WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING:

PATHS OF LIBERATORY RESISTANCE

By

LORRAINE J. IRLAM
B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1995

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Department of ~~De~~ *Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education*

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Abstract

The field of psychology has been aptly criticised by feminists for its de-contextualizing emphasis on so-called individual deficits. Feminists and other critical psychologists posit that marginalized groups and women in particular are overly pathologized for problems that in fact may be the natural consequences of internalized oppression. Consciousness-raising is assumed to be of benefit not only by stimulating collective action for social change, but by psychologically liberating individual women as well. Most existing research on the effects of consciousness-raising, however, was conducted in the 1970s. Looking at related concepts, more recent studies have examined the effects of taking women's studies courses or the processes of racial or feminist identity development. Together this body of research, most of which has relied on quantitative, cross-sectional data, suggests that consciousness-raising is implicated in profound personal metamorphoses. Virtually absent from the literature, however, are holistic qualitative explorations of women's experiences of consciousness-raising. Therefore, this study, a collaborative feminist narrative approach, is a qualitative exploration attempting to enhance our existing understanding of women's lived experiences of consciousness-raising, particularly with respect to its emancipatory and psychological consequences. Seven women, including the researcher, have narrated their experiences of consciousness-raising. Themes such as enhanced self-concept; positive changes in spiritual and work lives, as well as psychological health; mixed effects; and consciousness-raising as a tool of liberatory resistance are discussed. Findings are compared with existing research and implications for counselling psychology and future research are drawn.

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Today, psychologists have a favorite word, and that word is maladjusted. I tell

you today that there are some things to which I am proud to be maladjusted. I

shall never be adjusted to lynch mobs, segregation, economic inequalities, 'the

madness of militarism,' and self-defeating physical violence. The salvation of

the world lies in the maladjusted.

<div style="text-align: right">Martin Luther King, Jr. (cited in Freedman & Combs, 1996)</div>

In memory of Brian Rohatyn,

who helped raise my consciousness.

(1967 to 2000)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I remember in fifth grade, we had this thing called the "fag test." What would happen is that a kid would go up to another kid and scratch him on the hand as hard as he could, and if it made a scar, or if it bled, that meant he was a fag (a seventeen-year-old student, cited in Blumenfeld, 1994, p. 116).

As a black woman, I'm not supposed to be here. . . . I think about growing up watching T.V., nobody black. There were only white people on T.V.. [bursting into tears] There were only white people in magazines, only white people on billboards, only white people on cereal boxes, only white people on the soap, only white people everywhere (Mercedes, in Collins, 1999).

Legally I was a single woman; but I did not *feel* single. I always had my two children in my life. Then I would feel guilty. Was I a horrible mother to feel this way? (anonymous single mother, cited in Gail, 1984, p. 192).

The inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it (Allison, cited in Russell, 1996, p. 64).

We are oppressed from without by a society which does not value us and therefore does not give priority to our needs, and we are oppressed from within because we have internalised those same attitudes towards ourselves (a deaf author, cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p. 134).

Oppression is commonly thought of as political and economic, however, both political and psychological oppression co-exist as inseparable, interdependent realities (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Self-identity never develops in isolation. It grows within a social context from the moment of birth. Our society's dominant ideology tells us who we are and how we fit in. As children, we learn whether we are good enough to play with, the right colour, the right gender, the right class (Root, 1992). Root (1992) describes "insidious trauma" as the cumulative impact of racism, anti-Semitism, poverty, heterosexism, ageism, homophobia and other discriminations. Over time, insidious trauma manifests a symptomatological picture not unlike that of direct or indirect traumas. This frequently includes anxiety, depression, paranoia, and substance abuse.

Albee (1995) also sees the social environment as the main source of emotional distress, noting that therapists commonly work with individuals injured by

> the stress of being a member of a rejected minority group, the stress of social
> homophobia, the stress of growing old in a society that worships youth and
> rejects the elderly. The stress of being a woman in a world ruled by males who
> use their power to establish sexist control and discrimination, and the stress of
> being poor and powerless in a society where the power structure is in the hands
> of a small male elite group whose top one percent owns a major proportion of
> society's wealth and power (Albee, 1995, p. 206).

Albee (1988) cites epidemiological studies showing clear relationships between marginal social status and psychopathology.

For example, the horrific experiences and psychological effects of being gay in a homophobic society frequently include self-hatred, isolation, shame, turning inward, verbal and physical assaults, even by family, rejection by friends and strangers, and harassment (Blumenfeld, 1993-1994). In six American cities in 1993, 1813 antigay incidents were reported, including bomb threats, murders, physical assaults, arson, vandalism, telephone harassment, and police abuse (Ochs, 1996). However, "it is not necessary ... to beat us up or to murder or torture us to ensure our silence and invisibility. . . . A climate of terror has been created instead in which most gay people voluntarily and of our own free will choose to stay silent and invisible" (Kitzinger, 1996). A vicious cycle of poor self-esteem and school performance, difficulties with emotional and intellectual development, and dysfunctional behaviours is often seen in gay youth (Blumenfeld, 1993-1994). Not surprisingly, 58% of young gay males resort to substance abuse to numb the pain, and suicide in gay youth is two to three times more prevalent than in heterosexual youth.

Similarly, Nell (1996) discusses the "psychic mutilation" resulting from internalizing the hatred of colonized people. Internalized colonial ideologies also set the stage for identity crises, which involve low self-esteem, self-denial, feelings of inadequacy, and helplessness (Comas-Diaz, 1995). A collective group identity of inferiority is also often seen among minorities, while the dominant group is considered superior (Prilliltensky & Gonick, 1996). Likewise, poverty and classism are almost inevitably accompanied by shame and a sense of being different (Russell,

1996), with the myth of classlessness in this part of the world serving to obscure such injustice (Chalifoux, 1996).

The damages of exploitation and the resulting internalized self-denigrating images of inferiority become a self-fulfilling prophecy as people behave in accordance with their marginalized social status (Albee, 1995; Montero, 1997; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). What feminists have long referred to as internalized oppression, Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) define as "psychological oppression," or "the internalized view of self as negative and as not deserving" (p. 130). Feelings of personal inadequacy lead to learned helplessness and surplus powerlessness, that is, powerlessness beyond a material lack of power (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). Legitimizing myths of our dominant culture, such as beliefs in a just world, along with personal experiences of discrimination, further reinforce psychological oppression. Psychological oppression can be seen as both a process and a state. As a process, it may be most effective in its subtle forms, when we are less likely to notice and challenge it. As Myers Avis (1991) reminds us, "It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your own head" (p. 147).

White (1991) describes our cultural recruitment into accepting and playing out the power dynamics of our dominant society. We all collaborate subconsciously with the normalization of pathological cultural standards and believe we are acting of our own free will. Referring to Foucault's work, White writes of

> the mechanisms and the structures of this modern system of power [that] actually recruit persons into collaborating in the subjugation of their own lives and in the objectification of their own bodies; of how they [become] 'willing' participants in the disciplining of, or policing of, their own lives (p. 34-35).

Similarly, Steve Biko, a South African activist executed by the apartheid regime, remarked that "the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (cited by David Barsamian, personal communication, Dec. 2000). Noam Chomsky notes how oppression is most effective when its legitimacy is internalized, even in the most extreme cases, such as slavery. "It wasn't easy to revolt if you were a slave, by any means. But

if you look over the history of slavery, it was in some sense . . . recognized as just the way things are. We'll do the best we can under this regime" (personal communication, Dec. 2000). Acts of oppression need not be traumatic, however, to result in psychological oppression. "Small daily doses of personal devaluation usually suffice" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p. 132). Bartky (as cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) discusses how,

> recent liberation movements, the black liberation movement and the women's movement in particular, have brought to light forms of oppression that are not immediately economic or political. It is possible to be oppressed in ways that need involve neither deprivation, legal inequality, nor economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically – the 'psychic alienation' of which Fanon speaks. To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. The psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors; they come to exercise dominion over their own self-esteem. Differently put, psychological oppression can be regarded as the 'internalization of intimations of inferiority'" (p. 129).

And while exploitation based on marginalized social status results in poverty, hardship and misery (Albee, 1988), relative privilege does not provide complete insulation from internalization of destructively unhealthy social norms. The few who may be white, middle class, male or otherwise "privileged" generally remain parched with the insatiable thirst of our individualistic, consumerist, money-driven culture. Although the economically privileged may live in *relative* luxury vis-à-vis the marginalized majority of this planet, our dominant ideology breeds a sense of inferiority. Indeed, capitalist hegemony, with the help of an ubiquitous mass media, thrives on persuading potential consumers that we can only be "OK" when we are rich, beautiful, slim or muscular, young, powerful, and have expensive cars, homes, and high status careers. For example, women with eating disorders often come from white, middle-class families exhibiting a "perfectionist need to meet socially prescribed norms" (Kuba & Hanchey, 1991, p. 132). As hooks (1992) points out, our

> culture of domination ... says to people: There is nothing in you that is of value; everything of value is outside you and must be acquired. The tremendous message in this culture is one of devaluation. Low self-esteem is a national epidemic and victimization is the flip side of domination (p. 56).

The ruse, says White (1991), is that our culture's prescriptions for being are largely illusionary.

Author's Context

My interest in this thesis was born from my own personal experience of consciousness raising. As a single mother, I spent many years mired in a sea of poverty, exhaustion, guilt and self-deprecation. With a schedule of long work hours, commuting to and from day-care and work, cooking, washing dishes, doing laundry, helping with homework, driving to my daughter's sports events or school activities, each Sunday night I knew that it would be Friday evening before I could have 5 minutes to myself, to relax, make a phone call or even hope to get a full nights sleep. And to make ends meet, I often had to work weekends as well. I could not complain as that would have made me a terrible mother. Well-meaning friends would hush me with their reminders that "I wouldn't want it any other way, of course ... would I?"

"Why wasn't I getting it all done?" I wondered. "Why wasn't I coping like everyone else?" "Why did I snap at my daughter?" "Why could I never find the extra time to get caught up at work?" "Why did I not once find the time to take her camping or the money to take her to Disneyland?" "What was the matter with me?" I *must* have been a terrible mother. And so I struggled to be a "good mother," a good employee, a good friend, not understanding why *I* could not seem to find the time to be all three.

Meanwhile, cultural messages of my social status were and are plentiful. Usually communicated in more subtle forms, single mothers have been referred to as "A New American Dilemma" (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986) and are warned of the dangers of androgynous child-rearing and of not providing a male role model which could lead to their children "falling into a homosexual temptation" (Rekers & Swihart, 1984, p. 75). In our "World's Most Widely Read Magazine," Reader's Digest, we are told that "a single woman with a small child [is] not a viable economic unit and therefore not a legitimate social unit. In small numbers they drain the community's resources. In large numbers they destroy the community's capacity to sustain itself" (Murray, 1994, p. 48). The solution promulgated by Murray, and other such theorists,

"means ending all government support for single mothers" (p. 48). Social stigma, he says, is a "wonderful – and indispensable" "deterrent" (p. 49).

Aside from this social stigma, the birth of my daughter had brought an instant loss of life's choices and of the economic independence I had formerly known. In other contexts, these living conditions, long hours and poverty wages, could be considered violations of human rights. But, *I* had made my own bed. I had been aware that single motherhood was not going to be easy, but others managed. Why couldn't *I*? I felt a failure in all areas of my life. I did not know that "countless people experience themselves as failures, as stupid or inadequate. Many frequently feel silently crazy in their presumed isolated frustration and confusion" (Rose, 1990, pp. 42-43).

During my first semester of my later return to school, I met a classmate, a middle-aged woman who also had returned to school following a long career of raising children. I was bewildered to hear that her Women's Studies 101 course had had a profound effect on her self-esteem. How could an academic course impact one's self-esteem?, I wondered. Curious, I signed up for the next class. Indeed, it was an eye opener. Feminist analysis of my own situation instantly resonated for me. To learn that my experience was anything but unique was possibly the most liberating moment of my life. It did not immediately change my circumstances, but it did change my self-deprecation to anger. My internalized oppression was replaced with an understanding of an externalized locus of the source of my struggles.

The brief narrative I have just discussed describes but one of the myriad ways in which I have experienced and internalized the deleterious prescriptions of my culture. It does not describe the beginning nor the end of my story of consciousness raising. Although there was never one specific moment in which I became "enlightened," "many of us can point to a moment in our lives when long-held values and beliefs are shattered in a flash of new insight. Suddenly, the world is seen from a different perspective" (Seifer, 1976, p. 13). More often, however, it is an accumulation of experiences, some subtle, some profound. My altered worldview has sometimes been accompanied by a great deal of anger, disillusionment, and at times feelings of impotence.

Other consequences have included a sense of empowerment, solidarity and connection with others in action-taking efforts to effect social change. Despite such ambiguities, my experience of conscientization has always been reassuring when feelings of inadequacy return to haunt me. Many friends and acquaintances have disclosed to me that their lives too have undergone profound transformation, experiencing increased self-confidence, stronger sense of self, spirituality, and morality to name a few consequences. Seeing these outcomes as many of the goals of psychotherapy, I have become interested in the idea of consciousness-raising as a therapeutic intervention.

Psychology's Mysterious Neglect of Social Context

Sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination [are] so clearly associated with the incidence of mental and emotional disorders (Albee & Perry, 1994, p. 1088).

Given the relationship between social status and psychological health, it is a mystery how the field of psychology can not only ignore the socio-economic-political context of clients' lives, but go so far as to declare any discussion of such power dynamics, such as that found in feminist therapy, to be "too political." Yet, neglect of such a social context is equally political as it serves to perpetuate the status quo. "The hidden assumption of the perspective that knowingly or unknowingly excludes the structural context of individual problems is that the economic and social power arrangements of society are basically sound and egalitarian, rather than the source of suffering and problems for people, and are static" (Keefe, 1980, p. 389). By focusing on individual deficits, therapists, perhaps unwittingly, divert attention from the need for social change, and reinforce in clients their existing sense of inadequacy. This is not merely an oversight, but a political ideology, according to feminists and other critical psychologists. Waldegrave (1986) sees this silence as a travesty of therapy and identifies the therapist as politically active in institutionalizing power differentials. Politics, say Mander and Rush (1974), is the "present tense of history" (p. 66). But conservatives oppose such critical social analysis as it is a threat to preservation of the status quo (Albee, 1992).

Consciousness-Raising as Externalization of Oppression

When the social preconditions for the existence of the good society and the advancement of human welfare are conspicuously deficient, it is morally incumbent upon psychologists to engage in activities that bring about a state of affairs more conducive to the well-being of the entire population (Prilleltensky, 1990, p. 310).

Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) call for the promotion of conscientization as a critical theme in any social justice agenda of community psychology. Variously called consciousness-raising, conscientization, or critical consciousness, this gaining awareness of the existence, the sources and the effects of oppression has long been seen as healing. Like feminists before her who saw "feminism as therapy" (Mander & Rush, 1974), hooks (as cited in Hertzberg, 1996) calls for critical consciousness as the "road to liberation" (p. 146). Psychopolitical education, according to Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996), must be the first step in overcoming oppression.

Rationale / Method of Study / Research Question

Research into the effects of participating in the early consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s, indeed, has shown significant benefits for women. Similarly, more recent studies on the effects of taking women's studies courses also suggests that consciousness-raising, an integral aspect of taking such courses, helps to empower women in the face of patriarchy. And other research into models of identity development, whether among women, African-Americans, "Urban American Indians," people with disabilities, or other marginalized groups, gives strong support to the theory that consciousness-raising is emancipatory and serves to *externalize* internalized oppression. Virtually all of this related research, however, either is becoming dated, or utilized quantitative measures such as scales or inventories; some used short-answer questionnaires. As well, most of the earlier consciousness-raising studies and those on women's studies looked only at short-term change.

What is absent in the literature is research which asks women to describe their lived experience of consciousness-raising. As Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) note, theory can be better developed by "applying our framework to the lived experience of people" (p. 144).

Women sharing their personal experiences in the early 70's opened the door to connecting the personal and the political. These shared stories served as a catalyst to further resistance of our culture's dominant ideology. Deconstructing the dominant narrative begins with individual stories.

Individual narratives also tell us a great deal about the cultural context, the "dominant narrative" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). "We learn about general social processes through analysis of specific narratives.... The ways in which culture marks, shapes, and/or constrains this narrative; and the ways in which *this* narrator makes use of cultural resources and struggles with cultural constraints" (Chase, 1995, pp. 22, 22). Dominant narratives have the power to marginalize. At the same time, however, narratives open the possibility for resistance, for constructing new meaning and for legitimizing alternative "realities" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Consciousness-raising facilitates the deconstruction of dominant, oppressive narratives. And exploring narratives of consciousness-raising can illuminate the process and the impact of such an experience. As elaborated in Chapter Three, a qualitative, holistic narrative approach to investigating women's lived experiences of consciousness-raising is, therefore, timely.

The following chapter, reviewing literature on consciousness-raising and related concepts, describes much research suggesting that such a process indeed is therapeutic. This, of course, has important implications for the field of psychology as many of these outcomes of consciousness-raising appear strikingly similar to the goals of psychotherapy. Likewise, such knowledge is critically important for the lives of women and other marginalized peoples. This narrative exploration adds to the existing body of literature and supports several theoretical explanations of past research inconsistencies.

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) point out that "conscientization is never enough, but it is nevertheless a sine qua non condition of personal emancipation and reciprocal empowerment." While it may pose more questions than it answers, a narrative study of women's experiences of consciousness-raising can begin to ask *What are women's experiences of consciousness-raising?*

What meaning do women make of their consciousness-raising experiences? What are the effects of consciousness-raising on women at this time in history and how can the experience of consciousness-raising impact women's lives?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions or Theories of Consciousness-Raising

The concept of *consciousness* was originally used by Marx in his theory of class consciousness (Fantasia, cited in Barnartt, 1996). Later, the term *consciousness-raising* came into popular use among feminists in the late 1960s with the formation of radical women's groups (Bryson, 1992). Group discussions influenced by leftist critical thought allowed women to break "years of silence to discover the shared nature of problems which they had assumed to be theirs alone" (p. 183). Consciousness-raising groups have been described as "experiments in the process of critiquing established social norms and the shaping of new ones through the development of reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships and conscious avoidance of the imposition of a leader or teacher" (Hart, cited in Butterwick, 1987, p. 53). These consciousness-raising groups had a profound effect on women and, though originally formed for the purpose of political action, women began to appreciate therapeutic benefits as well.

Longres & McLeod (1980) describe consciousness-raising as "the process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of people into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political" (p. 267). In Women Together, Women Alone: The Legacy of the Consciousness-Raising Movement, Shreve (1989) asks, "can one's consciousness be properly said to be raised, or is it rather *expanded?* And is it consciousness we mean, or *awareness, insight intelligence?*" (p. 237). This awareness of the social forces that oppress women is a central purpose of consciousness-raising, according to Shreve. We might, therefore, define consciousness-raising as the discovery that "the personal is political."

There are many other terms in use to describe such a process. Myers Avis describes *empowerment* as

a holistic process which involves our comprehensive integration of (1) a political
understanding of the oppression of women, (including its embeddedness in the
culture, its maintenance in family relationships and its internalization within
individual women); with (2) a high degree of respect for women, their strengths,
and their self wisdom, and (3) an understanding of change at individual, family,
and larger system levels (p. 153).

Lather (1991) also favours the word empowerment. Drawing on Gramsi's notion of

counter-hegemony, she defines empowerment as "analyzing ideas about the causes of

powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and

collectively to change the conditions of our lives" (p. 4). Other terms found in the literature by

Lather, include *ideology critique*, *cultural demystification*, and *critical analysis*, which can

"problematize 'areas of consensus belief'"(Bowers, cited in Lather, 1991, p. 75) and bring to

light the "fundamental contradictions which help dispossessed people see how poorly their

'ideologically frozen understandings' serve their interests" (Comstock, cited in Lather, p. 63). In

Lather's description of *critical inquiry*, "the present is cast against a historical background while

at the same time the 'naturalness' of social arrangements is challenged so that social actors can

see both the constraints and the potential for change in their situations" (p. 63).

Other terms are also often used synonymously to describe the aforementioned process or

outcome of consciousness-raising: *critical consciousness* (Keefe, 1980), *politicization* (Longres

& McLeod, 1980), the French concept of *animation* (Reisch, Wenocur, & Sherman, 1981),

deideologization (Montero, 1997), *conscientization* (Freire, 1995), *emancipatory rationality* and

"self-reflection with social action" (Gordon, 1985). Much discussion of these alternative terms

takes place outside the domain of feminism.

For example, the phrase *disability culture* is used to describe a growing social movement

calling for civil rights and respect for people with disabilities. Barnartt (1996) argues that

disability culture should more aptly be called a *collective consciousness*. Whereas culture really

refers to a society's norms, values and belief systems, collective consciousness is "a transforming

set of ideas that *legitimates opposition to* traditional norms, roles, institutions and/or the

distribution of scarce resources" (Mueller, cited in Barnartt, 1996, p. 5). As such, the disability

movement is a *disruption* of existing culture, as people with disabilities recognize that social

rather than individual change is essential.

Similarly, Freire's theory of *conscientization* is well-known within critical pedagogy

discourse. It is also the basis of much literature on empowerment (Wallerstein & Weinger, 1992;

Reisch, Wenocur & Sherman, 1981), popular education (Wallerstein & Weinger, 1992),

Participatory Action Research (Reason, 1994), critical psychology (e.g. Prilleltensky, 1990) and

structural approaches to social work (e.g. Moreau, 1990). A prolific writer, educator and Marxist

(Butterwick, 1987), Freire formulated his theories based on his literacy programs in impoverished

Brazilian communities (Wallerstein & Weinger, 1992). Meaning of the word can be seen in the

title of Freire and Faundez's (1989) work, "Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation." In

Freire's (1995) classic "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," the translator notes that, the original

Portuguese word, *conscientizacao*, "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic

contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 17). Such *critical

consciousness*, according to Freire (1995), cannot be imparted or received; rather it is the

outcome of a dialectic process of critical thinking, reflection and dialogue. Conscientization

necessarily results in action-taking for social change.

Freire speaks of oppression as any act that "prevents people from being more fully

human" (1995, p. 39). "Internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them" leads to self-

depreciation by the oppressed (p. 45). Though the oppressed may despise their oppressors, this

"colonized mentality" means that simultaneously they "want at any cost to resemble the

oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the

middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the 'eminent' men and women of the upper

class" (p. 44). Naïve or uncritical acceptance of the dominant version of reality leaves the

marginalized accepting their exploitation as normal, natural. Freire describes how "the oppressed

are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these 'incompetent and lazy' folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality" (p. 55).

Through dialogue and critical reflection, people begin to recognize their dehumanization and the sources of their oppression. This, says Freire, is the "moment of awakening" (1995, p. 46), as people begin to believe in themselves. The task then becomes not only one of unveiling reality, but of re-creating this knowledge: "A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men [sic] feel themselves to be in control" (p. 66). Based on Freire's work, other writers define conscientization as the "process whereby individuals and groups achieve an illuminating awareness of the socio-economic, political, cultural, and psychological factors that determine their lives and their capacity to transform that reality.... This state of increased social awareness develops in stages" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p. 139). Although Freire's theory of conscientization sounds equivalent to that of feminist consciousness-raising, it has been criticized more recently for its omission of issues of patriarchy and the oppressive reality of many women (Nadeau, 1996).

Stages / Models of consciousness-raising

Conscientization

Looking at several theoretical models of the stages of consciousness-raising might also help to elucidate the concept of consciousness-raising. Freirian conscientization, also referred to by Alschuler (1997) as *political consciousness-raising*, involves three components: (1) naming the problem of oppression, (2) identifying its causes, and (3) taking action to resolve this oppression (Smith, cited in Alschuler, 1997). Alschuler (1997) describes this three-stage progression of conscientization. In the first stage, *Magical Consciousness*, people feel powerless before natural forces beyond their control. For example, they may believe that their problem of poverty is caused by infertile land. Action is futile as it is God's will, bad luck, or perhaps, just

the way things are; in any event, there is nothing to be done about it, rather physical survival takes precedence.

The second stage of *Naïve Consciousness* involves naming and blaming at an individual level. Oppression might be identified, but the cause is an isolated case of a deviant individual such as a boss or other authority figure. Similarly, an oppressed individual, possibly oneself, is often to blame. Perhaps they are not working hard enough, are too lazy or incompetent. The solution is to internalize the oppressors ideology, perhaps work harder. When the problem is seen as another individual, "horizontal aggression" may be the result. In the final stage of conscientization, *Critical Consciousness*, the individual has developed a critical socio-political analysis. Problems are seen as social rather than personal failures. Rather than seeing indigenous peoples as inferior, for example, they might reflect on the mechanisms of institutionalized racism. By demythologizing and rejecting the oppressor's ideology, people can revise their negative self-evaluations. This final stage of conscientization, or *revolutionary consciousness* results in two levels of action: self-actualization and collaborative political work to democratically transform an unjust system.

In the area of critical psychology, Prilleltensky (1990) describes the inculcation and counter-acting of *cultural hegemony* and suggests, as in the title of his article, that promoting conscientization can serve in "Enhancing the Social Ethics of Psychology." Prilleltensky's Stages One and Two roughly correspond to Freire's Magical and Naïve Consciousness. Natural causes and individual blame are central in the first stage of cultural hegemony. The second *Inculcation* stage involves both subtle processes such as lack of self-confidence leading to self-fulfilling prophecies, as well as more blatant blame-the-victim mentalities. Learned helplessness is given as an example of resigned inculcation. Prilleltensky proposes the implementation of two tasks within the field of psychology in order to counter-act hegemony: Denunciation and Annunciation. Denunciation would involve making explicit such hegemonic processes. Similar to the process of feminist consciousness-raising, awareness might be raised through exchange of

information and support, while annunciation is the posing of strategies for action and social change.

Racial Identity Development

Though not using the term consciousness-raising, a similar process has been described within the literature on African-American Identity Development. Helms (1995) argues that "the central racial identity developmental theme of all people of color is to recognize and overcome the psychological manifestations of internalized racism" (p. 189). Based on phenomenological interviews and "simply interacting with Brothers and Sisters who were going through changes as a consequence of their participation in the modern Black movement," Cross's classic model of "the Negro-to-Black conversion experience" (1971, p. 14), or *nigrescence*, is a five-stage process of "psychological liberation under conditions of oppression."

Stage One, or *Pre-encounter* is characterised by denigration of the self, of Blacks and of African-American identity. The frame of reference for people in this stage is mainstream White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Internalization of the dominant ideology is exemplified in behaviours such as chemically straightening one's black hair or deifying white women. Stage Two, or *Encounter* is brought about by one or more experiences that may call into question the values and beliefs of the previous stage. For example, the death of Martin Luther King led many "politically naïve" African-Americans to begin to take note of the injustices being committed against their racial group. Self-hatred and idealization of whites becomes replaced with "Black is beautiful." At the same time, the white enemy is identified and new-found anger is directed at hatred towards all whites. Characteristic feelings of guilt over having been duped and anger in this stage eventually leads to Stage Three, or *Immersion-Emersion*. The person becomes immersed in Black identity and fighting back against whites takes many forms. Cross considers this stage to be a "pseudo Black identity" because it is more of an obsession with hatred of white people than an affirmation of Blackness.

Later on, such intense anger transforms to feelings of pride and a more reasoned socio-economic-political critical analysis emerges. After developing idealistic expectations of anything Black, the individual then enters Stage Four, *Internalization*. Three outcomes of this stage are possible: disappointment; fixation on hatred of whites; or internalization of a more secure, satisfactory view of self. If "feeling 'Black and beautiful' becomes an end in itself rather than the source of motivation" (p. 22), a person can appear unchanged externally, "yet psychologically and spiritually the person is significantly different." Finally, as feelings of anxiety over whether or not one is "Black" enough lead to more self-acceptance, and the individual is exposed to alternative thinking, a commitment to sustainable activism in Stage Five, *Internalization-Commitment* results. Cross sees it as necessary to pass through all stages of development, including the accompanying rage, guilt, anxiety and pride, in order for "self-actualization under conditions of oppression" (p. 25) to be reached.

Cross (1995) has since revised his model somewhat, placing less emphasis on self-hatred at the Pre-Encounter stage (I). Instead, Cross now reports that many blacks at this stage simply consider their race to be less significant to their identity than was earlier believed. The updated theory also notes a variety of black identities, such as Black Nationalism as well as multiculturalism, in the Internalization stage (IV). Another revision to the theory is based on findings that not all blacks sustain the commitment to activism as earlier described in the Internalization-Commitment stage (V). Essentially, however, the model remains unchanged.

