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Report from an "Experienced" CR Group

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relating at least one thing about our backgrounds of which we were proud. For all of us, the pride was in survival. Surviving the economic deprivation and its ramifications: the harshness; the stress; the discrimination of not having the right clothes, the cashmere sweater; of not being able to afford the right kind of gift if invited, on a rare occasion, to a birthday party.

We came from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Mexico, California. We were raised in city ghettos, on dust farms, in coal mining towns. My plan for the first day was to form small groups along ethnic lines to respond to the following: (1) Tell a little about your ground you are proud of. (2) What is your first memory of learning about different races? (3) What did you learn? (4) Whom did you learn it from? (5) How did it make you feel? But we found that although we represented a number of ethnic groups, there was a large overlap, particularly of those with Scotch and Irish backgrounds, and the group chose to work as a whole.

From this discussion, we learned to view endurance and passivity as survival skills. For lower-class women, what often appears to be passivity is actually a silent exhibition of wisdom gained from elemental hardship, the knowledge of what is or is not worth fighting for. We also discussed our present lives and the experience of marginality. Although, as professionals, society now classifies us as middle-class, we feel on the edge, the margin, of it all. The feeling of "passing" is ever-present because we never really leave behind our working-class culture.

On the second day, we shared incidents of how we had been oppressed as lower- and working-class women, and then how we had oppressed others. This sharing occurred in small groups which in turn reported to the whole group—a difficult and painful process, but we made our way through it intact. An important insight common to the group was that our attitude toward Black women was one of awe, which created feelings of intimidation that put a wall between us and Black women. We felt that the recognition of this feeling was a crucial step in knocking down the wall.

I thought the third, and last, session—on strategies for interrupting racism—would be the most difficult for me because I felt the least prepared for it. But the group once again demonstrated its strength. We shared incidents of racism we had experienced or witnessed and suggested ways to change or to react to the situations.

One woman summed up the essential lesson for interrupting racism: "What I've learned is how important it is to take risks." The risk of having a group of friends fall silent and disperse when we approach because we've let them know their racist jokes offend us. The risk of losing a job because we speak up about the large number of people of color in lower-level positions and the presence of few, or none, at higher levels. The risk of straining or breaking family ties when we challenge the humorless Archie Bunkerism we were raised with.

I feel strongly that the three days of meeting constituted a successful group experience. The time was too short, our discussions truncated, yet the work we accomplished and the group feeling that developed carried us far beyond the superficial gesture I had fearfully anticipated.

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Using the techniques of the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement from the '60s and '70s, white women in my "Experienced" group worked together to confront elements of racism in our present stages of work and address ourselves to the tasks of moving on. Many of us found that we needed to combat despair and resentment—the effects of being scapegoated, unsuccessful, unsupported, and punished. Each member of the group stated a need, a goal, and a strength in her anticommunism work, and in small groups shared feelings about the themes of anger, guilt, fear, and creative energy, and responses to the messages of Rich and Lorde. Sharing my emotional responses, rather than just talking about them, was powerful; instead of draining me, the experience released new energy by going underneath anger to pain and the deepest sources of caring.

In the second session, we participated in and analyzed a role-playing situation: a Women's Center meeting to discuss an upcoming conference planned by the Third World Center and cosponsored by the Women's Center. Each woman drew a slip of paper telling her what her concern and identity was. For example, one woman was to play a white woman concerned about the survival of the Women's Center, where she worked. One woman was to play a Black lesbian mother concerned that the Black keynote speaker might not recognize her reality. Another woman was to play an Hispanic woman concerned about the speaker and realizing that the silence of the white women was a form of racism. Still another woman was to play the Center coordinator, a woman concerned to effect compromise.

The meeting was intense, frustrating, painful for each woman. Those who had played women of color were asked to comment on how they experienced the behavior of the white women; white women were asked to say what they could have done differently. The process was emotional, enlightening; the results, startling.

One articulate lesbian, a radical, found in her role as an Hispanic woman that despite her original assertiveness in the group, as the white women took and maintained control, as the distance widened between Black and Hispanic women, as the lesbians' militancy seemed to shut off other feminist positions, she became inarticulate; and while resenting the administrator's control and suppression of issues in the guise of mediator, she began to see her as the only person to turn to. She wanted to call for an Hispanic caucus, yet couldn't risk division among Third World women, and ended by wishing to go back to her community and her family, much less confident that there was a place for her in the women's movement. At the session's end she found she could detail the gestures, postures, stances, phrases, positions, attitudes, relations to resources of each woman at the meeting, nearly all of whom were "above" her either in the institution or in the movement. In particular, the woman gained insight into how that Hispanic woman experienced the radical lesbian feminist she herself was in daily life, and she understood from the other side how the skills of the coordinator became tools of manipulation and control. By experiencing the very real human emotions of being in another woman's position, each woman in the CR group also saw her own emotions in another light.

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