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THE NWSA CONVENTION: CR SESSIONS

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 mixed 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 or ashamed of from that heritage? On what occasions have I felt oppressed, felt oppressive? In what ways have I been privileged? What stereotypes do I hold of white women? 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, as a professional, on the edge of 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 upper-middle-class or upper-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