Feminist and Womanist Identity Development

Downing and Roush's 5-stage model of feminist identity development was based on and roughly parallels Cross' model of nigrescence (Bargad & Hyde, 1991). Stage 1 is characterized by *Passive Acceptance* of traditional gender roles and patriarchal cultural norms. Stage 2, *Revelation*, is precipitated by one or more crises or recognition of injustices. This new awareness leads to a questioning of previously accepted values and beliefs about gender roles, anger toward men, and possibly guilt over having participated in their own oppression (Fischer, Tokar, Mergl,

Good, Hill & Blum, 2000). Stage 3, *Embeddedness-Emanation*, is a connection with women and caution towards men. The fourth stage of *Synthesis* involves a "flexible truce," transcendence of traditional gender roles, and viewing men individually as opposed to stereotyping (Fischer, et al., 2000). Women at this stage may choose pro-feminist male friends (Taylor, 1994). Lastly, Stage 5 is an *Active Commitment* to social change. Downing and Roush's feminist identity development model has been criticized for not addressing the diversity of women's lives (Fischer, et al., 2000). Omitting issues of race, class, age, sexual orientation and disability, the model represents but one perspective on feminism. Separatist feminists, for example, might not agree that "anger about patriarchy must mature and eventually be toned down [and that] interaction with men is desirable" (p. 28).

In synthesizing the literature on both women's and other minority status identity development, Helms (as cited in Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992) proposes a model of a *womanist*, rather than feminist, identity *process*. What she finds in common within this literature is that minorities, including women, tend to define and evaluate themselves in terms of the dominant culture. Also drawing largely on Cross's theoretical model, but using the Black feminist term womanist, she describes four stages of "Womanist Identity" development, a progression from an externally based to an internally chosen value system. Her *Pre-encounter* Stage (I) involves uncritical acceptance of mainstream social norms, values and beliefs. The male model provides her frame of reference, while there is a lack of conscious awareness that women are devalued. The *Encounter* Stage (II) is the beginning awareness of problems with the existing male model. Following new experiences or information, critical questioning of the status quo begins to take place at this stage. Such questioning leads to *Immersion-Emersion* (III) in which the male norm is rejected and womanhood becomes idealized. The final phase, *Internalization* (IV), is characterized by an internally based positive definition of self and womanhood.

Helms distinguishes her model from those of Cross and of Downing and Roush's feminist identity model in that her final stage of identity development does not require the

internalization of a prescribed political view, such as feminism. That is, to be functioning with a healthy self-definition only requires that one base such evaluation on *self*-chosen standards and a positive view of women, rather than accept cultural prescriptions. Though many feminists might have difficulty imagining a non-patriarchal view that is not feminist, Helms' model allows that the dominant patriarchal cultural norms may or may not be replaced with feminism. Indeed, many women of colour involved in the women's movement today are rejecting the label of feminism, asserting that it is white middle class feminists who are often among their greatest oppressors. Helms' Womanist Identity Model (WIM), has been favoured by some because, unlike Downing and Roush's Feminist Identity Model, the WIM takes into account the experiences of Black women (Letlaka-Rennert, Luswazi, Helms, & Zea, 1997). It also *includes* feminist identity, which often begins in the third stage of womanist identity development.

Urban American Indian Identity

More recently, Walters (1995/1996) has developed a similar model of identity development of Urban American Indians. (For reasons discussed in her dissertation, Walters has chosen the term "American Indian" and, therefore, references to her work in the present paper will use her chosen term). The Urban American Indian Identity development model (UAII) was based on and roughly parallels the developmental models of Parham and Helms (1985), Cross (1971) and Sue (as cited in Walters, 1995/1996). Walters notes that these similar models have been shown to be relevant to numerous minority groups and suggests that such a developmental process may be applicable to many, if not all, oppressed populations.

Critical Consciousness

Watts and Abdul-Adil (as cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) present a five-stage model of an evolving *critical consciousness* which also roughly parallels the processes of conscientization, nigrescence, feminist identity development, or womanist identity development. Starting at the *Acritical Stage*, people, unaware of power differentials, accept the status quo as just, legitimate. In fact, the more people internalize their oppression, the less they see the

connections between their suffering and unjust political conditions. As they become aware of power inequities, people tend to progress to the *Adaptive Stage*, where, believing things are unchangeable, they try to fit in to the system to benefit as best they can. In the *Pre-critical Stage*, people begin to question such attempts to adapt. Later, the *Critical Stage* is characterized by a greater analysis of the sources of oppression and a concomitant desire to work toward social justice. Finally, the *Liberation Stage* involves active social and political commitment to effect change.

Connecting Terminology

These various theories have evolved from markedly different social contexts: conscientization from the Reform Movement against class oppression in Brazil (Butterwick, 1987), nigrescence from the history of racism in Black America, and consciousness-raising from North American women's revolution against gender oppression. Such processes have also been identified in individuals suffering from discrimination and oppression based on their disabilities (Scheer, cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) or sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 1994). And comparable processes have been noted in Asian, Latin, and biracial populations, as well as in phases of chemical recovery (Cross, 1995). Interestingly, despite some diverse origins, these theories all describe similar progressions from internalized oppression and acceptance of the status quo, to a critical awareness of oppression, leading to desire for social change and commitment to some degree of activism. They also all describe an accompanying psychological liberation, that is to say, externalization of internalized oppression, wherein self and group deprecation is replaced with a positive, integrated identity (Phinney, as cited in Walters 1995/1996). Cross (1995) has described such profound change as a personal metamorphosis. There is much theory devoted to describing the development of consciousness-raising, whether using the term nigrescence, womanist identity, feminist identity, urban American Indian identity, or critical consciousness. And with some exceptions, research to date generally supports such theory.

Research

<u>Consciousness-Raising</u>

In 1987, Diane Kravetz reported that no studies had been conducted on consciousness-raising since the mid-1970s. Looking at the specific term, consciousness-raising, the same virtually holds true today. In her review of the history of consciousness-raising, Enns (1992) summarises some of the many benefits of participating in consciousness-raising groups. Studies found enhanced support and personal change, increased awareness of commonalities and connectedness with other women, increased expression of feelings such as anger, the "development of a sociopolitical analysis of the female experience and women's oppression," and "changes in interpersonal roles and relationships." Although there were criticisms levelled against the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, such as inadequate attention to diversity and lack of structure leading to awareness without change, overall, the effects of participating in such groups were found to be highly beneficial.

Few feminists would disagree that these are valuable changes. However, aside from frequent reports, in the 70s and 80s, of increased self-confidence, self-esteem and "therapeutic" benefits (Kravetz, 1987), there has been little focus on psychological effects of the consciousness-raising experience, particularly in the past decade or two. Limited exceptions include findings that consciousness-raising groups decreased depression, helplessness, and self-reproach, while increasing self-respect and esteem as well as autonomy and assertiveness (Kravetz, 1987). One study found no effect on depression (Kravetz, 1987). The lack of attention to psychological effects of consciousness-raising is illustrated in Weitz' (1982) research on consciousness-raising which was designed "in order to explore the *unintended* psychological benefits of participation" (p. 231) [italics added]. She did indeed find that consciousness-raising "may help women to increase their sense of control and externalise their attributions of blame, and may consequently increase self-esteem and reduce depression among participants" (p. 231).

There are a few exceptions to the dearth of *recent* research investigating the construct "consciousness-raising." One such experimental study, though specific to Latino ethnic consciousness-raising and not exclusive to women, found that consciousness-raising groups which included discussion of social analysis and problem-solving led to making cognitive connections between the personal and political, a change in attribution from blaming the individual to seeing systemic causes of "personal" problems, and to increased interest in action-oriented social change strategies (Gutierrez, 1990).

In a striking example of the power of consciousness-raising, even displaced women continuing to live in settings of war violence have been able to experience empowerment through consciousness-raising, solidarity, and the taking on of new roles in the community. In his study with women in Central America and the Philippines, Roe's (1992) interview and observational data revealed many women taking on new leadership and other essential roles. Experiences of solidarity and new collective identities were also identified. Though it was not an isolated variable, consciousness-raising around gender subordination and other aspects of their social, political, and economic realities was seen as critical in these women's experience of empowerment. Consciousness-raising was implemented as an integral part of deliberate programs aimed at counteracting the horrific effects of war.

Consciousness-raising is also commonly used in Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects. In "Consciousness-Raising, Conversion & De-Ideologization in Community Psychosocial Work," Montero (1994) illustrates how "*normalization* of adverse conditions" of poverty and oppression helps to maintain the status quo, while consciousness-raising gives birth to resistance. Montero's research with a community in the slums of Caracas, Venezuela began with a questionnaire of residents needs and possible solutions. As in Freire's conscientization model, participants then met to discuss their problems and brainstorm for solutions. Consciousness-raising naturally evolved as participants shared their experiences and identified causes. "Consciousness-raising has a liberating nature," says Montero:

> Because it is accompanied by a process of production of knowledge that leads to the revelation of causes, establishing connections, and lifting the veil of ignorance required by a given status quo, it involves a process of *de-ideologization*. . . . A group (or community) that has raised consciousness of its material conditions of life can take over control of its destiny and perform the actions necessary to that end ... setting off the sociocognitive process of *conversion*, and activating internal validation and comparison" (p. 8-9).

Szivos and Griffiths (1990) hold that the consciousness-raising paradigm is based on social identity theory. According to social identity theory, marginalized people have two options: to attempt to pass for mainstream or to incorporate a positive view of oneself and one's unique group into their identity. As we have seen, attempting to pass for mainstream requires self-denigration and other deleterious psychological effects. Alternatively, taking on a positive identity based on difference is what Szivos and Griffiths refer to as consciousness-raising. These authors report that there is no literature on consciousness-raising in people with "mental retardation" (p. 334).

To assess the impact of a consciousness-raising group process on people with a "mentally retarded" identity, Szivo and Griffiths observed a 13-week self-esteem group of 3 men and 4 women. Using the phenomenological method, six phases were identified in group members coming to terms with a handicapped identity: denial, statement of the problem (stigmatization), recognition (how they first discovered they were different), exploration, meaning, and acceptance. In some ways, these phases are similar to models of consciousness-raising. Within the group, participants shared experiences, expressed solidarity, support and compassion, and expressed anger at systemic injustices or at professionals who they felt had not treated them respectfully. Stronger group affiliation was identified over the course of the 13-week group, which appeared to provide a rare environment of acceptance and destigmatization for people with mental disabilities. Some members also began to take more responsibility in practical ways in their lives and personal relationships. However, the process of consciousness-raising in this group was limited. A strong or more positive group identity was *not* reached and the authors question the relevance of the consciousness-raising model for people with "mentally retarded"

identity. There were important benefits, however, and Szivos and Griffiths call for additional research to help uncover factors that may be specific to this population.

As Szivos and Griffiths (1990) claim, consciousness-raising and social identity are closely intertwined. Though little research has been done on the effects of consciousness-raising per se in the past two decades, if we are to assume that the processes of nigrescence, conscientization, feminist identity development, womanist identity development, and empowerment *are* forms of consciousness-raising, or, at least, *involve* consciousness-raising, whether as part of the process or as a critical goal, then research on such models can also inform our knowledge of consciousness-raising. Unlike studies addressing "consciousness-raising" specifically, research on these models of identity development is more current.

Identity Development

Feminist Identity Development

Bargad and Hyde (1991) operationalized Downing and Roush's model of feminist identity development, by developing the Feminist Identity Development Scale (FIDS). Using the FIDS as well as qualitative data, Bargad and Hyde found support for Downing and Roush's theoretical model, with the exception of Stage 4. The authors note limitations with the feminist identity development model in that it may be seen as an overly liberal feminist perspective and is heterocentered. Despite these shortcomings, Bargad and Hyde do see the model as offering theoretical value in assessing feminist identity development and consciousness-raising.

Rickard's (as cited in Fischer, et al., 2000) Feminist Identity Scale (FIS) was another version of Downing and Roush's feminist identity development model. It did not, however, operationalize the fifth stage, as some research has found it difficult to distinguish between stages four and five. Fischer, Tokar, Mergl, Good, Hill and Blum (2000) later amalgamated these two scales into a four stage model and found support for the theory of feminist identity development as a somewhat cumulative, though not strictly linear process. Assessing the validity and reliability of both the FIDS and the FIS, Gerstmann and Kramer (1997) found support and

validation for both scales, with the FIS rating superior in some areas, and a high convergent validity between the two.

One study utilizing the FIDS did not find support for the hypothesis that feminist identity development is positively related to self-esteem, at least with respect to body image. Cash, Ancis and Strachan (1997) assessed the relationship between feminist identity development and body image but did not uncover significant correlations. Two similar studies cited by the authors found either no significant relationship or a weak association, wherein Passive Acceptance (I) was negatively correlated with body satisfaction and Active Commitment (V) was positively correlated.

Womanist Identity Development

Unlike the feminist identity development model, Helms' Western model of womanist identity was found to have construct validity for Black women (Letlaka-Rennert, cited in Letlaka-Rennert, et al. 1997). Expanding on this research, Letlaka-Rennert, Luswazi, Helms and Zea, (1997) administered the Womanist Identity Attitudes Scale (WIAS), Rotter's Internal-External Control Scale, and Sherer's Self-Efficacy Scale to Black female students at an historically black institution in South Africa. The study attempted to examine the relationship between the stages of the WIM and psychological functioning in this population, specifically assessing levels of locus of control and self-efficacy. As hypothesized, women reporting high Pre-encounter (I) attitudes scored high on externality. In contrast to the model, however, Immersion-Emersion (III) attitudes were also associated with an external locus of control, though not significantly so. Women at both Pre-encounter (I) and Immersion-Emersion (III) stages were low in self-efficacy, while the Internalization stage (IV) was predictive of greater self-efficacy. Scores from the mid-stage of Immersion-Emersion did not support Helms' model, however. Letlaka-Rennert et al. hypothesize that women at this stage of identity development may need more support for their newly raised consciousness. Limitations of the study include western language not commonly in

use in S.A. (e.g. the word feminism), the fact that English was many participants' second language, and the lack of a representative sample of Black South African women.

Looking at the correlation between "Womanist" identity attitudes (Womanist Identity Attitudes Scale, WIAS) and self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), Ossana, Helms and Leonard (1992) found the initial Pre-encounter stage (I), which is an acceptance or conformity to "societal views about gender" to be associated with lower self-esteem. Also in accordance with the model, the final Internalization stage (IV), which includes a positive definition of womanhood and a refusal to be bound by external definitions of womanhood was correlated with higher self-esteem. Like the Letlaka-Rennert et al. study, however, the second and third stages, Encounter and Immersion-Emersion, were also related to lower self-esteem, in contrast to theory. It could be that these two transitional stages are fraught with upheaval and internal conflict. Caution interpreting the results was urged due to the early developmental stages of the "Womanist Identity Attitudes Scale."

