

A New Era of Consciousness-Raising

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Janet Freedman, Resident Scholar, Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center

Participation in a small consciousness-raising (CR) group was the entry point for many who became involved in the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. The experience was profound as Vivian Gornick recalls:

I stood in the middle of my own experience, turning and turning. In every direction I saw a roomful of women, also turning and turningThat is a moment of joy, when a sufficiently large number of people are galvanized by a social explanation of how their lives have taken shape and are gathered together in the same place at the same time, speaking the same language, making the same analysis, meeting again and again...for the pleasure of elaborating the insight and repeating the analysis.

But CR was not JUST about sharing insight and analysis. It was the process that fueled the activism of “second-wave” feminism. It is for this reason that that I am urging a new era of consciousness-raising – a revitalization of one of the women’s liberation movement’s most effective organizing strategies.

Loretta Ross, co-founder and former National Coordinator of the Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, describes how insights discovered in CR groups led to action.

“We may have more formally called it ‘consciousness-raising’ but in essence we were telling each other stories to reclaim ourselves and our humanity. We created a feminist culture with these stories, not through narratives of logic and structure, but by creating verbal snapshots of the lived experiences of women. We didn’t have to all tell the same story in order to resonate with each other. Each story was unique but the act of telling our stories created strong bonds among diverse women who worked together to change our realities. We could imagine a world in which women lived in freedom from violence and we set about building rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters not only to help women who had been violated, but also to project a vision of what a world without violence could look like for women.”

Most consciousness raising groups used variations on the suggestions outlined by Kathie Sarachild in her *Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising* which was presented at the first National Women’s Liberation Conference in the fall of 1968. At a time before electronic communications, the guidelines were copied, amended, edited and, in various cut-and-pasted forms, circulated from coast to coast.

In the late 1960s and early ‘70s all around me women formed CR groups and moved from these to make changes in their personal lives, community involvements and work. Sharing experiences on sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth, contraception, sterilization, abortion, masturbation, sexually transmitted diseases and so much more in a CR setting led to the extensive research that was then reported in clear, jargon-free language in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The work was described in a 2008 article in *The Nation* by Linda Gordon - a keynote speaker at this conference - as “the feminist left’s most valuable contribution to the world.”

It was through asking questions about their professional training and experience as psychotherapists that led one of my dearest friends and some of her colleagues to create the first feminist counseling center in the Boston area which was dedicated to challenging and changing personal and social circumstances, rather than adjusting to them. It exists to this day

Involvement in a CR group made it impossible for me NOT to find ways to translate new understanding to activism. I was working as a librarian at Salem State College at that time. Soon I was part of a group discussing how to organize a Women's Center on our campus, which we did in short order, and a day care center, which proved more difficult, but, eventually, also was created. I joined others who advocated for and taught the earliest women's studies courses at Salem. Of course, neither I nor the other course developers had academic preparation in the field because there was not yet a discipline called "women's studies;" we were creating it. Several of us working at the college reached out to community women to organize the North Shore Women's School, which paired women with skills to share, from auto mechanics to political organizing with those who wanted to learn. The classes moved from the college to union halls, church basements and other settings. More coalitions were formed with community women around issues of health, parenting, anti-racism, welfare rights and other concerns.

Feminist activism was everywhere and it was rooted in the small group.

But by the end of 1970s CR groups dwindled; in the 1980s more groups were being remembered than formed. Vivian Gornick describes when her "moment of joy" ended. "One day I woke up to realize the excitement, the longing, the expectation of community was over."

There were many, many slowly developing cracks that resulted in what seemed to be a sudden collapse of revolutionary possibility. That makes this conference title so poignantly resonant. In retrospect it seems like those years of profound change *were* but a "moment."

By the 1980s when feminism was being attacked from the outside by an increasingly vocal conservatism, and from within from important critiques of the limitations of its own theory and practice, the women's liberation movement had lost one of the important tools and settings to assess and respond to these events – consciousness-raising. In my forthcoming book I have enumerated in some detail myriad causes for the demise, but one major reason is that most participants saw consciousness-raising as a *precursor* to action instead of a process that needs to be integrated within it - and revisited often so questions about new experiences can be raised, reflected upon and applied to current choices for appropriate action.

Both the abrupt ending of community and the isolation that ensued have been overstated. In her study of the feminist community in Columbus, Ohio, Nancy Whittier acknowledges the ebbing of the 2nd wave in the 1980s. Yet she documents that, even as some organizations disappeared, others continued and new ones formed, and “everyday resistance” in work places, and through friendship and social networks –small groups -kept the movement alive.

