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A Working-Class CR Group: One Facilitator's View

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Consciousness-Raising at the NWSA Convention: An Overview

Yolanda T. Moses and Peg Strobel

In order to add a personal component to the response to racism, this year’s Convention included consciousness-raising groups, which, however, proved controversial: some women disputed their composition; some felt they were too elementary; some welcomed them as a way of dealing in small groups with the Convention as a whole—including, but not limited to, the issue of racism.

The Northeast region assumed the responsibility for organizing the CR groups for the Convention. CR facilitators and the structure of the groups came out of the Northeast regional conference held earlier in the spring. At that time, women of color from the Boston area who were involved in CR decided that groups for the National Convention should be segregated. They believed that white women must work through their racism; women of color should not have to bear that burden and responsibility.

This decision laid the basis for later suspicion, misinterpretation, and resentment. Upon registering, Convention participants were asked to choose a CR group. For women of color there was no choice—there was only one kind of group for all women of color. White women could choose from various categories: immigrants or children of immigrants working-class or Jewish backgrounds, women experienced in CR, and so forth (although there was no lesbian group). This contrast in itself represented a kind of racism, but the most controversial question was the absence of a mixed group, which many women felt was absurd. Even when women of color found out that it was not white women who had decided the format, many found it difficult to believe that the segregation was not deliberate and racist planning by whites.

The result was a large meeting, attended by nearly 150, followed by the organization of a CR group for the remainder of the Convention. Participants at the meeting also agreed to suggest that the next Convention continue the theme of responding to racism, since this one had not succeeded. Still, some felt an air of uneasiness and mistrust permeating the meeting. The women of color were suspicious about a group of white women presuming to know enough about the dynamics of racism to talk about it. And the white women were afraid to talk about racism to women of color because perhaps they had not really worked it through themselves.

The CR groups for white women were designed to explore the roots of racial feelings and suggest ways of intervening in racially tense or racist situations. For example, each white woman in one group described her first recollection of racial differences: What was the context? Other questions followed: What is my ethnic heritage? What am I proud of? What am I ashamed of? What has my heritage contributed to racism? What stereotypes do I hold of white women? What stereotypes do I hold of women of color? Black women? Black men? Role-playing exercises offered the opportunity to learn to attempt feared interactions, and to intervene in racist situations.

As with the Convention theme itself, the inclusion of CR groups represented an innovation compared with academic or other types of conferences. In determining how to utilize CR groups again, NWSA members might keep in mind the comments of a woman of color: “I saw a lot of women of color at Storrs who were still internalizing their anger, or who were dumping it on the white women at the Convention. We too have to learn to deal with our rage and frustration. We must also realize that these white women are not our enemies; they chose to discuss racism at a national conference, something that I have seen no other white professional association do in my eleven years in academia....”

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A Working-Class CR Group: One Facilitator’s View

Gayle Lauradunn

At the NWSA Convention, I facilitated a consciousness-raising group in antiracism for white working-class women. It was difficult, painful work but a rewarding and inspiring experience. I went to the Convention with several positive expectations based upon my objectives, as well as negative anticipations based upon groundless fears about the as-yet-unformed group.

The expectations were clear and straightforward—easy for me, as a teacher, to carry out. They fell neatly into three categories: developing a trusting, supportive atmosphere; assisting people to validate their whiteness, thus diminishing feelings of guilt; and developing strategies for interrupting racism.

On the other hand, the anticipations were broad in scope and character. I felt strongly that the time allotted was far too little, that the effort would be merely a gesture toward the work that needs to be done. Surely, the complexity of the issues and the intensity of feeling surrounding them warranted fuller attention. Then I feared that if the participants felt that they were pressured into going through consciousness raising they would be resentful, or even hostile.

But my greatest concern was how I would respond if any participants were downwardly mobile. As a lower-class person who has moved up to the working class and teeters in academia, in the middle class, I constantly experience class bias, which I have learned to live with at a low smoulder. One of the most intense experiences of class bias I have ever had was in the facilitators’ training workshops that included several trainees who were living, from choice, as if they were working-class despite middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. The patronizing attitude of those who have chosen to be downwardly mobile brings my low smoulder to a bright flame. There is nothing funny about economic deprivation; moreover, given that people cannot as easily shed the values, behaviors, and contacts they are raised with as they can their money, it is their money and not their other advantages that the downwardly mobile turn their backs on. Just as women of color say it is the work of white women to root out their racism, it is the work of middle- and upper-class women to root out their class bias.

Fortunately, all the participants in my group were from working-class backgrounds. And for the first time since I started the CR training, I felt relaxed. The women were strong, gentle, and supportive of each other as we quickly developed a group identity on the first day through sharing childhood experiences and
THE NWSA CONVENTION: CR SESSIONS

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 ethnic background and what in your background 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." There is 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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Report from an " Experienced" CR Group

Pamella Farley

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 antiracism 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 how she felt about the meeting, the other women worked on the survival of the Women's Center, where she worked. One woman was to play the white woman concerned about the survival of the Women's Center, where she worked. One woman was to play a Black lesbian mother who 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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