Racial Identity Development

Parham and Helms (1985a, 1985b) studied whether Black students do indeed progress from feelings of inferiority in the "pro-white/anti-black" Pre-encounter stage (I) to self-acceptance and self-actualizaing in the Internalization stage (IV). Utilizing the Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (RAIS, based on Cross' model of nigrescence), they found partial support for Cross' theory. Low self-esteem, including feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, hypersensitivity, anxiety and lack of self-acceptance, was associated with the Pre-encounter stage (I), while increased self-esteem, including feelings of personal adequacy, self-acceptance, and low anxiety, was related to the Encounter stage (II). In contrast with Cross' model, however, Parham and Helms found a decrease in self-esteem in Immersion (stage III). Anger was also found to be associated with the Immersion stage. It was unknown whether this anger was inward or outward directed. The researchers suggested that outward directed anger could, in fact, be a healthy function. In the Internalization stage (IV), self-esteem was again higher, though not significantly.

Parham and Helms discuss some possible explanations for the differences between the results of their study and the theoretical model. One of the limitations of the study was that most of the measures used were not developed on African-Americans. They also suggest that the process of nigrescence may be more complex than Cross theorized. For example, there could be different cognitive and affective processes involved. There may also be other factors that would need to be addressed separately, such as what kind of role social class may play in the development of a Black identity. Parham and Helms also wonder whether Cross' 1971 model is no longer relevant. Additionally, their study was based on both male and female participants and it is unknown whether different effects might have been found for each gender.

Carter (1991) also examined the relationship between the stages of Cross's model of nigrescence (measured by the RAIS) and psychological symptomatology (Bell Global Psychopathology Scale). As predicted by the racial identity development model, Preencounter (I) attitudes were associated with higher anxiety, impaired memory, paranoia, alcohol concerns, and global psychological distress. In contrast with theory, significant paranoia was also found in the Internalization stage 4, however, it was hypothesized that "paranoia" actually may be a realistic effect of racism and an adaptive coping skill. Another finding inconsistent with the model is that Immersion-Emersion (III) attitudes were positively related to drug use.

Interaction of Identity Development: Race & Gender

The fact that many women must live with both racism and sexism has come to be known as "double jeopardy" (Downie, 1998). Addressing the role of gender as well as race, Pyant and Yanico (1991) found results similar to Carter's (1991) in female African American College students while investigating relations between racial identity, gender role attitudes and psychological well-being. In students demonstrating Pre-encounter stage (I) characteristics, lower self-esteem and well-being were evident. In non-student African American women, these researchers found lower self-esteem and well-being, as well as greater levels of depression within both Pre-encounter (I) and Encounter (II) stages. No connection was found, however, between

gender role attitudes and psychological well-being, suggesting that race may be a far more salient issue than is gender for Black American women. Others (Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996) have suggested that Internalization of racial identity may precede development of a womanist identity. As well, no relationship was found between mental health and the later Immersion (III) or Internalization (IV) stages. Consistent with racial identity theory, stage one appeared to be detrimental to African American women's mental health. Improved mental health as one progresses through later stages was not evident, however. Pyant and Yanico point out limitations of their study, including that the Attitudes Toward Women Scale used was normed on a population of whites and that the sample size was small. They also note that stronger correlations were found in older, non-students, suggesting that age and different life circumstances may be important factors.

In assessing the relationship between mental health (using the Bell Global Psychopathology Scale) and womanist identity attitudes (WIAS) in female college students, Carter and Parks (1996) found greater rates of symptomatology such as depression, anxiety, paranoia and concerns around alcohol use in Caucasian women in the stages of Pre-encounter (I), Encounter (II), and Immersion-Emersion (III). Interestingly, no such relationship was found in African American women. Again, it could be that racial issues overshadow the effects of gender role attitudes for African American women.

Parks, Carter, and Gushue (1996) also studied the relationship between development of both racial identity (White Racial identity Attitude Scale; Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale) and womanist identity (WIAS) in both African American and Caucasian female college students. For black women, they found a significant correlation between the racial Internalization stage (IV) and both womanist Encounter (II) and Internalization (IV) stages. It was hypothesized that racial Internalization may, in some cases, precede awareness of gender issues, thus the relationship between racial stage four and both two and four in womanist identity. No such relationship was found for white women. It appears from this study that the processes of racial

and womanist identity development may be related for black women, but not for whites, who, of course, are members of the dominant racial group.

In a similar vein, Poindexter-Cameron and Robinson (1997) examined the relationship between self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale) and both racial and womanist identity development (RIAS & WIAS) in college women. Consistent with the theoretical models, self-esteem was negatively correlated with the racial Pre-encounter stage (I) and positively correlated with the Internalization stage (IV). Similarly, self-esteem was negatively correlated with Pre-encounter (I), Encounter (II) and Immersion-Emmersion (III) stages of womanist identity development, while it was positively correlated with the womanist Internalization stage (IV). Poindexter-Cameron and Robinson also found a relationship between the Pre-encounter stages (I) of both racial identity and womanist identity, as well as between the Internalization stages (IV) of both racial and womanist identity development. No such relationship was found between either Encounter (II) or Immersion-Emmersion (III).

Hypothesizing that Internalization (IV) attitudes of both racial and womanist identity models would serve as a buffer against the harmful effects of racism and sexism in African American college women, Downie (1998) administered questionnaires asking about racist and sexist events, racial and womanist identity, and depression and adjustment to college. The author did not find significant results to support her hypothesis, but offered a number of explanations for the lack of results. Limitations include small sample size, very young sample, location and population of the university not being generalizeable, low reliability of the scales used to operationalize Cross' and Helms' theoretical models, and the possibly discouraging length of the questionnaire. Downie also raises the question of whether Cross' 1971 model continues to be applicable to African Americans today.

Urban American Indian Identity Development

Walters (1995/1996) describes a four-stage process of UAII similar to those previously discussed. She has labelled these stages Internalization (I), Marginalization (II), Externalization

(III), and Actualization (IV). Based on structured interviews with 332 American Indian women and men, Walters assessed the relationship between these four stages and mental health indicators of self-esteem (Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale), depression (CES-D), anxiety, hostility, paranoid-ideation, and interpersonal-sensitivity (SCL-90R).

In addition to finding that the UAIIS was a valid and reliable instrument, able to distinguish between the four hypothesized stages, most of Walters' results were not unlike those of research on the other identity development models. Lack of relationship between Stage I and mental health variables was hypothesized to be due to isolation from Indian communities and to the protection such denial of identity can tentatively offer. Stage II revealed increased psychological problems such as low self-esteem, high anxiety, depression, hostility, interpersonal-sensitivity, and paranoid-ideation. Walters reports that this stage is usually preceded by some crisis, event, or realization that one's identity is markedly different from that of the dominant culture. While it is characterized by an awakening of racial, ethnic, cultural, spiritual, and political consciousness, it also results in cognitive dissonance, confusion and feelings of marginalization, as one is caught between two worlds, relating to neither. Similar to the previously discussed research, increased hostility and paranoid-ideation were associated with Stage III. The author suggests that an important implication for mental health workers is that people at this stage of identity development may be helped by being encouraged to externalize and channel such anger in useful, practical ways, while becoming more connected with the urban American Indian community. Walters also believes that it may well be the anger characteristic of this third stage that also helps psychologically in areas such as self-esteem and anxiety. Like research on other identity development models, the strongest finding of Walters' study was that of higher self-esteem evident in Stage IV.

Overview of Research on Identity Development

Overall, research done on the scales developed to operationalize the identity development models of Cross, of Helms, of Downing and Roush, and of Walters lend credence to the existence

of such a process. That is, people do appear to develop an identity somewhat in accordance with these theories. Other research has shown correlations between the stages of the womanist identity development model and the racial identity development model, suggesting a relationship between the two. Most research has also indicated a positive relationship between progression of identity development and mental health. With some inconsistencies and exceptions, there appears to be convergent support for the notion that the first Pre-encounter stage is characterized by greater psychological distress. Although less clear, research also indicates greater psychological health at the final stage of these identity development models.

Most inconsistencies in the research are to be found in the middle stages. Such results may not be surprising given that this period is likely a time of identity confusion, when one's world view has been shaken. As has been suggested by some researchers, progression through these stages may be more complex than originally thought. For example, race has been proposed as more salient than gender for African American women (Poindexter-Cameron & Robinson,1997). Likewise, the stages may not be discrete or linear. Rather there could be more of a spiral progression, back and forth movement between stages, or a simultaneous experiencing of characteristics from more than one stage (Helms, 1995). In fact, Helms (1995) has since revised her terminology, preferring *statuses* to *stages* to reflect this more complex, dynamic process.

Feminism and Psychological Health

Without addressing identity *development*, other research has also assessed connections between feminism and psychological variables. In a quantitative study, De Man and Benoit (1982) found higher self-esteem in both feminist French-Canadian women and French Canadian men than in nonfeminist French-Canadian women. In contrast, Leavy and Adams (1986) did not find a correlation between feminism and self-acceptance or esteem among lesbians. The authors question their results, however, given the apparent bias of the measurement scale used. The Bills Index of Adjustment and Values which aims to assess self-esteem and self-acceptance assumes

that characteristics such as *fashionable* and *charming* are positive and desirable, while being *stubborn* is categorized as a negative trait. Feminists, of course, may argue just the opposite.

Using both quantitative and qualitative measurements (Attitudes Toward Feminism Scale, Beck Depression Inventory, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and diary and interviews), Taylor (1994) assessed the influence of feminism on Caucasian women's emotional well-being. She found that feminist women had significantly lower scores on the BDI than nonfeminist women. When separated, heterosexual feminist women had significantly lower BDI scores than the lesbian/bisexual feminist women, perhaps because of the additional oppression of homophobia. Differences were small, though statistically significant. Taylor questioned whether the BDI was the best instrument given that the women in this study were not clinically depressed. Perhaps another instrument more sensitive to differences in people who are not clinically depressed would have found larger differences. The research did not uncover a significant difference on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Eiswerth-Cox (1993) writes of the tendency of rape victims to internalize rape myths and to blame themselves for their sexual assault. In her research, she found that among rape and sexual assault victims, women with greater feminist identity and awareness of sexual discrimination tended to view themselves and other victims more positively. In contrast, victims without such awareness, who maintained traditional views about women's roles, held more negative attitudes towards themselves with respect to their rape as well as towards other rape victims. Similarly, another study found feminist consciousness served as an important coping resource for feminist professors (Klonis, Endo, Crosy, Worell, 1997). Like most of the previous research discussed thus far, these two studies further support the theory that consciousness-raising serves to insulate women from some of the effects of oppression.

Impact of Women's Studies Courses

Another way to assess the impact of consciousness-raising on women is in the area of women's studies courses. While interest in consciousness-raising groups may have waned over

the past two decades, women do continue to experience consciousness-raising through many avenues. The most common means may be exposure to feminist theory in women's studies courses, a major goal of which is "improving the lives of women by empowering them to make personal and social changes" (Stake & Rose, 1994). A number of studies have addressed the effects of taking women's studies classes. Most of these studies, as summarised by Stake and Rose (1994), indicated increased awareness of sexism in society, fewer gender stereotyped attitudes, fewer gender stereotyped relations with others, greater confidence and assertiveness, and greater interest in working for feminist causes (p. 404). A few follow-up studies established longer term effects such as improved self-confidence, greater awareness of gender discrimination, effects on interactions with significant others, and more positive attitudes toward women (p. 404). One study (Zuckerman, cited in Irving, 1993) found a decrease in underclasswomen's self-esteem after taking a women's studies course, but an increase in the junior and senior women. Like the contrary findings in the identity development studies previously discussed, it was hypothesized that a new awareness of sexism can be disturbing initially.

Other research includes Lee's (1993) exploration of the effects of taking an introductory women's studies course on "the impact of sexist, heterosexist, ageist, classist, ableist, racist, and anti-Semitic social institutions on women's lives" (p. 270). The course involved small group work, feminist theory and consciousness-raising. At the end of the term, a self-evaluation survey asked students to describe how the course may have affected them and whether and how they might have grown or changed. All but one said they had experienced empowerment due to the course, and it was violence survivors who were most impacted. Nine out of ten violence survivors said that the women's studies course definitely helped them to deal with their abuse. Students also reported increased assertiveness, self-acceptance and esteem and a sense of greater control over their lives.

Irving (1993) reviewed research done on the effects of women's studies courses at the high school level. In one study involving consciousness-raising exercises with grades 10 to 12

classes, Kahn & Richardson (as cited in Irving, 1993) found more androgynous views, flexibility, intellectual development and confidence, as well as better adjustment upon completion of the women's studies course. They also found greater satisfaction in student's who had elected to take the course than in those assigned to it. In another study that incorporated consciousness-raising exercises and gender role analysis for youth, self-concept had improved by the end of the course (Olshen & Matthews, cited in Irving, 1993). The authors found that there was more enthusiasm for the course in the age 10 and 11 group than in students aged 12 to 18. Although there was more resistance noted among the older youth, the researchers did observe increasing self-assertion and group cohesion over the course of the program.

In a rare study attempting to assess the longer term impact of taking women's studies courses, Stake and Rose (1994) followed up with another questionnaire after nine months and found continued personal change and increased feminist activism. Themes included enhanced self-confidence, greater tolerance of others, ability to educate others, increased assertiveness and wanting to learn more about other issues such as racial oppression. Like the earlier studies on consciousness-raising, however, the emphasis in more recent research on the effects of women's studies largely is on changes in feminist attitudes or social action-taking (e.g. Thomsen, Basu & Reinitz, 1995). Aside from measuring self-esteem or confidence, albeit important psychological variables, these studies largely overlook the many possible psychological effects of gaining a feminist socio-political analysis.

Overall, research on the effects of taking women's studies courses has shown very positive impacts on women's lives (e.g. Stake & Hoffmann, 2000). Yet, resistance to such "liberatory curriculum" (Lather, 1991) has also been revealed, and unlike most data which are based on quantitative measures, such resistance seems best illustrated by direct quotes. In her qualitative and quantitative study involving pre and post surveys from 890 women's studies students, Lather writes,

It became evident that there is a painful first step which we call 'reality shock.'
Students enter the classroom at varying stages of feminist awareness and those
from the most sheltered lives seem to suffer the most 'reality shock.' 'At this
time I feel disoriented, alienated, hopeless and angry. I feel somewhat like the
floor has been pulled out from underneath me.' These feelings were often
expressed in a two-part journal entry which began on a 'hopeless' note but ended
with strength. For instance: I am glad I took this class even though it has caused
me confusion, alienation and fights with my boyfriend and I wish it was a
requirement for everyone. In this women's studies course I've gone from
ignorance to being educated. I've felt the oppositional knowledge; indeed there
are some days I wish I didn't have to deal with women's issues – but the
wonderful hours come when I feel liberated, not angry, but full of love for
sisterhood (p.132).

