





HC WGS100: Collective Learning through Consciousness Raising

During the second wave, feminists took the problem of collective education seriously, inventing a method called “consciousness raising” to facilitate the collective discovery of truth through collaborative self-reflection. We will adapt this method to structure our class discussions in ways that embody the goals of feminist pedagogy. Key concepts: consciousness, self-reflection, trust, honesty, abstraction.

- **Assigned:**
 -  Lorde 1978, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action
 -  Allen 1970.4, The Small Group Process
- **Recommended:**
 - National Organization for Women 1982, *NOW Guidelines for Feminist Consciousness-Raising*.
 - Rosenthal 1984, “Consciousness Raising: From Revolution to Re-Evaluation.” in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 8(4).
 - Haslanger 2021, “Political Epistemology and Social Critique” in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 7*, pg 23-65.
- **Media:**
 - Gerwig 2023, *Barbie*
 - Barbie Deprogramming (1:12:30-1:17:00): Matel employee Gloria visits the patriachalized Barbie Land and leads the brainwashed dolls in a consciousness raising exercise that breaks through their false consciousness.

Consciousness Raising

- **A Brief History of Consciousness Raising.** Consciousness raising is a form of collective discussion developed by second wave feminists as a way of exposing and overcoming patriarchal ideology.
 - **Masculine Objectivity.** Proponents of consciousness raising argued that men had historically monopolized public discourse, so that the concepts, ideas, and language available to women were infected by patriarchal assumptions (e.g. men's superiority, women's inferiority, naturalization, foreclosure, etc.)
 - **Women's Perspective.** As a result, second wave feminists argued that women needed to develop new concepts in order to make sense of their reality in a non-patriarchal way and understand how it could be changed. To develop these ideas, they turned to women's experience, arguing that women shared a common situation defined by patriarchal oppression. By collectively discussing their experiences of this oppression, feminists argued that women could produce a unique understanding of the world that went beyond patriarchal ideology.

- **False Consciousness.** But obviously not all conversations between women resulted in feminist consciousness. In fact, many women affirmed what to second wave feminists appeared to be patriarchal ideology. To make sense of this problem, second wave feminists argued that ideology can be internalized by women so that they are unaware of how their own experiences diverge from the patriarchal stories and concepts they tell themselves.
- **Consciousness Raising as Method.** Second wave feminists argued that false consciousness could be overcome through collective discussions among women, but only if those discussions took a specific form—that of consciousness raising. What exactly defined the method of consciousness raising was never fully agreed upon, but Pamela Allen outlines some common ideas and principles.
- **The Method of Freedom.** So, the purpose of consciousness raising as a feminist method is to overcome false consciousness and break down patriarchal ideology so that women can understand the world from a feminist perspective that will both expose the reality of their oppression and shows the possibility of overcoming the patriarchy.
- **The Third Wave Critique.** However, consciousness raising fell off as a prominent feminist method due, in part, to a powerful feminist criticism of its primary assumption: that women share a common experience of oppression. We will discuss this more when we study intersectionality, but third wave feminists pointed out that there are important differences between women (race, class, age, etc.) and that the very meaning of "woman" was up for contestation (are trans women invited to the CR group? What about trans men?).
-  **Question.** What is an example of a something that you were taught about yourself which you came to realize was false through conversation with (or observation of) other people?
-  **Question.** What is an example of a discussion you had which changed your perspective on yourself and the world? Who was it with? What did you learn? And what made it possible for you to be open to that new perspective?
- **Consciousness Raising in the Classroom.** Feminist discussions of consciousness raising provide us with an important warning and some good ideas for shaping our small group discussions.
 - **The Importance of Method.** First, CR shows us that simply talking to each other and sharing our feelings is not enough to produce insight into our experiences. To understand what our experiences mean, we need to do more than just express them, we need to discuss them in a feminist fashion. And to structure feminist discussion, especially in the beginning, we need a method that guides our exploration in a critical way. However, we must also recognize the legitimacy of the third wave critique. This will be less difficult for us since we do not all share the same identity.

- **Pedagogical Method.** The deeper lesson is that the goal of consciousness raising cannot be the to uncover a pre-existing unity among discussants, but rather to build a shared understanding of ourselves and our world that goes beyond any individual perspective. So, for our class, we need a method that helps us to critically explore our experiences in a way that empowers us to develop our perspectives together.
 - To develop such a method, we will adapt Pamela Allen's four-step process as outlined in "Free Space"
 - 📖 *Quotes*
 - ● 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... 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. [[Allen 1970]], 26.

Allen 1970.4, The Small Group Process

- **Sudsofloppen's Method.** Let's begin by exploring Pamela Allen's proposed method, derived from her experiences in the Sudsofloppen collective.
 - 🧑 **Question.** Go through the method step by step, noting the differences with out method, and coming up with examples.
 - **Opening Up.** Individual need to communicate subjective feelings
 - What are ""feelings"" — this should be thoughts, experiences, and perspective and should actually be called "sharing".
 - 📖 *Quotes*
 - ● 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. [[Allen 1970]], 27.
 - ● Our society alienates us from our feelings... 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. [[Allen 1970]], 27.
 - ● 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. [[Allen 1970]], 28.

