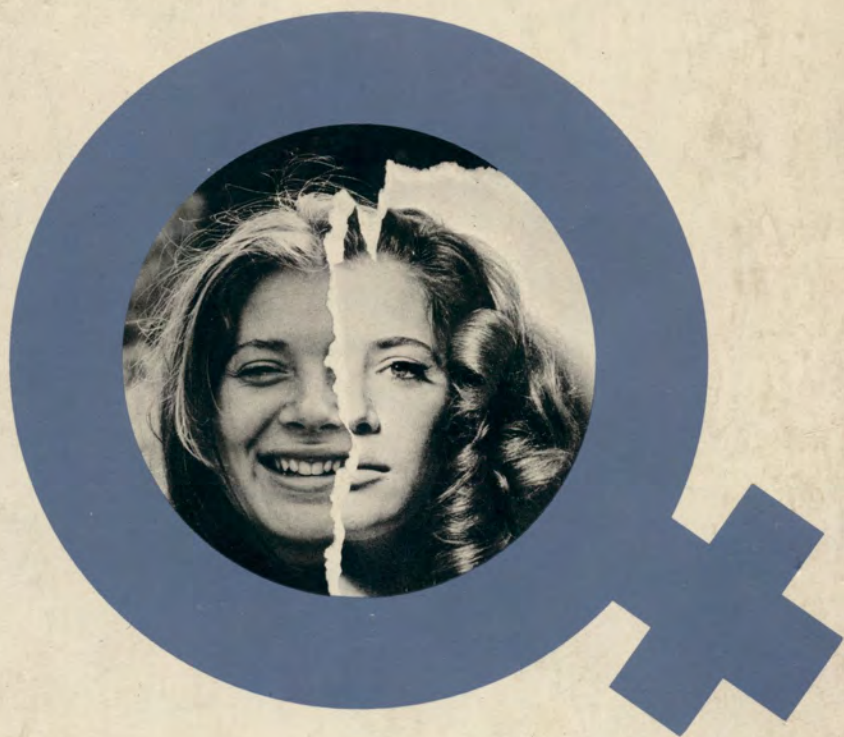


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# Radical Feminism

edited by Anne Koedt • Ellen Levine • Anita Rapone



An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.

# Consciousness Raising: A Dead End?

by Carol Williams Payne

*Carol Payne is a relative newcomer to the women's movement. She has been a member of an unaffiliated consciousness-raising group in New York for a year and a half.*

For almost a year and a half I have been a member of a group of women which has met regularly on Thursday evenings. Some of us are married, some single, some divorced, some with children, some without, some established in professions, some trying to decide what kind of work to do. Our ages range from mid-20's to mid-30's. Membership in the group has shifted; some people have moved away; others became frustrated with the direction the group was taking or felt that they didn't want to contribute.

The group was formed when two women began talking to each other about starting a group to talk about starting a group to talk about problems women have in working and wondering whether their self-doubts and lack of self-confidence were related to their being women. They found enough friends and friends of friends interested in the same problems to start a group. There were seven of us to begin with; then two more joined. The number has remained between six and nine.

We have talked about many problems which concern us—work, competitiveness with other women, jealousy, relationships with men, our childhood, our parents. We have tried to understand how we have been shaped by society's expectations of us, how we share problems and fears and how we can help each other.

Sometimes we used the approved consciousness-raising technique

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of choosing a subject and having everyone speak about it. More often, whoever wanted to speak about something initiated the discussion. Doing this created problems because the people who were the most vocal or the most competitive tended to dominate meetings and we spent many evenings struggling with destructive tendencies and personality conflicts.

Periodically, we asked ourselves, "What is the purpose of this group? What are we trying to accomplish? What direction should we be going in?"

We argued about this. A women's group shouldn't be group therapy, we decided. But there were elements of group therapy in what we were trying to do, to help each other deal with personal problems. We finally realized that we could not handle confrontation and hostility in the manner of group therapy because we did not have a trained leader who could remain objective and call a halt if someone was being hurt. We decided that we should be supportive and avoid confrontation.

We never resolved the question of what a women's liberation group was supposed to do. There was always a conflict between those who favored the personal, psychological approach and those who felt that a women's group should be building a bridge between the personal insight gained by being in a small group and political action with a larger body of women.

We would discuss one person's problem in balancing work and family responsibilities, another's in handling the aftermath of a divorce, another's with her husband who felt threatened by her belonging to a women's liberation group, but we never tried to relate these problems to the structural problems of women in society nor did we think about how they could be dealt with beyond the personal level of these particular women in their particular situations.

Some women in our group were engaged in political action or work which involved them with other women and they looked upon the group as a haven from the hassles they were going through elsewhere. All of us were busy and could not spare much more than one evening a week. And it was easier to continue the way we had started than to find some meaningful action that we could all agree we wanted to do.

I kept asking myself, "What is the point of just continuing to talk about ourselves? Why bother? Where is it leading?" Some evenings we didn't get down to serious discussion until 10:30 or



11:00 when everyone was ready to go home. Some meetings degenerated to the level of comparing bra sizes and talking about what vitamins we bought at the health food store. At these meetings we were all unconsciously expressing our frustration with our purposelessness.

I continued to come for several months after I had realized that things would probably not change and that the majority of the members were not as frustrated as I was with what the group was doing. Because I had become attached to the group and didn't want to leave, I kept hoping that we would come to a resolution.

I left because the group did not change and I needed to relate to the women's movement in a different way. I felt that nothing could be accomplished by becoming more and more intimate with a small group of women and that if women's groups are not political then they are nothing more than amateur group therapy or social clubs.

The consciousness-raising group was one of the great successes of the beginning of the women's liberation movement. It was a great way to reach large numbers of women and to provide a setting in which women could develop self-confidence and a realization of what they shared. The groups met a need and they proliferated.

But now, my staying in a small group which just talks and which does not relate to the rest of the movement is stagnation. It is pointless to develop the self-confidence to challenge assumptions about women's roles and an understanding of the way society channels women without then collectively doing something about these problems. There must be a way to retain the intimacy and sense of belonging that comes from being part of a small group and link it to a sense of purpose and relationship with other groups.

I am not sure where to go from here. I feel isolated because I was not connected with any women's organization except the small group. Beyond the group I am related to nothing but the barrage of distorted images of women's liberation projected by the mass media.

Where should I fit in among the ideological schisms which are dividing the movement? What organizations are still in existence? At this point, is developing a theoretical base and a strategy for action more important than specific actions? And if action, what action?

I don't think my time in the group was wasted but now I need to work with women in a different way on specific projects with tangible results. The question is what? and how? and with whom?