Morley (1993) also found a mix of hurt, delight, resistance, confusion, enthusiasm, and

empowerment. And Joyceshild (as cited in Lather, 1991) describes

a psychological upheaval (to whatever degree) as a result of participating in the
course, and [a] range of reactions – excitement, empowerment, feeling they've
been duped/ignorant because they never had this knowledge before, resistance,
disbelief, frustration, anger, burn-out, wanting to act but wondering how, feeling
as though their worlds have been shaken up, getting hostile/resistant reactions
from family and significant others (p. 128).

But as hooks (as cited in Morley, 1993) points out, "courses that work to shift paradigms, to

change consciousness, cannot necessarily be experienced immediately as fun or positive or safe

and this [is] not a worthwhile criteria to use in evaluation" (p. 122). Kea (as cited in Lather,

1991) refers to such resistance as

the fear, dislike, hesitance most people have about turning their entire lives
upside down and watching everything they have ever learned disintegrate into
lies. 'Empowerment' may be liberating, but it is also a lot of hard work and new
responsibility to sort through one's life and rebuild according to one's own
values and choices (p. 142).

This profound impact of taking women's studies courses has also been described as a

"quasi religious conversion" (Morley, 1993, p. 122). Lather provides one quote which she says

best summarizes the response of most students: "I will never be the same. What else can I say?

This class makes me feel angry, happy, sad, numb, sick, wonderful, intelligent, dumb, responsible

and most of all *aware!*" (p. 133). While the taking of women's studies courses is not the same

thing as consciousness-raising, consciousness-raising, or "awareness," undoubtedly is integral to the significant changes women experience as a result of these classes.

Empowerment

As discussed earlier, some theories of empowerment are also comparable to definitions of consciousness-raising. Lord and Hutchison's review of empowerment literature describes empowerment as a developmental process of change which requires the acquisition of a critical analysis of socio-political relations. Political consciousness is seen as a necessary part of the process of empowerment. Using qualitative interviews and focus groups, Lord and Hutchison (1993) explored the process of empowerment by looking at peoples lived experiences. They found five themes in people's transitions from powerlessness to empowerment. Participants' sense of powerlessness tended to involve social isolation, unresponsive services and systems, poverty and abuse.

As is suggested by Cross's nigrescence model, Downing and Roush's feminist identity, and Helms' womanist identity model in which the transition from stage one to two involves new life event(s) calling into question established norms, Lord and Hutchison found that the impetus to empowerment was often some sort of crisis or new information (such as that learned in a course on women's issues). Acting on anger and building on existing strengths were also factors in facilitating the transition to empowerment, as were access to resources and participating in community life. Outcomes of the transition to empowerment included increased sense of self-esteem, improved relationships, gaining practical skills or knowledge, and enhancement in the area of overall life, that is, increased control of personal lives, influence in decisions, participation in community life and empowerment. Lord and Hutchison note that these themes and outcomes seem to be interdependent and that personal empowerment *always* involves social support and community. As is the case with changes observed in women's studies students, consciousness-raising may not be the equivalent of empowerment, but it *is* a critical component, process, and outcome of empowerment.

Consciousness-Raising as Psychotherapy

Many feminist and other critical psychologists have called for critical social analysis within psychotherapy. The use of socio-political analysis, or consciousness-raising, within therapy approaches has been described as therapeutic for people dealing with addiction (Morell, 1996), disempowered social work clients (Rose, 1990; Moreau, 1990; Keefe, 1980) Puerto Rican survivors of sexual child abuse (Comas-Diaz, 1995), women with eating disorders (Kuba & Hanchey, 1991), Black or biracial women living with racism (Pankhania, 1996; Hershel, 1995); and Native American Indian women living the legacy of genocide and historical trauma (Braveheart-Jordan & DeBruyn, 1995). It is also a mainstay of deconstructive narrative therapy (White, 1991) and much feminist therapy. Yet, little research has been done addressing the effects of consciousness-raising as an intervention.

One exception is Krawitz's (1997) outcome study on a psychotherapeutic model incorporating feminist therapy, gender role analysis and sociopolitical analysis, as well as integrating other more traditional frameworks (cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic). Though not an isolated variable being measured, social analysis of issues such as gender, race and poverty was emphasized as a "therapeutic tool to break the cycle of self-blame and doubt and to contextualize intrapsychic experience" (Krawitz & Watson, 1997, p. 474). The program proved highly successful in a marginalized population of patients who exhibited moderate to severe personality difficulties (history of opiate dependence, prison, illegal drug dealing, or self-harm) and had not experienced adequate success in previous therapy. Treatment effects were not only significant but were large and were sustained over the 24 months of follow-up.

Although not described specifically as consciousness-raising, one group therapy approach for holocaust survivors and their offspring involved components suggestive of the consciousness-raising process (Fogelman, 1988). For example, learning about their history helped members to develop a more positive sense of their Jewishness. And sharing painful stories led some to "social action instead of self-destruction" (p. 635).

Another group approach, though not designed as "therapy," assessed the effects of a "Gender Role Workshop Focused On Sexism, Gender Role Conflict, And The Gender Role Journey" (O'Neil and Roberts Carroll 1988). Male and female professionals explored "how masculinity and femininity both enhance and restrict human growth" (p. 193). Based on earlier work with consciousness-raising groups, the gender role journey is described in five stages, not unlike the other models discussed previously: Phase 1: Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles; Phase 2: Ambivalence About Gender Roles; Phase 3: Anger; Phase 4: Activism; and Phase 5: Celebration and Integration of Gender Roles. At 1, 12 and 24 months after the 36-hour workshops were completed, participants reported an increased understanding of selves, socialization processes, and the damaging effects of stereotypes for men and women, as well as increased empowerment in affecting change with respect to gender role conflict.

Summary of Research & Need for Narrative Study

Overall, with some exceptions, there is a great deal of research supporting the theory that consciousness-raising is beneficial for women. Profound and positive change has been seen in women who participated in consciousness-raising groups in the '70s and '80s, and more recently in women's studies students. The development of a feminist, womanist or racial identity, as defined herein, is closely intertwined with the consciousness-raising process and has been shown to be accompanied by an increase in psychological health. Empowerment and consciousness-raising are also found to be closely connected. Though little research has been conducted on consciousness-raising within the psychotherapy context, literature describing therapeutic effects abounds. While it is difficult to separate the process of consciousness-raising from other aspects of women's studies education, identity development or empowerment, the consciousness-raising experience indeed seems to help insulate women from some of the damaging effects of oppression, perhaps "serv[ing] as a life raft" (Klonis, Endo, Crosby & Worell, 1997).

Research results inconsistent with this theory include some mixed findings at the middle stages of identity development. Likewise, some women describe mixed reactions to women's

studies courses as well as new-found conflicts in existing relationships. These experiences may not be all negative in the long term, however. Such outcomes are not be surprising if this stage of the consciousness-raising experience is seen as a transitional period of upheaval. Carter and Parks (1996) offer several possible explanations for these findings which contrast with theoretical models. In addition to a temporary period of identity confusion, women in these middle stages may experience greater societal pressure and conflict as they begin to notice and challenge discrimination. This is a source of stress largely avoided in the early Pre-Encounter or Passive Acceptance stage which may provide a certain dubious social acceptance and security. Likewise, existing relationships may become strained before new sources of social support have been established. A sense of hopelessness may also exist at this stage. In any event, research has generally supported the theory that later progression of identity development leads to healthier psychological functioning.

Although the women's movement has brought about significant changes since the 1970s, little research specifically on consciousness-raising has been done in the past decade. More recent findings, though not *particularly* current, on the psychological effects of identity development have been measured by quantitative scales and inventories, usually based on cross-sectional research designs, comparing the stages of different women at one point in time. Similarly, women's studies research, largely relying on questionnaire or short-answer surveys, has tended to focus on short-term outcomes such as changes in feminist attitudes or feminist activism.

Consciousness-raising, however, appears to be more of a life long process, not something that begins or ends in the course of one semester. Yet, rarely are women asked to describe their ongoing lived experience of consciousness-raising. In narrative postmodernist terminology, individual stories not only reveal, but help to resist and deconstruct marginalizing "dominant narratives" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This holistic narrative exploration begins to illuminate further the apparently profound impact of women's experiences of consciousness-raising,

revealing a process of liberatory resistance and empowerment. As Prilleltensky and Gonick point out, such understanding of people's lived experiences can also better inform existing theory. Likewise, the findings of this study support several aforementioned explanations for inconsistencies in existing research and suggest areas for further study. A narrative inquiry at this point in time contributes in a unique way to our existing understanding of women's experiences of consciousness-raising, with implications for psychology, women's studies, and other critical liberatory disciplines.

CHAPTER THREE

FEMINIST NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

We will not find out about women's consciousness unless we ask (Armitage, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 144).

Scientific rigor can be demonstrated when there is congruence between the chosen method and the research question (M. Arvay, personal communication, November, 1999). As such, a feminist approach to a narrative study on women's experiences of consciousness-raising seems ideally suited to exploring women's experiences of consciousness-raising. In contrast to traditional psychology's neglect of the socio-economic-political context of women's lives, and in particular the decontextualizing nature of experimental research, both feminist and narrative methods of research *emphasize* lived experience and social context.

This chapter shall discuss ways in which feminist theory and narrative methodology can facilitate the deconstruction of our culture's status quo and offer the potential to discover emancipatory alternatives. It also outlines specific goals of the study, the research design, limitations and criteria for evaluation.

A Feminist Epistemology

A feminist approach to inquiry is more of a perspective than a method (Reinharz, 1992). Just as there are multiple feminisms, there is no one agreed upon set of rules for undertaking feminist research. However, there are a number of common themes and important considerations which I have endeavoured to incorporate into my work.

Consistent with feminist theory, I have delineated some of my own personal experiences, values and beliefs. As Denmark (1984) states, feminist psychology "does not pretend to be value-free, because not only *can't* it be, it *must not* be" (p. x). While critics might see this as a political "bias," feminists such as Donnelly (1987) argue that a non-feminist psychology, is not unbiased, but rather, masculinist. Instead of claiming that a researcher *can* be truly "objective" or

should be detached from her work, I hope to elucidate my own standpoint or, to use Mies' term, my own *conscious partiality* (as cited in Mishler, 1986a, p. 130) so that readers shall be better informed and, therefore, better equipped to form their own interpretation. In feminist investigation, the researcher's personal experience is often included, linking the public and the private (Reinharz, 1992). "Writing such as this is not a confession of 'bias' as it would undoubtedly be labeled in a positivist framework. Rather it is an explanation of 'the researcher's standpoint' in a feminist framework" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 259). As postmodernists contend, there is no one true reality, no research that is neutral, only multiple perspectives (Lather, 1991).

Women who have experienced consciousness-raising have been considered the best experts concerning their lived experience. In an effort to defer to the expertise of the participants in my study and to reduce the potential for "ethnocentrism" which may accompany my role as a self-disclosing researcher (Reinharz, 1992, p. 261), I have seen myself as a co-participant, a learner and listener (Reinharz, 1992) as well as a researcher, and have viewed the participants as co-researchers or "researcher collaborators" (Mishler, 1986a, p. 126). In the words of one participant, they have served as my "advisory committee." Co-researchers were asked for their active participation, not only in articulating the stories of their experiences of consciousness-raising, but also in collaboratively and dialectically generating interpretations of the results through their ongoing feedback, analyses and group discussion. Likewise, I invite readers of the resulting manuscript to apply their pre-existing understandings towards their own interpretations. Like many feminist researchers, I have aimed to provide a forum that is reflexive and collaborative, that is oriented to social context and change, is conducive to consciousness-raising around issues of racism, heterosexism, ageism and other forms of marginalization, and a research design that is *for* women as participants rather than *about* women as objects (Reinharz, 1992).

Although I have placed myself, the researcher, within this study as a person, I simultaneously have endeavoured to honour the participants' voices and hope that it is they who are speaking for themselves (Reinharz, 1992). While I have striven to ensure participants' voices

are heard, I must also acknowledge the inherent difficulties in actually accomplishing this. The fact remains, that it is I, the researcher, who has chosen *what, how*, and *who* to study. It is I who will perform the interpretive process of transcribing, deciding what is significant and what can be left out, as I attempt a delicate balancing act of staying true to women's own voices while still producing a manuscript of manageable size (Reinharz, 1992, p. 71). Despite the attempt at a collaborative group interpretation, and the use of direct quotes as much as is feasible, the reality is that the final product will be written in my own words. Although participants and I have all engaged in constructing meaning together (Riessman, 1993), it would be both naive and inadequate to deny the authorial privilege I hold in writing the final word.

Such inherent limitations do not make a qualitative study meaningless, however. Rather, they are best approached by remaining cognizant of these contradictions and by taking steps to minimize their potentially negative impact. This includes transparency in my perspective (Klein, cited in Reinharz, 1992), self-reflexivity, deferring to my co-participants as experts in their experiences, articulating what this project has meant to *me*, keeping mindful of the fact that "interpretation is an artful political process" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 481), relying on a collaborative group interpretation, and offering the final results of this group effort as but *one* interpretation among many possibilities. Meaning is always ambiguous, constructed, contextual and dynamic (Riessman, 1993). "The challenge is to find ways of working with texts so the original narrator is not effaced, so she does not lose control over her words" (p. 34).

Narrative Approach to Feminist Research

> We learn about general social processes through analysis of specific narratives. ... life stories themselves embody what we need to study: the relation between *this* instance of social action (*this* particular life story) and the social world the narrator shares with others; the ways in which culture marks, shapes, and/or constrains this narrative; and the ways in which *this* narrator makes use of cultural resources and struggles with cultural constraints. By analyzing the complex process of narration in specific instances, we learn about the kinds of narratives that are possible for certain groups of people, and we learn about the cultural world that makes their particular narratives possible – and problematic – in certain ways. ... we know the general fully only through its embodiments. ... The task of narrative analysis is to find out *how* she embeds those general social processes in her narrative (Chase, 1995, pp. 20, 22).

