress” it’s clear that this kind of workshop brings up difficult memories for people that need to be handled sensitively.

There is tension between the pattern mining intent of a workshop and people being fully present to speak and listen

The facilitators were not a part of the conversations; instead, they circulated in the room to facilitate. This left it up to the participants to make notes about the stories and commonalities they heard, with the result that the facilitators had only scant notes to work from in the end. However, participants seemed fully present as witnesses to each others’ stories, and we would not want to compromise the restorative, solidarity-building experience of the workshop itself. In future experiences, we would want to explore options like designated note-takers or recording the conversations in order to better meet the pattern-mining intent.

In mining patterns to disrupt the patriarchy, we need to be careful not to further embed the patriarchy

Some materials ostensibly aimed at building up women’s power and credibility appear to do more to help women get a piece of the patriarchy pie rather than build power in ways that are contrary to a philosophy of domination (e.g. [8]). Leadership or career advice from powerful people has to be suspect as potentially a result of survivor bias, and hence a potential vector for covert domination behaviors.

While we were careful to center the voices and views of the marginalized in this workshop, everyone who attended had already cleared a minimum bar of privilege just to be at the PLoP conference. Furthermore, we did not have enough traceability of the recommended plays to be confident that they were endorsed by the least privileged in the room. A future workshop would need a more sophisticated analysis of the positionality of the researchers and participants to be confident of a pattern’s viability.

In particular, we imagine following the course set out by Milner [9] and adopting the metaphor that Dillard [10] calls “research as responsibility” to the researched community.

In addition to these more general findings, the facilitators also emerged with a set of potential patterns to explore, flesh out, evaluate, and share.

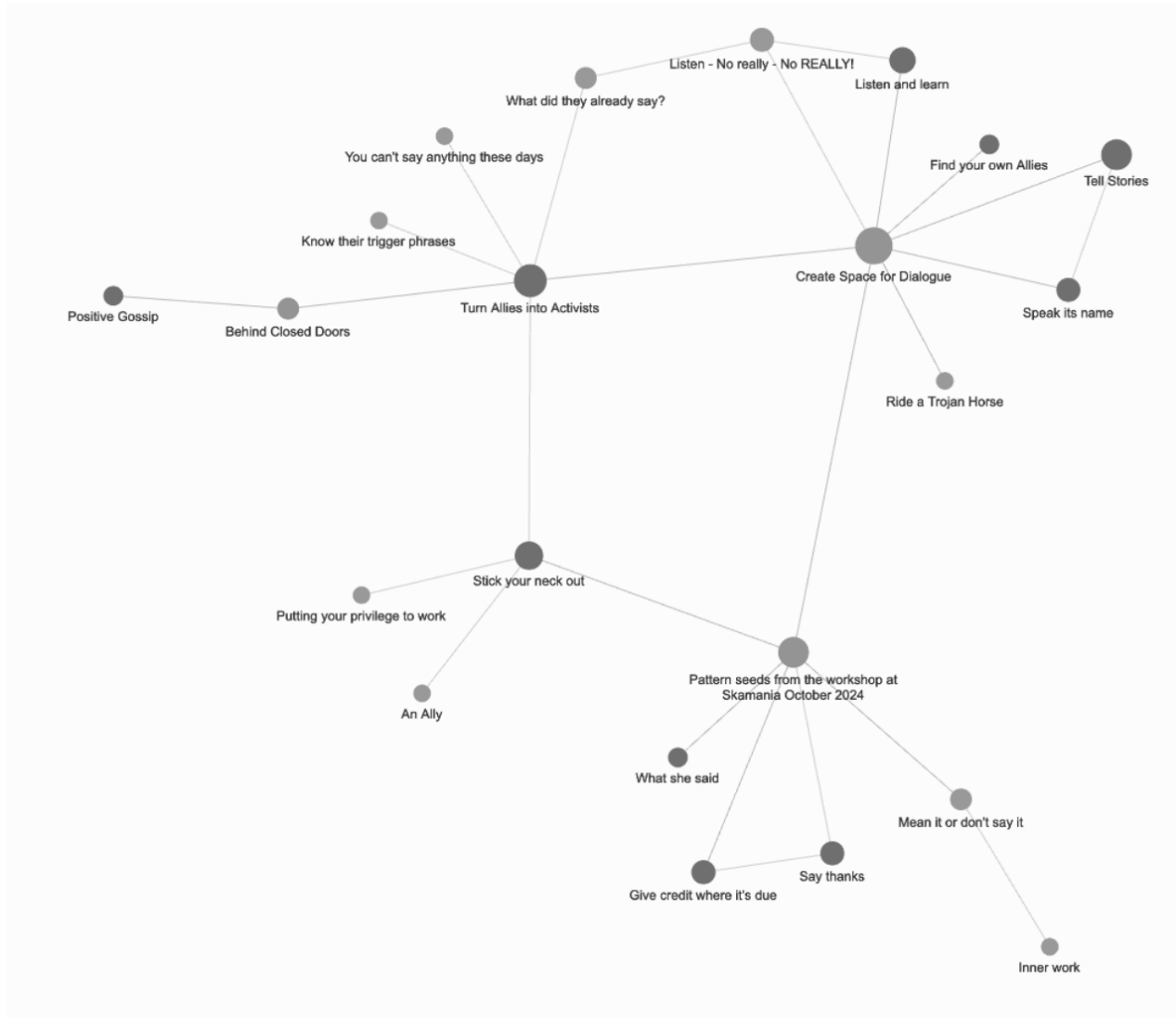


Fig. 1. Map of the relationships between different pattern seeds and pattern families that surfaced during the workshop and in subsequent analysis.

