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.
Free Space

by Pamela Allen

Introduction

I joined my group, Sudsofloppen, at its second meeting in September, 1968. I was new to San Francisco, having moved from New York City where I had been active in women’s liberation. I brought to the group a political commitment to building a mass women’s movement. The group experience has helped me to synthesize and deepen my emotional and intellectual understanding of the predicament of females in this society and of the concerns with which we must deal in building a women’s movement.

We have defined our group as a place in which to think: to think about our lives, our society, and our potential for being creative individuals and for building a women’s movement. We call this Free Space. We have had successes and failures in utilizing this space. Usually our problems stem from our failure to be completely honest with ourselves and each other—failing to question and disagree with another’s ideas and perspectives and to say what we think is an alternative. Our failure to be truthful has always had a negative effect on the functioning of our group. Thus individual integrity—intellectual and emotional honesty—is our goal. It has been a difficult struggle.

Precisely because the group does become so meaningful to our lives as we start to separate ourselves from dependence on male values and institutions, it is a temptation to transfer our identities onto the group, to let our thinking be determined by group consensus rather than doing it ourselves. Although we are not sure that full autonomy is a possible goal, we believe that our hope lies in

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developing as individuals who understand themselves, their own needs, the workings of our society, and the needs of others. Thus we try to resist the temptation to submerge our individuality in the group and struggle instead to make contact with our own feelings and thoughts. Freedom is frightening and difficult to use. We are always struggling to take advantage of the Free Space we have created for ourselves.

We have developed four group processes to help us in our endeavor to become autonomous in thought and behavior. We call these processes “opening up,” “sharing,” “analyzing,” and “abstracting.” They are our way of keeping in touch with our emotions, giving one another information about experiences we have had, trying to understand the meaning of those events, and finally fitting that understanding into an overview of our potential as human beings and the reality of our society—i.e., developing an ideology.

The group processes are described below. It should be understood that they are not totally separate processes; rather there is a great deal of overlap. But the emphasis in opening up is on our feelings; in sharing, on our experiences; in analyzing, on our thinking; and in abstracting, on our evolving theory.

I have chosen to write about one structure that has developed in the women’s movement, the small group, because I think the small group is especially suited to freeing women to affirm their own view of reality and to think independently of male-supremacist values. It is a space where women can come to understand not only the ways this society works to keep women oppressed but ways to overcome that oppression psychologically and socially. It is Free Space.

The group processes described in this paper were discussed and identified by Sudsloflopens 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. For some, the processes may seem a little arbitrary and too structured, but we are a group which believes that there is always a structure, that 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 feel-
ings will be challenged to do so. The same is true for women who
fear analysis and would rather remain only on the subjective level.
The total process is not easy but we feel that each process is neces-
sary 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 pro-
cesses 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 begin-
ning of a group experience opening up is a reaching out to find
human contact with other women. Later it becomes a way to com-
 municate 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
ture for women than for men. It is imperative for our understand-
ing 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 them-
selves 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 unp comprehending 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, the woman finds it easy to begin to question herself, to see her problems as personal ones.

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 as 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 toward 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 revealed 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 the therapeutic value of opening up hidden areas. Through 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 may 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, experiences in the civil rights movement, 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 seem 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 that 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 in practice to be false.

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 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 woman’s predicament with some objectivity. This new approach is difficult for many of us, for as women we 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. Analyzing 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 the ways 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 to 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 with our class and educational status. The complexity of women’s situations necessitates our bringing information outside 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 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 it 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 had 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 that 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 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.