Narrative methodology is an ideal fit with feminist research. Given feminist critiques of psychology for its decontextualizing focus on the individual and "individual" deficits, a holistic approach that takes into account the context of women's lives is called for. Similarly, since the majority of existing research, much of it now becoming outdated, has relied on questionnaire or short answer data, a more in-depth qualitative exploration of women's lived experiences can help illuminate the process and the effects of consciousness-raising. Because a collection of narratives is also a vehicle for illuminating common themes (Riessman, 1993), it can serve feminism well by revealing further some commonalities of women's lives. Also congruent with feminist principles is narrative methodology's attention to human agency (Riessman, 1993, p. 5). Moreover, narratives are inseparable from context (Lieblich et al., 1998). Personal stories are also cultural narratives; culture speaks through the stories we tell. They are the process through which our "selves," our identities are constructed within a social context. Narratives *are* life itself (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Like consciousness-raising, narrative meaning-making is an ongoing, dynamic, constructive process. While multiple realities exist in all facets of life, so too can multiple interpretations of the same experience be expected within one individual as new information is uncovered and further experiences are lived. As Kierkegaard remarks, "we live life forwards but understand it backwards" (as cited in Josselson, 1995, p. 35). "The life story develops and changes through time. When a particular story is recorded and transcribed, we get a 'text' that is like a single, frozen, still photograph of the dynamically changing identity . . . constantly in flux" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 8). As both a process and a phenomenon (Cole & Knowles, 1995), or a process and a product (Polkinghorne, 1988), the life narrative plays an integral role in identity creation. Lieblich et al. (1998) go so far as to state that "the story *is* one's identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell" (p. 7).

Postmodern narrative theorists make the following epistemological claims:

1. Realities are socially constructed.

2. Realities are constituted through language.

3. Realities are organized and maintained through narratives.

4. There are no essential truths, only interpretations (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 22).

Narratives are the social discourse through which meaning is constructed (Josselson, 1995). Freedman and Combs (1996) describe how cultural stories mould individual interpretation, which in turn affects daily action and life narratives. In a reciprocal process, these individual life stories contribute to our cultural narratives. Self, like reality, is constructed in an ongoing interaction with others. Yet, it is not an equal interaction. Certain stories become dominant cultural narratives, the lens through which we interpret our own experiences, define our own identities. Dominant narratives have the power to marginalize and to negate lived experience. Understanding how the dominant culture has been taken up in my participants stories has been a significant aspect of this study.

Freedman and Combs (1996) further describe the power of language to reify or legitimize "truth." For example, despite scientific evidence that it does not exist biologically, the concept of "race" is socially constructed as a reality (Hershel, 1995). "Language does not mirror nature; language creates the natures we know" (Anderson and Goolishian, cited in Freedman & Combs, 196, p. 29). Drawing on Foucault, Freedman and Combs illustrate the potent relationship between language, power and knowledge. Those with the power to participate in, and thus shape, public discourse, hold the power to name, to define truths such as right and wrong, normal and abnormal. Looking closely at the language chosen by participants helps to explicate the power relations in their lives.

Although internalized dominant narratives serve as blinders to alternative possibilities, such oppressive narratives *can* be resisted, subverted and eventually transformed by looking to subcultures with different stories (Freedman and Combs, 1996). Stories of lived experience call

into question dominant stories. Retelling narratives open the possibility for developing new

language, new meaning and legitimizing alternative realities (Freedman and Combs, 1996).

Consciousness-raising, therefore, is a vehicle for deconstruction of dominant, oppressive

narratives.

Praxis and Social Change

[Praxis research is] research that is explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society (Lather, 1991, p. 51).

Praxis-oriented inquirers seek emancipatory knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions distorted or hidden by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes (Lather, 1991, p. 51)

Although action-taking was not a specific goal of this research, given that feminism calls

for social change, all feminist research involves action components (Reinharz, 1992). For

example, consciousness-raising serves to deconstruct dominant narratives, as discussed above,

and provides alternative realities from which women can choose. As well, change is a common

outcome of group processes such as this. Cancian (as cited in Reinharz, 1992) describes one such

example:

While we did not engage in collective action, the group seemed to produce change on an individual level ... A sense of personal change pervaded the members of the group: . . . half the members said that the group had changed their behavior. . . . Turning to the results of the group from the perspective of producing knowledge for social science, the discussions produced rich data on the daily lives and conflicts of women. . . . New findings also emerged because of the discussion format and/or the possibility of action. In particular, discussions of whether to take action revealed how internalized oppression works, i.e., how fear, self-blame, and an ideology of individual achievement maintain the status quo (pp. 182-183).

Similarly, several women reported personal change or impact as a result of

participating in this project and made plans to form women's discussion or anti-racism

groups. Political and moral illumination as discussed by Harding (as cited in Reinharz,

1992, p. 175) is also an "intervention" inherently imbedded in feminist research. Many

believe that feminist researchers have a *responsibility* to raise consciousness and thereby

contribute to social change (Reinharz, 1992, p. 251). An integral component of this research project, reading each other's stories seemed to naturally inspire us all. Several participants, as well as myself, found that our consciousness had "definitely" been raised by sharing our stories and reading other women's narratives.

Speaking only for myself, I can say that my involvement in this research, from the early readings of existing literature to the profoundly impacting experience of hearing other's stories to sharing and discussing our analyses, has solidified my own commitment to social justice and change. I have begun working as a "pro-choice" counsellor in an abortion clinic and am involved in the design and facilitation of Popular Education workshops through the Vancouver Status of Women, something I had not considered until recently. Likewise, I feel re-inspired about my existing commitments to human rights work in Latin America and elsewhere. Furthermore, this research will undoubtedly inform my future counselling practice. Just as "raising mental health workers' consciousness about rape helps women by affirming their experience" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 178), this project has raised further my own consciousness about other women's lives, and hopefully will enhance my understanding of future clients' experiences of oppression and of consciousness-raising. Ferguson (as cited in Reinharz, 1992) sees all

> knowledge-creation-as-praxis: By exposing the contradictions and manipulations contained within a bureaucratic society, one can demystify the theory and practice of that society. Since the organizational society is maintained in part by creating and perpetuating the appropriate ideology, one that both reflects and distorts the reality it describes, a different form of understanding is in some ways also a form of action. . . . I do believe that political theory can be transformative, can help us to live well, if it is used to rethink our lives, reshape our possibilities, and resist the official definition of reality (p. 192).

Goals / Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study has been, first and foremost, to learn more about women's lived experiences of consciousness-raising in an oppressive culture. How has the experience of consciousness-raising impacted these women and their lives? As we have seen, narratives

identify and construct our "selves;" narratives *are* life itself (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This study is an exploration into how consciousness-raising can influence the course of women's narratives. At the same time, articulation of a few women's narratives can expose something of our socio-economic-political context, the dominant cultural narrative within which we live.

This study was born from my belief that consciousness-raising serves to externalize internalized oppression, to help insulate us from destructive dominant narratives. To investigate this thesis, women were asked to describe their experiences of oppression and consciousness-raising. They also were asked specific questions such as, "How do you think your consciousness-raising has affected your psychological health? Your self-concept?" and "Have there also been negative consequences of gaining a critical consciousness?" (Appendix C). Like many feminist researchers, I have aimed "to document the lives and activities of women, to understand the experience of women from their own point of view, and to conceptualize women's behavior as an expression of social contexts" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 51).

In many ways, this project actually paralleled the consciousness-raising process. Firstly, women disclosed their personal experiences of life in a hierarchical system. The interview process of contemplation, articulation and description itself seemed to facilitate existing social analysis and further consciousness-raising. The process may have been most pronounced when women read each other's stories and, for some, during the group component of the study, where, like consciousness-raising groups, women discussed commonalities as well as diversities, illuminating and analyzing the often unacknowledged politics of our personal lives. Another important aim of consciousness-raising groups has been the taking of action for social change. Though direct action was not a specific goal of this project, the research process "offers a powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that it enables people to change by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular situations" (Lather, 1991, p. 56). As discussed in chapter five, comments by several participants suggest this process did indeed occur for some.

Another objective consistent with common feminist research methods is for the women participating in this project to benefit personally (Kramer, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 238). Mishler (1986a) maintains that respondents are empowered by having their voices heard and by participating in the process of interpretation. As well, he notes that sharing narratives often inspires people to action-taking in line with their own interests. The articulating of one's life story not only explicates its implicit meaning (Wildershoven, 1993), but "shapes[s] and construct[s] the narrator's personality and reality" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 7). As this study involves consciousness-raising about consciousness-raising, and to the degree that consciousness-raising *is* liberating or otherwise beneficial, my hope was for the women participating in the project to experience personal benefits from their involvement. Gratifyingly, such benefits have been expressed by several participants and are reflected in their comments quoted in chapter five. As Patti Lather (1991) states, "the goal of emancipatory research is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge" (p. 60).

And like myself and the participants, readers of the manuscript may learn more about other women's experiences of consciousness-raising as well as see similarities in their own experiences. This is part of the process of consciousness-raising as well as a common goal of many feminist researchers. Exposing the dominant narratives of patriarchy, racism, capitalism and any of the numerous other interrelated oppressive systems at play in our globalized culture can reduce a sense of isolation and be liberating for the reader (Reinharz, 1992). Retaining direct quotes as much as possible hopefully maintains the authentic voice of the women participants so that the woman reader may feel less alone (Pope, cited in Reinharz, 1992) as she sees connections between the personal and the political.

To the extent that any learnings might contribute in some way to the understanding of the "psychology of women," other women too may stand to benefit. For example, as discussed in chapter six, one implication for counselling psychology might be that group consciousness-

raising experiences be encouraged in contrast to psychology's current emphasis on individual counselling. Currently, "radical" perspectives such as feminist therapy remain in the margins, under attack for having a political agenda. At the same time, inadequate government funding for mental health programs means that "therapy 'remains' privileged therapy, for the privileged people" (Waldegrave, 1986, p. 200). Albee (1982) goes so far as to argue that "one-to-one psychotherapy is a hopeless approach because of the unbridgeable gap between the large numbers in need and the small numbers of helpers" (p. 1043).

This study was born from my belief that consciousness-raising has the potential to bridge the gap between women's psychological needs and the limitations of the field of psychology. Unfortunately, interest in researching consciousness-raising appears to have waned over the past two decades. What related research exists is largely quantitative and/or outdated. Further knowledge of the processes and the products of consciousness-raising at the turn of the millennium is needed. Although the importance of consciousness-raising is taken for granted by feminists and other social activists, greater understanding is necessary if consciousness-raising is to be used effectively to enhance the mental well-being of women. And to the extent that consciousness-raising increases action directed at social change, it may well be the most critical avenue toward prevention.

Selection of Participants

Although feminist theory on the benefits of consciousness-raising also can be expected to apply to men, to the alienated upper and middle classes and to most privileged people as well, for several reasons I have involved women participants only. While circumscribed male gender roles, for example, also can be seen as deleterious to men (Good, Gilbert & Scher, 1990), and men undoubtedly stand to benefit in many ways from consciousness-raising and from a more egalitarian society, my choice of women-only is one form of affirmative action towards offsetting the preponderance of men writing about men. "Biography [has] the potential of bringing women

'into' history and making the female experience part of the written record," increasing awareness

of women's lived experience (Reinharz, 1992, p. 134).

Another rationale for selecting only women is that although women can experience

privileged status within a culture based on factors such as class, race, heterosexuality or

ablebodiness; within each category, women still form the "most oppressed of all groups" (Nes &

Iadicola, 1989, p. 14). It would, therefore, stand to reason that women may benefit most from the

experience of consciousness-raising. Also, benefits of all-women groups have been well

delineated (for e.g., Kimmel & Kazanis, 1995; Gottlieb, Burden, McCormick & Nicarthy, 1983;

Donnelly, 1987; Schubert Walker, 1987). I believe that openness, rapport and feelings of

solidarity as well as potential consciousness-raising within group discussions can be adversely

affected by the presence of men.

Seeking diversity is often a feminist criteria for selection of participants. Just as women

in general largely have been ignored in research, as in history, in politics, in leadership, in policy

making, and in economics to name a few institutions of discrimination; women of colour, women

with disabilities, women living in poverty, Jewish women, single mothers, lesbians and many

others remain invisible, despite having a wealth of experience and knowledge to contribute. It

can be expected that multiple oppressions cause greater psychological suffering and that women

who have been marginalized in multiple ways stand to benefit most from consciousness-raising.

As well, women living with such double or multiple jeopardy undoubtedly have the most

experience with oppression. In recent years, feminism has been aptly criticized for its white,

middle class, heterosexist bias. When I speak of consciousness-raising, I do not refer solely to

critical analysis of gender issues. I am defining feminism as the call for equality for all. This

includes critiquing cultural narratives of racism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ableism, ageism,

classism and the many other forms of culturally accepted hierarchies and discrimination. Without

suggesting that any one woman speaks on behalf of, or represents all women with similar issues

or experiences, it is clear that an all-white or otherwise heterogeneous group studying women's experiences of consciousness-raising would be inherently impoverished.

At the same time, there is a paradox in contributing to the status quo of white academic researchers "studying down," studying "the natives," "the poor," the "other." Though I have lived life with more than one of the above categories of discrimination, as a white "educated" woman from a middle class background, my relative privilege may have been an obstacle to creating a truly authentic collaborative, egalitarian research process. Just as male presence in our group would likely detract from group process, solidarity and learnings, I was compelled to reflect on whether my whiteness and other aspects of my "status" would interfere? Would it negate the validity of the research? Do I have a right to study or the ability to understand a group of which I am not a member? Have I been engaging in "the indignity of speaking for others?" (Foucault, cited in Kritzman, 1988, p. xviii). Understandably, there is growing hostility and suspicion of the privileged few studying marginalized others. In "Some Painful Experiences of a White Feminist Therapist Doing Research with Women of Colour," Nikki Gerrard (1995, p. 60), labelled a "blood clot" by one prospective participant of colour, discusses the inadequacies of such inherently non-egalitarian research relationships. In many ways, despite good intentions, this common practice of studying "down," of speaking for others, is a perpetuation of dominance and colonialism (Lather, 1991).

However, the solution cannot be for white middle class academics to ignore marginalized others. The paradox is reminiscent of Pat Parker's 1978 poem:

> The first thing you do is forget that i'm Black.
> Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.
>   Parker (cited in Gerrard, 1995, p. 62)

Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 15) point out how, "the field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions and hesitations." Likewise, Mishler (1986a) reminds us that "ambiguity and complexity are omnipresent in all situations and types of discourse" (p. 45).

My decision then was to strive for transparency, articulating my biases and limitations such as those discussed above. In seeking participants, I described myself as a white woman exploring women's experiences of consciousness-raising around issues of sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, etc., as part of a Masters degree program (see Appendix A). I advertised for participants in a variety of places, such as women's centres, multi-cultural, Native and lesbian/bisexual women's centres, the Disabled Women's Network, and women's book stores, and decided to allow women themselves to be relatively self-selecting (Appendix B). I provided my own definition of consciousness-raising and left it to prospective participants to decide whether they wished to work with me. While acknowledging the dilemma of studying "the other", I felt that a diverse group of women would have a great deal to learn from each other by sharing stories. This, indeed, was the case. As it turned out, aside from offers of several friends and family members, the narratives presented in this paper were the *only* women who approached me to participate. To borrow a word from one participant, it was like "magic." Indeed, it was only coincidence that brought together such a diverse and interesting group of women to share their stories.

