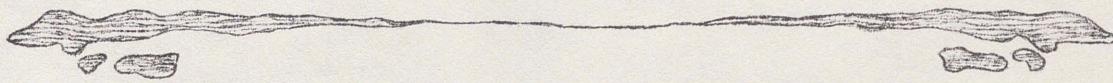
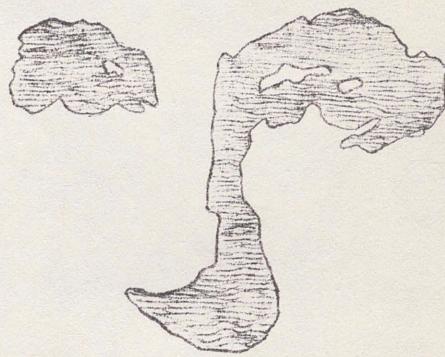
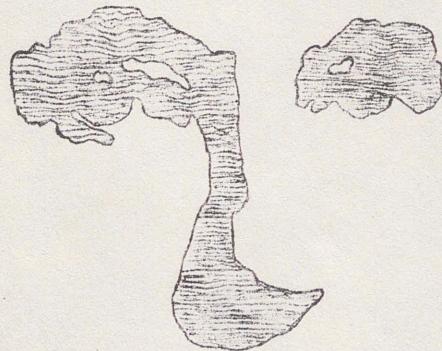


on our own: gay men in consciousness-raising groups



This article is a collective effort by a New York consciousness-raising group composed of nine GLF men. We have adopted the process of consciousness-raising from the Womens' Liberation Movement.

Gays must organize because it is the only way a class of people that has been cut adrift by society can deal with that fact. Everywhere we find hostility, prejudice and condescension, even amongst ourselves. Most gays accept, in self-defense, the straight man's mythology that says we're sick, immature, perverse deviant, and thus should hide our love away in tearooms, park bushes, on cruising streets, and in Mafia- or otherwise pig-controlled bars. Those who reject the mythology, developing positive attitudes toward their homosexuality are even more offensive to straights. We all risk brutalization and imprisonment and have little alternative but to use the traditional oppressive cruising institutions. These myths and institutions keep us isolated and distrustful of each other. And don't expect any help from our straight oppressors in creating alternatives. We're on our own.

New York Gay Liberation Front's first attempts at coming together have been the large Sunday night meetings, which after a year produced few decisions and no policy. Since June '69 GLF had talked of a community center, but when prospects arose the body could never get together on the proposals. Only in November 1970, over objections from the general meeting, did a small, independent work collective realize that goal. Similarly, attempts to formulate a GLF platform met with failure. The number of people at these meetings (from 50-150) made decisions impossible; discussions became arguments and, often, destructive personal attacks. Since a good part of the attendance varied from week to week, the past

development of issues had to be relieved each time they came up, retarding policy-making decisions. In contradiction to GLF's basic structural principle of having no leaders, the de-facto leaders were those men who spoke best in large groups. It was a replay of the competitive, hierachial structure we wished to change: a few wielded power and the rest were dominated. This way of doing things brought out the 'man' in gay men. But most women left this 'male trip' GLF in disgust after half a year. Thus the large Sunday night group proved ineffectual and oppressive.

In our consciousness-raising group, we have been trying to step outside the straight man's myths and institutions, to suspend the limited ways we deal with each other, and experiment with new ways of relating. Everyone's feelings are considered in consciousness-raising (CR), and instead of shouting each other down, consensus, a solution that is to each person's interest, can be reached. If people are silent, they are asked to contribute. This is part of the collective process. We as men are struggling with our eagerness to dominate and ego-trip by being aware of the needs of others in the group, and struggling with our tendency to intellectualize by speaking from our experience. We are also learning what has been forbidden us- to relate to one another with respect and love. CR provides a format in which this potential can develop and operate. We use it to discover our identity as gay men, to recognize our oppression in a straight society, and redefine ourselves in our own terms, from our own heads and experience, because no political philosophy designed by white heterosexual men can be adequate for us. Thus we use CR to arrive at policy and positions, to plan actions and projects- to evolve a politics out of our experience.

In New York at this writing there are 10 to 12 gay mens' CR groups, some new, some months old. Gays who have not related to GLF have been involved by this small group process. It has been decided, in order to encourage the restructuring of NY\*GLF, that each of these groups will send a representative, on a rotating basis so all participate, to the Sunday meetings. These representatives will constitute a caucus and function collectively.

A CR group is a serious and long range effort. It is well

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A CR group is a serious and long range effort. It is well to start with as many as 10-15 people, because members will surely drop out in the opening weeks. After the formative first weeks, the groups constitute itself and is closed to new people. The group meets weekly, alternating among the homes of the members.

