

**free  
space**  
a perspective  
on the  
small group in  
women's liberation

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Susan

## THE SMALL GROUP PROCESS

The group processes described in this chapter were discussed and identified by Sudsofloppen after we had been meeting for over a year. This was one of the first times that we turned our growing ability to analyze onto ourselves and our own activity. The experience of working out these concepts collectively was very exciting for us all. The processes may seem a little arbitrary and too structured for some of you but we are a group which believes that there is always a structure, the issue is to consciously choose one that will encourage our growth rather than just hope that it will happen. We think this way because our early activity was consciously unstructured—we thought—and we found that letting things just happen meant that the strongest personalities controlled the meetings and that it was very easy to avoid areas of discussion that were difficult. The group processes as described here are impersonal and they ensure that those of us who find it hard to open up about our feelings will be challenged to do so. The same is true for women who fear analysis and would rather stay only on the subjective level. The total process is not easy but we feel that *each* process is necessary to understanding the human experience. We believe that theory and analysis which are not rooted in concrete experience (practice) are useless, but we also maintain that for the concrete, everyday experiences to be understood, they must be subjected to the processes of analysis and abstraction.

## OPENING UP

This is a very individual need: the need for a woman to open up and talk about her feelings about herself and her life. In the beginning of a group experience opening up is a reaching out to find human contact with other women. Later it becomes a way to communicate to others about one's subjective feelings—about the group, about the women's movement, about one's life.

Our society alienates us from our feelings. However, this is less true for women than for men. It is imperative for our understanding of ourselves and for our mental health that we maintain and deepen our contact with our feelings. Our first concern must not be with whether these feelings are good or bad but what they are. Feelings are a reality. To deny their existence does not get rid of them. Rather it is through admitting them that one can begin to deal with her feelings.

Opening up is an essential but difficult process for a group. In its early stages a group usually fosters a feeling of intimacy and trust which frees women to discuss their fears and problems. This is because most women have been isolated and alone and the group experience is the first time they have found others who like themselves are frustrated with their lot as women in this society. Every woman who has tried to articulate her loss of a sense of identity to her husband knows the despair of not being understood. Any woman who has tried to explain her driving need to have a life of her own and sees her words falling on the incomprehending ears of family and friends knows the horror of being alone, being seen by others as some kind of freak. Any woman who has admitted that she is unhappy and depressed but can't explain why, knows the pain of not being taken seriously. Isolated, always getting negative responses to her attempts to communicate her feelings about her condition, it is very easy to begin to question herself, to see her problems in personal terms.

The group offers women a place where the response will be positive. “Yes, we know.” “Yes, we understand.” It is not so much the words that are said in response that are important; rather it is the fact that someone listens and does not ridicule; someone listens and acknowledges the validity of another’s view of her life. It is the beginning of sisterhood, the feeling of unity with others, of no longer being alone.

The early group experience of closeness—the honeymoon period as some call it—fosters opening up about one’s feelings towards oneself and one’s life. But as the group begins to function on a long term basis and the members participate in activities in a women’s movement, it becomes harder to be honest about one’s feelings for sometimes they are negative and may involve another woman. Yet such disclosures are necessary if trust and sisterhood are to become long term realities. Neither a group nor a movement can function if there is latent distrust and hostility or overt back biting going on. In addition an individual cannot be free to trust in herself and in others if she is suppressing feelings and allowing them to cloud her thinking and activity.

Opening up is a personal need to admit to and express one’s emotions—her joys as well as her sorrows. In addition it is a group need in that no group can continue to function over a long period of time which does not deal with the feelings of its members. Unless women are given a *non-judgmental* space in which to express themselves, we will never have the strength or the perception to deal with the ambivalences which are a part of us all. It is essential that the group guarantee confidentiality; that we know that our feelings will not be told elsewhere or used against us. This is a group commitment without which there can be no trust.

## SHARING

The opening up process is centered on the individual's expressive needs, and carried to an extreme it can become self indulgence. However, there is another experience that can take place in the group which is similar to the first yet different, for the emphasis is on teaching one another through sharing experiences. Not only do we respond with recognition to someone's account, but we add from our own histories as well, building a collage of similar experiences from all women present. The intention here is to arrive at an understanding of the social conditions of women by pooling descriptions of the forms oppression has taken in each individual's life. Revealing these particulars may be very painful, but the reason for dredging up these problems is not only for the therapeutic value of opening up hidden areas. Through-experiencing the common discussion comes the understanding that many of the situations described are not personal at all, and are not based on individual inadequacies, but rather have a root in the social order. What we have found is that painful "personal" problems can be common to many of the women present. Thus attention can turn to finding the real causes of these problems rather than merely emphasizing one's own inadequacies.

Almost any topic can be used for the sharing process. All that is necessary is that women have experience in that area. Some of the topics we have used for discussion have been communal living, job experiences, movement experiences in civil rights, SDS and the peace movement, relationships with men focusing on examples of male chauvinism, relationships with women with emphasis on our adolescent experiences and how these affect our present feelings toward women, and our self images—how we perceive ourselves and how we think others perceive us. Agreeing on a topic, and preparing for the discussion for a week or so, seems to ensure the most productive sharing discussion.

The sharing occasions have shown us that the solutions to our problems will be found in joining with other women, because the basis of many of our problems is our status as women. It was not only sharing the stories of our childhood, school, marriage and job experiences which led us to this realization. It was as much the positive feelings, the warmth and comradeship of the small group which reinforced the conviction that it is with other women both now and in the future that solutions will be found. The old stereotypes that women can't work together and don't like one another are shown to be false in practice.