- **Sharing.** This is when others add their similar stories in response to an opening up.
 - 📖 *Quotes*
 - ● 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...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. Allen 1970, 29.
- **Analyzing.** Here a structural analysis of individual experience is performed in consultation with objective investigations, e.g. studies, theory, etc. The analysis is designed to uncover the cause of oppression and thereby the possibilities for overcoming it.
 - As Allen describes it, sharing already includes a moment of "analyzing" (really abstracting) insofar as it is supposed to uncover the structuration of individual experience rather than just similarity
 - This is an undefended move from the construction of a descriptive type to the recognition of an objective (structural) type.
 - 📖 *Quotes*
 - ● A third stage now takes place in the group: the experience of analyzing the reasons for and the causes of the oppression of women. Allen 1970, 30.
 - ● 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.... 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. Allen 1970, 31.
 - ● 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. Allen 1970, 32.

- ● 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 Allen 1970, 32.
- **Abstracting.** Here the focus seems to be on abstracting from the formal reproduction of the structure and the range of possibilities it permits, to perceive the structure as a historical object which had a beginning and can have an end, thus to begin considering what in humanity expresses the possibility of the abolition of the oppressive structure. And how this can be made concrete through a women's ideology and movement.
 - 📖 *Quotes*
 - ● 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. Allen 1970, 33.
 - ● 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. Allen 1970, 33.
 - ● 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. Allen 1970, 33.

Our GWS100 Method

- **Sharing.** In the first moment, we take turns sharing our perspective on the question / material. Everyone should take a turn saying something brief, and you should focus on expressing your unique perspective on the topic unfiltered by other's responses.
- **Reflecting.** In the second moment, we share our reflections on other people's responses. Every response should get and everyone should give at least one reflection (so some people may need to go more than once). However, this section should be more free-form. Allow yourself to respond to others responses and develop lines of inquiry—just make sure to at least touch on everyone's at least enough to affirm it was heard.
 - Good reflections often take the form of questions that explore how a topic can be seen from multiple perspectives. Different experiences teach us to ask different questions about ourselves and the world. Sharing what you find question worthy invites others to explore the topic from your viewpoint, empowering everyone to grow as their understanding is widened by your experience while your perspective is developed through their responses.
- **Analyzing.** Next, we integrate our reflections with the course material to develop our understanding of both. Choose a handful of topics that arose in reflection, approach the assigned material with questions in hand, and look for what speaks to your concerns. Focus on exploring the author's position on the topic, what they claim and why, what they leave out, and what questions you're left with. Everyone should contribute at least one idea about what the text says or how it relates to your reflections.
 - Here discussion can become very fluid. While it's not necessary or respectful to demand fully equal contribution to every aspect of the discussion, students have a responsibility to ensure that everyone feels involved.
 - For class, this is the moment where the thinkers should be explicitly introduced and discussed.
- **Developing.** Finally, we create new knowledge by exploring how integrating the authors ideas to our own reflections develops the topics in new ways. Here we focus on asking how the ideas could be applied to our own lives and world.
 - this could involve fleshing out how an idea applies to our reflections in particular, criticizing an idea for failing to make sense of our reflections, explaining how we will apply an idea in our lives, showing how an idea has made us think differently,
 - In class this might be applying the theories to new examples, e.g. our own lives, media, etc.?
- **Non-Linearity.** Finally, as Allen remarks, these "moments" of the process of consciousness raising need not be gone through in a linear fashion. While the order presented has a certain priority, it's not necessary to rigidly stick to the outline. It's fine to skip around from sharing to analyzing to reflecting to developing, etc. The most

important thing is to make sure that everyone has a chance to express their perspective and receive have it recognized by the group.

- 📖 *Quotes*
- ● 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. Allen 1970, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Womens Liberation*, 30.
- 🧑 **Question.** Critically discuss the "consciousness raising" clip from the Barbie movie. In what ways does it exemplify the process of consciousness raising Allen discusses it? In what ways does it go beyond or fall short of Allen's method? Go through the method while doing so:
 - Sharing, what are your initial reactions to the clip? Be honest but respectful.
 - Reflecting, what do you think about what your partners have said? Did you find any comments really insightful or disagree with something? How has your perspective already changed from just listening to everyone else?
 - Analyzing, now bring in Allen explicitly (they may have been brought up already). What would they think about the clip? Why do you think so? Make sure to work with the text itself.
 - Developing, finally, consider how you could develop the ideas of the clip. This might mean applying them to your own life, or thinking about how you would re-write the script or change the direction of the film, or how a similar scene might go differently in another movie, etc.