The format of the session consists of each persons testimony on a given topic and concluding discussion. Notes are kept from week to week. The topic chosen must be relevant to the members life experiences and should be agreed upon by all. Usually chosen as a first topic is coming out, one's first gay sexual experiences. When giving testimony a group member relates his personal experiences and feelings about the topic, avoiding any tendency to intellectualize or to draw conclusions. Each person speaks to the topic for as long as he wishes, and can only be interrupted for questions of clarification. The order of the testimony is determined by the group, either rotating around the room, or randomly by spinning the bottle. Giving personal testimony is difficult: it involves opening up to the other group members and beginning to trust them. Of course, testimony cannot be discussed outside the group. After everyone has given testimony, the group compares the evidence of their experiences. The significance of the similarities and differences in peoples testimony is considered. Generalizations about the condition of gay men in our society emerge. This format of CR ensures that the discussion and conclusions are rooted in the members experience and feelings.

The following is a list of some of the most important topics our group has used in the past months:

Series: age 1-5, early formative experiences

grade school, acceptance or rejection of 'male role'

high school, pressure to conform to straight environment

college, post high school - sexual repression or expression

Series on Sexual Relationships

coming out (first sexual experiences, acknowledging oneself as gay  
sex roles

sexual objectification

cruising and bars

masturbation

sexual experiences with women

S&M

sexual fantasies

monogamy

jealousy and possessiveness

domination or passivity in relationships

what kind of men are we attracted to

how do we approach men and how do we react from these approaches from men

sex acts - sucking, fucking, being fucked, etc...-experiences with and feelings about

parents \*siblings\* reaction to the terms 'faggot' and 'queer'\*

relations with women & relations with straight men \* racism\*

class backgrounds and prejudices\* age-ism (the pressure to be young)\*

religious training and background

The group must give priority to dealing with a member's pressing immediate situation, using whenever possible the CR framework. Periodically, sessions should openly examine and confront personality conflicts and feelings among members.

All groups must constantly struggle with resistance to CR. There always seem to be a thousand other things to do, especially on the night of the group meeting. However only a major reason should cause a member to miss a session- the group process is at stake! Once the group is assembled, people tend to put off serious business of CR. For example, they will socialize and gossip for hours to delay selecting a topic. They may get hung-up in debating a potential topic.

During testimony, resistance frequently takes the form of intellectualization and the expression of abstract ideas, negating concrete experience and feelings. Both during testimony and discussion, resistance to CR manifests itself by straying from the chosen topic. These manifestations may all be symptoms of the fear that people feel when they come in contact with their own oppression and begin to realize that they must make changes in their lives to deal with it. Of course, leaving the group is the ultimate resistance.

CR is often confused with other small group efforts such as group therapy, encounter and purely social formations. We must also distinguish it from all other political organizing processes. CR and psychotherapy are poles apart in their methods and purposes, and in their basic assumptions. Psychiatric theory defines the gay person's situation as that of individual sickness, while CR substitutes the perspective of gay people as collectively oppressed by society. In a therapy situation, there is always a leader and the authority of the body of psychoanalytic thought, while CR is without leaders and brings people together around their common experiences. On occasion we in CR borrow the techniques of encounter groups to help us express our feelings when we have problems relating, but encounter does not analyze the social causes of our alienation. CR is distinct from other political organizing processes in that it begins with no preconceived ideology or strategy for gay liberation. We do not deal in abstractions or rhetoric, but draw ideas from our life-situations.

The results of our CR meeting have been many. While we began as nine isolated, alienated people, we have become a group politicized by the study of our experience. We found that our problems are not individual illnesses, but are generated by our oppression as a class. This discovery negated one of the most effective weapons of our oppressors, the false division between the personal and political. Whether

or not we'd had any previous political involvement, none of us saw homosexuality in political terms. The sharing of our experience has brought us to a collective consciousness as gay men. We have begun an analysis of gays as a class exploited by the white straight man, the sexist who rules this society. Gay consciousness for us now means gay anger as well as pride. While pornographers, the psychiatrists, and the owners of gay bars and of the stores on cruising streets get rich exploiting us, we are kept socially and economically fragmented, separate amongst ourselves and from the other exploited classes of society-blacks, workers, poor people, women, and the populations of third world nations. Those in power in Amerika keep us all of us down via the policy of 'divide and conquer.'

In our CR group, we have been finding new ways of relating to each other. We approach a true functioning democracy with no leaders, providing support for one another in our attempts to change our role-oriented behaviour. Gays need not to be isolated; strength comes from the fusion of consciousnesses.

Four months ago a radical male homosexual collective was formed by five members of the group. This commune is an extension of our CR process into a total living situation. The entire CR group of nine holds weekly orientation meetings to introduce gays to gay liberation and to organize new groups. We have opened a weekly coffee house where our community can get together and rap. We are the switchboard for NY\*GLF men. We organized the August mass demonstration to protest police harassment on 42nd St. and on Christopher St. The CR group is our 'movement.' It is the focus of our political activities, and the basis of our struggle to free ourselves and to smash sexism.