To approach this research project in the most respectful, ethical and legitimate way possible, I attempted to remain self-reflexive and cognizant of the impact of various forms of oppression which I may or may not have experienced. In an effort to minimize the inherent potential for researcher bias, I continually strove to authentically defer to the expertise of each participant. At times I wondered whether I was imposing an undue burden on my participants by requesting their feedback. However, their ongoing input was truly valuable. Lastly, after discussion with two participants, as well as much internal struggle, I decided to include my own narrative for several reasons. Firstly, I believe it facilitated a more egalitarian research relationship and greater rapport with participants, as was also expressed in the group meeting (see chapter five). Secondly, I believe strongly that women sharing their stories is integral to consciousness-raising; it is a powerful means of deconstructing and rewriting the dominant

narrative. It is a process through which we can resist being silenced, or "collaborating in the subjugation of [our] own lives . . . [becoming] 'willing' participants in the disciplining of, or policing of, their own lives (White, p. 34-35). And so, consistent with the feminist philosophy and underlying thesis of this entire research project, for both political and methodological reasons, I wrote and shared my own narrative, though I too have chosen to use a pseudonym.

Reflexivity was a critical aim throughout this research process, from my own journalling to discussions with participants, from transcribing to writing. As Lather (1991) describes, "to write 'postmodern' is to write paradoxically aware of one's complicity in that which one critiques" (p. 10). This, I believe, is the best I can offer.

Procedures

Researcher's Journal

Throughout this research process, I reflected on my own experiences of consciousness-raising in a research journal. In addition to narrating my own experiences, the journal was a useful tool for remaining more cognizant about my biases and interpretations as well as in generating insights and further questions, noticing themes and patterns.

Moreover, the journalling process enabled me to follow the path that my own understanding of consciousness-raising has taken as a result of this study. For example, I began this undertaking with a firm belief that consciousness-raising is psychologically emancipating. In discussing my thesis with an acquaintance, "Mary," she became excited about the topic as some of my thoughts and experiences immediately resonated for her. At the same time, Mary questioned whether consciousness-raising is the "be-all and end-all." In her life, she has found consciousness-raising to be invaluable, yet insufficient. And I instantly recognized this too to be true. As research has shown, the process of consciousness-raising can also involve heightened feelings of anger or increased conflicts in personal relationships. Moreover, as long as oppression continues to exist, awareness alone clearly is inadequate. Journalling about our conversation helped me to revise my own ideas about consciousness-raising and, I believe, helped me to keep a

more open mind about possible outcomes. As Josselson (1995) notes, "if we listen well, we will unearth what we did not expect. This becomes the paradigm for discovery" (p. 30). Mary's point further demonstrates the need to understand more fully the process of consciousness-raising in all its complexities.

Pilot Study

The above example also illustrates a potential benefit of collaborating with other women from the initial stages. As preliminary practice and exploration, I interviewed a friend who has had experience with consciousness-raising. The discussion was audio taped, transcribed and written by myself into a narrative. This provided invaluable experience for me in advance of the formal study. It helped me to formulate and revise several research questions. For example, the interview question about possible negative consequences of consciousness-raising was a result of comments this participant made in the pilot interview. I had not previously considered asking that question, yet the answers provided unexpected findings which may have important implications for the women's movement as well as counselling psychology (see chapter 6).

The pilot study also offered me practice in interviewing skills, the opportunity to reflect on and develop rapport, and practice in "inviting stories" (Chase, 1995) as well as in understanding what participants might be telling me. I solicited feedback from the participant in terms of possible suggestions about aspects of the experience of consciousness-raising or methods of investigation that I may have been overlooking. She felt the interview process went extremely well and that she had no suggestions to make (see chapter 5, p. 135). As in the formal study, explanations of the research, as well as issues of consent and confidentiality were discussed with the pilot study participant before the interview and a consent form was signed.

Selection Process / Initial Contact

During the initial contact with potential participants, I provided an explanation of the project, including my interest in conducting this research. I explained how the respondent would be participating (i.e. one or two individual interviews and one group discussion, each expected to

last roughly one to three hours; input requested; audio-taping of interviews), and that she

maintains the freedom to terminate participation at any time. Lastly, I discussed the consent

forms (Appendices D-F) and issues of confidentiality as well as answered any questions.

Depending on how much I already knew of the potential participant (some were through word of

mouth; two I knew casually through paid or volunteer work), I asked her to tell me briefly about

her experiences of consciousness-raising for the purpose of establishing that her definition and

experiences meet with the concept under investigation (see Appendix A).

Upon agreeing to participate, each participant was provided with a written list of

interview questions to ponder prior to the interview. She was asked to choose a pseudonym and

to begin to contemplate her story of consciousness-raising, to jot down thoughts, comments or

questions that may occur to her. I requested that each participant begin a diary of such if she had

the time and inclination, or to just reflect on her experiences and answers to the research

questions. Each participant was also invited to write her own narrative, in lieu of my interpreting

her story. This was stressed as optional. Two participants chose to write their own stories.

Lather (1991) describes how having all participants contribute to the research writing "avoids

both appropriation of the experience of the 'Other' and the inherent disparity between the writer

and the written about" (p. 96). Having this level of input from participants greatly enhances the

richness of the project as they speak in their own voices; it can reduce the difficulties inherent in

interpreting for others as previously discussed. However, it was also recognized that it would

require a greater time commitment and certainly was not *expected* from the volunteer participants.

Conscious of the many time demands in women's lives, I did not wish to discourage potential

participants.

First Research Conversation

As meaning-making is an ongoing process of co-construction, this discussion was to be

one of discovery for us both. My role was to be that of attentive listener, eager to learn from my

co-researchers what I could about their experiences of consciousness-raising within the context of

their life stories. A balance between being "interviewee-guided" and staying focused on the story as it relates to consciousness-raising was sought, while at the same time recognizing the opportunity for gleaning invaluable information by allowing for digression (Reinharz, 1992, p. 25). In my research journal reflections, I discovered that several digressions that I had initially worried were not relevant, indeed provided richness and depth, highly related to consciousness-raising experiences.

I offered to answer any questions and where I felt it was appropriate, occasionally disclosed aspects of my own experiences. Of course, it was important to remain cognizant of the pros and cons of such self-disclosure. Once again, it is a balancing between the feminist goal of "transparency in all stages of our research" (Klein, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 74) and of avoiding "ethnocentricity" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 261), that is, imposing the researcher's views. While self-disclosure can encourage trust, rapport and deeper sharing by the participant, it can also limit participant disclosure to that which she believes is expected or desired by the interviewer (Reinharz, 1992, pp. 32-33). In my discussion with Mary, for example, it is possible that my own enthusiasm for my thesis that consciousness-raising is emancipatory may have inhibited her interest in sharing her alternative view and questioning my belief. Fortunately, she felt comfortable stating her opinion and her input was valued. Reflexivity, timing, intuition and sensitivity to these considerations were felt to be key issues in the research relationships.

Each individual interview lasted between 60 and 135 minutes. The primary goal was to understand the participant's experience of consciousness-raising. As part of the interpretive process, as soon as possible following each discussion and while it was fresh in my memory, I reflected and recorded in the research journal my thoughts both on the interview process and the meaning or significance of parts and the whole of her story. Was I successful in inviting stories? What did I do or not do that seemed to work? Or not work? What exactly did she mean when she said . . . ? How are parts of her story similar and different to others?

Transcript

> Transcribing discourse, like photographing reality, is an interpretive practice. ... by displaying text in particular ways, we provide grounds for our arguments, just like a photographer guides the viewer's eye with lenses and by cropping images (Riessman, 1993, p. 13).

Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) convincingly argue that, like all stages of research, the process of transcription is never neutral, objective nor complete. Rather, it is a constructive process of analysis. "Transcription is theory laden; the choices that researchers make about transcription enact the theories they hold and constrain the interpretations they can draw from their data" (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999, p. 64). Transcribers are interpreting during every step of transcription as they decide how to represent speech. They must select whether and how to record pauses, hesitations, body language, facial expressions, gestures, intonation, pitch, voice quality (e.g. shaky emotional sounding), accent, timing and duration of conversation, inaudible segments, physical and social setting, context, and the infinite other perceptual cues and paralinguistic features of speech relied upon in communication. The transcriber must make choices between accuracy and completeness on one hand and efficiency and readability on the other. Transcripts, like speech, serve a rhetorical function. This process of selectivity and interpretation by the transcriber results in "a kind of theoretical imperialism" (Schegloff, cited in Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 71) as the speaker's meaning is reduced to a textual representation.

Although transcription is inherently problematic, Lapadat and Lindsay do not see it as futile and meaningless. Rather, they contend that a transcript might be rendered *more* meaningful by reflectivity and transparency. While common practice overlooks the interpretive nature of transcribing, Lapadat and Lindsay see it as incumbent upon the author to acknowledge and describe the process of selection. For example, what rules were chosen for deciding what to include or exclude? A thoughtful and explicit process of selection can result in "lean transcriptions" that permit "rich interpretations" (Bloom, cited in Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 69).

Every transcriber has a different system (Cook, cited in Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 72) and as Kvale (cited in Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999) suggests, looking at "What is a useful transcription for my research purposes?" is more important than striving for the impossible goal of objectivity and completeness (p. 74). During my first transcription, this quickly became painfully apparent as each hour of tape required nine hours to transcribe. Then, when attempting to work from the transcript in writing a narrative, I realized that my perfectionistic transcription of each "um" and "you know" and "like" was a hindrance rather than useful in gleaning meaning from these 60 pages of transcription. So, I refined my process, selectively including only those aspects of speech I felt were significant to the participants experience of consciousness-raising. The nonetheless painstaking, yet critical process of transcription involved multiple listenings, readings, reflections and revisions. It was undertaken as soon as possible, with the conversation still fresh in my mind.

Narrative Interpretation / Data Analysis

As previously discussed, each participant was invited to write her own narrative summary of her experiences of consciousness-raising. In some ways, this can be the ideal as it may provide the best means for each woman's voice to be heard and reduces one interpretive stage of analysis. Reinharz (1992) describes one approach to interpretation:

> By not analysing the accounts, [Nancy Seifer] prevents herself from speaking for, speaking better than, or transforming them. . . . Her politics . . . is the basis of her methodological position of *not analyzing* oral histories. Nancy Siefer believes that the women are capable of analyzing their lives, and that an analysis is contained in what they are saying. Moreover, she believes that if the women are heard directly, without her interference, the reader will be able to identify with them. It is this identification that will produce social change, not the oral historian's analysis of the women's lives (1992, p. 137).

However, as we have seen, interpretation is inherent in every step of the research process. As compelling as Seifer's philosophy is,

> The refusal to analyze transcripts does not produce a kind of purity in which women speak for themselves in an unmediated way. After all, the [researcher] already had a role in producing the oral history and preparing it for publication. Since any involvement at all by the [researcher] is a de facto interpretation,

feminist researchers should be interested in providing analysis so that the reader
has a sense of the perspective used" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 137-138).

Two women wrote their own narratives, while I summarized narrative accounts of the
remaining participant's experience of consciousness-raising. I was struck by the ease with which
the stories seemed to write themselves. Largely, I believe, it was due to my privilege of finding
so many extremely articulate women. I looked for components of their stories, such as plot,
sequence, turning points and crisis resolutions and pondered, "How does consciousness-raising fit
into each of these narrative components? How do consciousness-raising experiences influence
the "progression" of the story? How does each woman's narrative serve to construct her identity,
her "self?"

In collaboration with participants, minor facts were altered in some cases to protect
confidentiality. Aside from these agreed upon changes, I felt uncomfortable, at first, making *any*
changes to the participants' words. However, I came to accept that converting from oral
conversation to written speech is, in fact, like translating from one language to another. That is,
we speak quite differently when we write our thoughts. What sounds perfectly articulate orally
can come out awkwardly on paper. And so, attempting to maintain the casual conversational tone
of the original interview, as well as to preserve the speakers' own words, I took minimal liberties
in translating the interview to a written conversation. Mostly, however, the process involved
cutting and pasting of direct quotes. Words, phrases or occasional sentences were added to
facilitate the flow of their "monologues." I believe that I changed very little from the original
dialogue.

The two narratives written by the participants themselves also required very little change.
Nomi's story was written entirely by herself, while I made some changes to punctuation for the
purpose of consistency. The post script, however, was written by myself based on a telephone
conversation in which I asked Nomi questions specifically to address areas where I had wanted
more elaboration. Karey's narrative originally came in the form of a list of answers to my

research questions. Again, the researcher's changes were largely in the form of cutting and pasting, adding transitional phrases for the purpose flow.

While writing the narratives, I strove to honour each woman's reality as a truth in its own right, to reflect on what her story has meant for *me* as *one* possible interpretation, and to accede authority for the final interpretation to each participant. The narrative summaries were passed back to their owners for contemplation. Participants were asked to make note of their reactions and anything needing correction, amendment, clarification, further comment or elaboration. Each participant was given final authority to edit, amend or re-write as they so wished.

Second Research Conversation

The most common form of emancipatory approach to research [is] the submission of a preliminary description of the data to the scrutiny of the researched (Lather, 1991, p. 53).

The primary purpose of this second individual discussion was to collaborate on the meaning and the accuracy of the narrative summary. Participants were to remain "actively involved" in "constructing data about their lives" (Graham, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 20). This discussion was an opportunity for further clarification, additional information, questions, amendments, additions, reactions, thoughts, comments, and corrective feedback. I had been viewing this as an integral moment of co-construction and offered to meet in person, talk by telephone, or communicate by e-mail, whichever was most convenient for participants. Because there were *very* few changes requested by participants, none of them felt it necessary to meet in person.

Guide to Reading Our Narratives

Copies of all amended narratives were distributed to all participants for reading and reflecting. A reading guide (Appendix G) was provided asking participants to dwell on the meaning of these collective experiences prior to our group meeting. The guide asked them to consider such things as: How did you feel and what did you think as you read and reflected on your own and others' stories? What things resonated for you? What similarities and differences

did you notice? What conclusions can we come to based on these experiences? What are the implications for the field of psychology? For other women? How has your involvement in this project impacted you?