After sharing we *know* that women suffer at the hands of a male supremacist society and that this male supremacy intrudes into every sphere of our existence, controlling the ways in which we are allowed to make our living and the ways in which we find fulfillment in personal relationships. We know that our most secret, our most private problems are grounded in the way women are treated, in the way women are allowed to live. Isolation turns frustration into self doubt; but joining together gives women perspective that can lead to action. Through sharing they can see that they have been lied to, and begin to look critically at a society which so narrowly defines the roles they may play. But before they can take their destinies into their own hands, they must understand the objective condition of women and the many forms that oppression takes in the lives of women.

## ANALYZING

A third stage now takes place in the group: the experience of analyzing the reasons for and the causes of the oppression of women. This analysis rises out of the questions which are posed by the basic raw data of the opening up and sharing periods. It is a new way of looking at women's condition: the development of



concepts which attempt to define not only the why's and how's of our oppression but possible ways of fighting that oppression. Because the analysis takes place *after* the sharing of individual examples of oppression, it is based on a female understanding of the reality of women's condition.

This period is important because it is the beginning of going beyond our personal experiences. Having gained a perspective on our lives through the sharing process, we now begin to look at women's predicament with some objectivity. This new approach is difficult for many of us as our lives as women exist predominantly in the realm of subjectivity; we perform functions but seldom get on top of a situation to understand how something works and why. This is a new and difficult procedure to learn.

In analyzing the role the group has played in our lives, for example, we have come to understand the ways in which women are kept from feeling they are worthwhile. We have discussed the need to have a social identity and how women are prevented from acquiring one. Women's roles as wife and mother have been analyzed. We have come to see that women are relegated to a private sphere, dependent both psychologically and financially on their husbands. The group is a first step in transcending the isolation. Here sometimes for the first time in her life a woman is allowed an identity independent of a man's. She is allowed to function intellectually as a thinker rather than as a sex object, servant, wife or mother. In short, the group establishes the social worth of the women present, a necessity if women are to take themselves seriously.

We have had to face realistically the inability of many of us to think conceptually. This inability comes from being encouraged to stay in the private sphere and to relate to people on personal levels even when working. We are training ourselves to get out from under our subjective responses and look at our reality in new ways. Although this is not easy for us, we see the absolute necessity of

analysis, for our oppression takes both obvious and subtle forms which vary depending on our class and educational status. The complexity of women's situations necessitates that we bring information outside of our individual experiences to bear on our analysis of women's oppression. This is the period when questions can be asked about how the entire society functions. This is the period when books and other documentation become crucial.

It is our contention, however, that this period of analysis belongs *after* the opening up and sharing experiences, for concepts we find must answer the questions which come from our problems as women. It is not in our interest to fit experiences into preconceived theory, especially one devised by men. This is not only because we must suspect all male thinking as being male supremacist, but also because we must teach ourselves to think independently. Our thinking must grow out of our questions if it is to be internalized and if we are to have the tools to look objectively at new experience and analyze that correctly. Thus a period of analysis will come after each new experience and will add new thinking to an ever growing ideology.

## ABSTRACTING

A synthesis of the analyses is necessary before decisions can be made as to priorities in problems and approach. For this to happen a certain distance must exist between us and our concerns. When we remove ourselves from immediate necessity, we are able to take the concepts and analysis we have developed and discuss abstract theory. We are able to look at the totality of the nature of our condition, utilizing the concepts we have formulated from discussions of the many forms our oppression takes. Further we begin to build (and to some extent, experience) a vision of our human potential. This does not mean we become more like men.

Rather we come to understand what we could be if freed of social oppression. We see this abstracting experience as the purest form of Free Space.

We are only beginning to experience this Free Space, abstracting, now that we have a year of opening up, sharing, and analyzing behind us. We are beginning to see how different institutions fulfill or prevent the fulfillment of human needs, how they work together and how they must be changed. We are beginning to gain an overview of what type of women's movement will be necessary to change the institutions that oppress women. Specifically we have begun to have a clear understanding of what role the small group can and cannot play in this social revolution. It is clear to us that the small group is neither an action-oriented political group in and of itself nor is it an alternative family unit. Rather this is where ideology can develop. And out of this emerging ideology will come a program grounded in a solid understanding of women's condition which will have its roots, but not its totality, in our own experience. Intellectually this is the most exciting stage. It is a joy to learn to think, to begin to comprehend what is happening to us. Ideas are experiences in themselves, freeing, joyous experiences which give us the framework for formulating our actions.

It is important to stress that opening up, sharing, analyzing and abstracting are not limited to certain periods of time. One never completes any of the processes. Opening up is not limited to the past and one does not graduate through the various processes until one is only abstracting to the exclusion of all else. Analyzing and abstracting are only valid processes if they continue to be rooted in the present feelings and experiences of participants. The order may be fixed but the processes themselves are ongoing.

The total group process is not therapy because we try to find the social causes for our experiences and the possible programs for changing these. But the therapeutic experience of momentarily

relieving the individual of all responsibility for her situation does occur and is necessary if women are to be free to act. This takes place in both the opening up and sharing phases of the group activity and gives us the courage to look objectively at our predicament, accepting what are realistically our responsibilities to change and understanding what must be confronted societally.