6. NEXT STEPS

We are exploring ideas for developing their nascent pattern language, including hosting a sequence of interviews, running further workshops, and publishing their draft patterns to the workshop attendees for feedback. They are also exploring the possibility of institutional sponsorship, without which it has been a challenge to sustain this work.

7. DISCUSSION

The workshop discovered a few patterns that describe the workshop itself. We `[[CREATED SPACE FOR DIALOGUE]]` where women and other under-privileged people could `[[TELL STORIES]]` and men could `[[LISTEN, NO REALLY, NO REALLY]]`.

We believe that this workshop has value simply in creating a space where we can acknowledge and learn more about patriarchy and its impacts in a spirit of curiosity and collaboration. If we're able to discover patterns for undermining it while we do that, it's a wonderful by-product.

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APPENDIX

COMPLETE RESULTS FROM QUESTIONS IN THE SESSION. PATTERN SEEDS ARE HIGHLIGHTED WITH `[[DOUBLE-BRACK]]`

WHAT ARE SOME APPROPRIATE USES OF POWER AT WORK?

- CHAMPIONING THOSE WHO MAY NEED IT
- PROTECTING THE TEAMS
- PROVIDING TIME AND FREEDOM FOR GROWTH AND EXPERIMENTATION
- FOSTERING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT
- REWARD MENTORSHIP
- REWARD THE TEAM, NOT THE INDIVIDUAL
- IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY & VISIBILITY
- FOSTERING HEALTHY INCENTIVE STRUCTURES
- BRINGING IN OTHER PERSPECTIVES
- FOSTERING (ANONYMOUS) DISCUSSIONS & CONVERSATION
- LEADING BY EXAMPLE
- STEPPING AWAY AND LET THE TEAM/INDIVIDUAL TAKE CREDIT
- PUBLIC PRAISE
- PRIVATE PALBACK (CONSTRUCTIVE AND RESPECTFUL)

ARE THERE TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS YOU ASSOCIATE WITH A SEXIST WORKPLACE? WHAT IS A COUNTER-MOVE?

- CONSULTANT POWER AS A COUNTER- MOVE
 - `[[OUTSIDE AUTHORITY PATTERN]]`
- USE YOUR AUTHORITY (IF YOU HAVE IT) TO ASK WOMEN

- BE AWARE
- POINT IT (SEXIST BEHAVIOUR) OUT IN PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS
 - FEARLESS CHANGE PATTERNS
- POLITE WARNING, PRIVATE SANCTION
- CONNECT + BUILD A COMMUNITY TO:
 - TACKLE ISSUES
 - PREVENT DAMAGE
 - SUPPORT EACH OTHER (GENERATIVE PATTERN)

CONSIDER A TIME WHEN YOU FELT WELL SUPPORTED AT WORK. WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT WAS MADE POSSIBLE?

- ICEBREAKERS
- TRAINING SESSIONS
- IDEAS X HIERARCHY
- DRINKING PARTY TO BRING PEOPLE IN
- GIVE TO NEW PEOPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK
- NOT DO INCENTIVES IN AN ARTIFICIAL WAY
 - [[MEAN IT OR DON'T SAY IT]]
- WORK ITSELF SHOULD BE COLLABORATIVE
- PASTORAL CARE
- UNDERSTANDING THAT WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN PROBLEMS
- RECOGNIZE PEOPLE THAT WERE IMPORTANT TO YOUR STORY
 - [[GIVE CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE]]
- GUIDE AND SUPPORT STUDENTS BEING OPEN TO TALK
- WORKSHOPS TO DISCUSS IMPORTANT TOPICS
 - [[CREATE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE]]

CONSIDER A TIME WHEN SOMEONE BUILT POWER WITH YOU, RATHER THAN EXERTED IT OVER YOU. WHAT HAPPENED?

- ALLIES AMPLIFYING AND INTERVENING FOR YOU
 - [[STICK YOUR NECK OUT]]
 - [[WHAT SHE SAID]]
- UNDERSTANDING THAT PATRIARCHY EXISTS, BUT COLLABORATING IN A MEANINGFUL MANNER. GIVING VOICES TO DIFFERENT IDEAS EVEN IF IT'S NOT YOUR OWN.
- COMPROMISE
- HEALTHY CONFLICT
- GOOD COMMUNICATION.
- SAY THANKS
 - [[SAY THANKS]]

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