Whittier's observations and the consistent advocacy of consciousness-raising in the work of bell hooks, Estelle Freedman, Barbara Smith, Patricia Hill Collins and others convince me that reviving the small group is not to take a nostalgic look back or to mourn something that is gone, but instead to affirm the practices that have given continuity to the women's liberation movement.

When I taught women's studies I used four questions to reveal how consciousness-raising proceeds from sharing to analysis to action. **WHAT IS? /WHY IS?/WHAT SHOULD?/ HOW SHOULD?** These questions have become “automatic,” informing my way of seeing, hearing, learning, being. Like the feminists Nancy Whittier studied in Columbus Ohio and many others, I took what I learned through consciousness-raising to a wide range of settings, from work in the academy, to community organizing, to a Jewish women's group and a “women and spirituality” group composed of women from varied faith

traditions and practices, and a work group which, after many years of meeting, we sometimes call the ReCollective. One of our members said this about our gatherings: *The interesting point is that 40 years later, and after meeting over 25 years, WE KNOW HOW TO DO CR, without talking about it. We just start doing it through unstated, mutual agreement – the form of speaking, the turn taking, the listening, the catharsis, the feelings (laughter, tears) the storytelling, the affirmation and recognition, the goal setting, the action steps when the ‘inward’ perspective is directed outward toward social change.*

I am gratified that the process of women meeting in small groups to share and analyze their lived experience and apply their insights to activism for social justice is being used again. Some examples are the CR groups that have formed across the globe by women who are adapting *Our Bodies Ourselves* to the unique perspectives and concerns of their communities, and the creation of Domestic Workers United, a New York group that eventually became the national Domestic Workers Alliance, an organization of housekeepers, nannies and caretakers organizing for power, respect and fair labor standards. Characteristic of the inevitable ability of consumer capitalism to co-opt radical impulses, the “Lean In” phenomenon based on Sheryl Sandberg’s recent book of that title also has been linked to consciousness-raising.

Happily, some in the new generation of feminists recognize that more has to be broken than the glass ceiling. I offer a tribute to younger feminists who have engaged with new, and often arcane, philosophical frameworks, and advanced an intersectional feminism that embraces the multiple, and often conflicting, identities that coexist with gender. This generation of feminists refuses to be categorized. They have found ways to live with, and often to celebrate, contradictions as they search for authentic personal and political expression. Their perspective is not only multicultural, but global, and, rather than a single mass movement, they seek strategic coalitions around common concerns in particular settings. They work within and beyond the academy, and are deeply concerned about the millions of girls and women who have no voice due to poverty, lack of education, and sexual and economic exploitation. They creatively challenge

and adapt popular culture and have enthusiastically utilized new technologies.

In a 2007 article, Tracy Kennedy asserts that “the internet is as much a site of consciousness-raising for the Third Wave as meeting with speculums in someone’s living room was in the Second Wave.” She urges that “feminist virtual consciousness-raising” be rooted in the model put forth by Kathie Sarachild that is directed toward social change.

Thousands of diary style commentaries from girls and women appear on the net each day. Online sharing, celebrating, venting and commiseration can take place anywhere ending geographical and social isolation that affect many girls and women. Feminist blogging and social networking also link viewers to activist organizations and projects in this country and around the world.

My advocacy for CR makes me greet this electronic form of the process with enthusiasm. But I have come to realize that **we need consciousness-raising about consciousness-raising**. The face-to-face groups of the late 1960s and ‘70s did not realize their revolutionary promise because feminists did not continue to ask questions about our experience – including experiences within the groups. Forty years ago critiques of the facile notions of solidarity often were ignored or met with defensive and weak responses. In following the reservations and criticism expressed online from women of color to the “Slutwalks” held in a number of cities I became painfully aware that rejoinders from some planners that “there were women of color on the organizing committee,” reveal how much more reflection needs to accompany our activism.

Small consciousness-raising groups on the internet and in person provide spaces where feminists can have necessary conversations on the many different approaches that shape feminism and feminist activism. The technique can be modeled in workshops but is most effective if participants commit to meeting regularly over a specific period of time.

Recently I’ve been involved in workshops introducing the CR technique to students from the University of Massachusetts

campuses and some cross-generational “CR” exchanges between members of the Brandeis University Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance and the Women’s Studies Research Center. Participants are now forming groups to extend the discussion both to build on a sense of unity **and** to reveal and address areas of disagreement that require the in-depth dialogue and analysis that can result in appropriate short and long-term action for social justice that is the goal of the women’s liberation movement.

Are we experiencing a new era of consciousness-raising? I think so. Can it lead to a new era of feminist activism? I hope so. With that vision in mind, I thank you for listening – and for joining me in an affirmation of *this* revolutionary moment.