Participants were invited to make notes; bring ideas to share and discuss with the group so that we could co-construct the potential meaning of consciousness-raising in women's lives. Private reflection was felt to be important prior to group analysis so that women might first formulate their own ideas before hearing, incorporating and being influenced by the interpretations of others. While I had originally expected that the group meeting might be inspiring and impacting, I was surprised to find that even the process of reading each others' stories was a moving experience for most participants. Their detailed feedback is outlined in chapter five.

Collaborative Group Interpretation

> It is through dialogue that the subject-object relationship of traditional science gives way to a subject-subject one, in which the academic knowledge of formally educated people works in a dialectical tension with the popular knowledge of the people to produce a more profound understanding of the situation (Reason, 1994, p. 328.)

Actively involving participants in the construction of meaning was an integral part of this feminist research project. I had seen this collaborative group interpretation as perhaps the most significant phase of the study. A collaborative process is congruent with the feminist goal of egalitarian research designs (James, cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 21) and because it also offers the potential for further consciousness-raising, it is a component particularly suited to the topic of this study. Heron (cited in Lather, 1991) believes that participants have a moral right to collaborate in generating knowledge about themselves (p. 56). Additionally, collaborative analysis serves to minimize the effects of the researcher's preconceptions about the participant's lived experience (Comstock, cited in Lather, 1991, p. 63). Such a dialectic process of interpretation is "mutually educative" (Lather, 1991, p. 63) in a manner similar to the process of conscientization (Freire, 1973) wherein the relationship between teacher/student and student/teacher is similar to that of

researcher/learner and participant/research collaborator (Mishler, 1986). As well, allowing theory to emerge in a dialectical rather than a priori manner helps us to avoid the "sin of theoretical imposition" (Lather, 1991, p. 55). True to feminism and consciousness-raising, this key component, I believe, not only enhances the validity of interpretation, but facilitates the feminist goal of connecting women, sharing experiences, and illuminating the connection between women's individual stories and dominant cultural narratives.

Unfortunately, the group was disappointingly small. All women had previously expressed great interest in meeting the others. However, as discussed in chapter five, only two participants were able to attend the group meeting. One woman had only ever originally offered to provide her written narrative and had never intended to participate in the group process due to time constraints. The other participant who wrote her own narrative lives in the eastern U.S. and was unable to attend for obvious reasons. One woman was sick, and another suddenly was faced with an unexpected personal crisis. After recovering from our disappointment, the three of us nonetheless embarked on an engaging and inspirational four hour discussion. As described in chapter five, feedback on the author's thematic analysis was solicited from those absent, resulting in five of the anticipated six women providing input into the interpretation of our collective experiences. Lastly, I provided the two group participants with a copy of my interpretation of our group discussion for their feedback and subsequently received their verification.

Limitations

Having a more complete and collaborative group process of analysis would have been preferable, of course. Additionally, ethical considerations, feminist and postmodernist research theory, representation and participant diversity issues have been discussed previously throughout this paper. Although "seeking diversity" can be problematic, it can also be highly valuable. As is discussed in the results chapter, women share many commonalities, but we also stand to learn much from each other's differences.

Of course, there are many questions *not* addressed by this inquiry. For example, I have only sought participants who feel they have *benefited* from experiencing consciousness-raising. There may be many more women who have been exposed to consciousness-raising but did not find their lives or themselves significantly affected. Likewise, this study has not explored which "types" of people, which types of circumstances, which oppression and which social contexts are required for people to benefit from consciousness-raising.

Lastly, generalization is not an appropriate purpose of this study. Rather, it is intended to explore what is *possible* for *some* women, how some women's lives have been impacted by the experience of consciousness-raising. We can only begin to illumine the dominant cultural narrative by articulating individual stories. Learning more about what is *possible* can have important implications for other women, for psychology, for future research, and for social change.

Criteria for Evaluating Worth of the Study

Narrative materials – like reality itself – can be read, understood, and analyzed in extremely diverse ways (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 171).

Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 171) rightly go on to ask, "What then can be offered as criteria for the quality of narrative research? How should we distinguish a good study from a bad one?" Positivist concepts of reliability, generalizeability and scientific validity are not relevant to narrative studies (Riessman, 1993, p. 65) and we must abandon the illusory search for an objective truth (Josselson, 1995). Within the expanding area of narrative inquiry, there is no one agreed upon method of interpretation nor set of criteria for validation. (Lieblich et al., 1988; Riessman, 1993; Mishler, 1986) . "There are no recipes and formulas" (Riessman, 1993, p. 69). Instead, concepts such as *persuasiveness, plausibility, correspondence, pragmatism* (Riessman, 1993), *vividness* (Runyan, in Lieblich et al., 1998), *relevance* (Rogers et al., in Lieblich et al., 1993), and *trustworthiness* (Mishler, in Lieblich et al., 1998,) have been proposed. Given the

multitude of answers to the above questions, pluralism is called for within the constructivist

paradigm (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Bearing in mind the foregoing considerations, my overall criterion for evaluating the

worth of this study is an assessment of the extent to which the design, process and outcome are

congruent with feminist research philosophy and goals. That is to say, does the study

demonstrate reflexivity, collaboration, resonance and an analysis of praxis.

<u>Reflexivity</u>

Rather than seeking an absolute, scientific truth, Mishler suggests that the plausibility of

a researcher's interpretations be improved by maintaining an "awareness of the range of 'threats'

to the internal validity of a study" (1986, p. 112-113). Similarly, Lather (1991, p. 67) suggests a

self-critical approach to *construct validity* by asking "Where are the weak points?" *Triangulation*,

she says, should include the search for "counter patterns as well as convergence" (p. 66-67). She

further provides a checklist for assessing our own attempts at self-deconstruction (p. 84), for

example:

> Did I encourage ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity, or did I impose order
> and structure? ...
> Have I questioned the textual staging of knowledge in a way that keeps my own
> authority from being reified? ...
> Did I focus on the limits of my own conceptualizations? ...
> What hierarchies are at play?

In a self-deconstructive effort to reduce theoretical imposition, Lather's notion of

systematized reflexivity can also be assessed by asking "how a priori theory has been changed by

the logic of the data?" (p. 67). For example, the importance of openness to new discoveries rather

than pursuing confirmation of my pre-existing hypothesis (Josselson, 1995) was demonstrated in

the outcome of my conversation with Mary. Likewise, some unexpected themes and learnings

were uncovered (see chapters five and six).

Collaboration

An assessment of collaboration will examine the extent to which participants' voices come through in the final product. Have I relied on each participant as an expert on her own experiences of consciousness-raising? Has each participant individually and has the group collectively contributed to, constructed and validated interpretations of the data? Have we valued women's lived experiences? How well was diversity in selection of participants achieved? Have the participants benefited personally? Perhaps the most important criteria for evaluating the validity of the study is "what participants think of our work" (Riessman, 1993, p. 66). As delineated in chapter five, the group discussion as well as separate participant feedback generated impressive validation for the present research process.

Resonance

My criterion of resonance might also be considered *verisimilitude*, but I believe is best explained in Kidder's (in Lather, 1991) definition of *face validity*. That is, does this collection of stories produce "a 'click of recognition' and a 'yes, of course,' instead of 'yes, but' experience'" (p. 67)? Dinnerstein's (as cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 232) approach "is to appeal to the reader's own experience: if the result feels in any way enlightening, the argument is validated insofar as it can be." These two definitions of validation are particularly appropriate in a study of consciousness-raising for they also *describe* consciousness-raising. As women recognize the commonalities of their experiences, connections between the personal and the social context become apparent. Once again, feedback from the participants themselves, offers a positive evaluation of the resonant worth of this study.

Praxis

Gergen (as cited in Mishler, 1986) sees the scientific quest for general laws as less important than gaining an understanding of factors that may increase life's range of alternatives (p. 134). As such, chapters five and six address ways in which this study has contributed to an understanding of how women and their lives might be impacted by the experience of

consciousness-raising. I believe these chapters provide affirmative answers to the following praxis-oriented questions. How have participants been impacted by participating in this project? Have their experiences of consciousness-raising helped them to externalize internalized oppression? Have these women's stories helped to expose or illuminate our socio-economic-political context? Have our findings allowed us to critique or deconstruct our culture's dominant narratives? Have they suggested alternatives or new possibilities, that is, avenues for social change? Lather (1991) stresses the importance of what she refers to as *catalytic validity*: the extent "to which the research process re-orients, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order transform it, a process Freire (1973) terms conscientization." The group discussion as well as individual participant feedback speaks well of the praxis value of this project. Additionally, in an effort towards praxis, I intend to share the results of this project through talks, workshops and writings where possible.

Methodology Conclusion

> It is not always clear at the beginning of a research project what features of speech will prove to be essential (Riessman, 1993, p. 60).

In many ways a positivist experimental method would have been so much more simple. At least, it would have come with clear directions on "how to" conduct research and precise instructions for interpreting results. At times during this project I have felt intimidated and overwhelmed by the grand ideals of feminism. Feminist research perspectives tell me I must contribute to liberation and social change; I must seek diversity, yet not study outside of my race or class; I must engage in egalitarian research, while acknowledging researcher/researched power differentials; I must contribute to social knowledge, to an understanding of the "psychology of women;" I must allow my participants to speak for themselves, to give them their own voice, while having the last word to announce reality; I must listen and learn well, facilitate dialectical collaboration, openness and rapport, and adequately deconstruct my own input; I must provide political and moral illumination and seek answers where there is no truth. Have I lived up to such

standards?, I wonder. Postmodernism offers little consolation. As Reason (1994) argues, "in its extreme form, [postmodernism] is over-intellectualized and thus both nihilistic and oppressive. Voices are just voices; they have no claim to truth, so the search for voice is seen as being the search for any old voice" (p. 334).

Fortunately, other voices provide more reassurance: the "excess [of deconstructionism] demonstrates not the demise of meaning but its endless possibilities" (Grousz cited in Lather, 1991, p. 83). This is not a quest "for any old voice." Rather, it is a search for alternative voices, a journey for discovering alternative narratives. "While the never-ending self-critique called for by Foucault can be paralyzing, it also offers the hope of developing more effective social change practices" (Lather, 1991, p. 100). And so, in response to Pat Parker, I have attempted to do my best to forget that you're Black, and to never forget that you're Black.

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING: THE NARRATIVES

Jay's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

I feel like I've been oppressed since birth because I was born into a family with a racist Caucasian father. He married an aboriginal woman. So, there was a built in day to day racism at home. And a lot of violence. He was very violent towards my brothers and my Mom. He sexually abused me. My self-identity included a lot of doubt, low self-esteem. We also live in such an oppressive society. I have felt that oppression in many ways. I'm a lesbian. Although I can hide a little bit in some people's eyes because I don't immediately *look* gay, I have felt homophobia around me all my life. Whatever way in which I relate to my identity, *female, lesbian, mixed heritage, aboriginal*, there's oppression. Whether it's within the gay and lesbian community, or within the First Nations community or the women's community, whether it's based on gender or class or *whatever*, it's everywhere. Even ideas, voice. You know, speaking out and naming things. Being outspoken, I've often felt a backlash.

As a young girl, I did speak up eventually, for example, by running away. But, how much can you do when you're a youth? Later, in my early 20's, I made an attempt to go to college. I wanted to become a criminologist. But, I couldn't take school, so I dropped out after a year. I had so much personal *pain* from my home life. It was quite a long process of dealing with it. It included a lot of therapy and counselling. Some was helpful; some wasn't. I got involved in the Adult Children of Alcoholics groups in the 80's and became addicted to support groups. Not that there's anything wrong with support groups, but I started feeling, at some point, that I was hooked into them, that I would never cope without them. But, I actually needed a lot more; I needed a socio-political analysis. Finally, I went back to school when I was 31. I'm certainly not saying that university was the site of my empowerment by *any* stretch of the imagination, but it did meet the societal expectations of credentials which assisted me in some ways. University did

give me some analysis and exposure to information and writings. As well, I was going to

university at the same time that I was getting more involved in social activism. This activism, in

turn, offered me the opportunity to critique university.

It took me a long time to be able to give voice to my experiences. It *still* is hard. What

really has assisted me is modelling from others. Seeing others give voice to stuff, putting ideas

together and then feeling the confidence to say or write them. People naming their experiences

and also naming the world, you know, homophobia, racism, all those things. How these things

exist and how they affect different groups of people. I think that's been the *biggest* source of my

own consciousness-raising. I remember watching some documentary or news program on

television when I was a young teen. There was a sociologist discussing an analysis on something.

I remember looking at that person, thinking, *I want to do that*! I was quite young to be having

these grand thoughts about social analysis of the world. I'm not sure if that's a personality thing

or if it was because I was in an environment that was incredibly racist and violent and I needed to

have power. I needed to feel like I could have some understanding of the world. I yearned to

give voice to what I saw as being wrong.

I can't say there have been *specific* moments of consciousness-raising. It feels more like

a *long* thread of experiences. There *have* been huge experiences though that have had a lot of

impact on me in terms of feeling powerful. Those experiences then fed my ability to pursue

challenging situations and to take risks. This then fed my consciousness-raising. For example, in

'91 I attended an international ecumenical conference in Brazil which was dealing with human

rights (even though I'm not a Christian). In a very spontaneous moment, I outed myself in front

of 500 people. I hadn't planned on doing it, but somebody had stood up and denounced

homosexuality. I was *so* angry. When there's an ethical question, I won't stay silent. I was

shocked at the level of ignorance. So, it raised my consciousness about the level of oppression

among all these supposedly loving Christian people. I was also shocked afterward by how many

people came up to me and thanked me. I hadn't realized there were so many gay and lesbian

people there who were not out. This was also consciousness-raising. They privately took me aside and explained how oppressive it was for them in their church group to be out. It had a powerful impact on me. The other thing that surprised me was that they were seeing *my* action and measuring it against their own voice. They saw *me* as somehow more powerful and stronger than them. But, in 1991, I don't know if I would have done that in Vancouver among people I knew. I said to them, well, I don't live in your environment. I don't have to go back home with any of these people.

Something I've witnessed over and over and over again, and that I continue to feel *very*, *very*, frustrated with is the lack of confidence people feel to speak their mind. The amount of fear people have. Or just apathy. It really amazes me. Even within the activist community. I have often seen people afraid of speaking out or being active for social change because they felt they didn't have a good enough or complete enough analysis. There also are certain social activist rules and high expectations in terms of contribution of time. We set up these barriers that can be very intimidating and overwhelming. Oppressive really. I think people need a place where they can just be witnesses and observe and learn. That was one of the big things for me. In my mind, I can see women from my past. Women who have just shown their strength to me, and to others, by their actions and their words and their analyses, with no expectation from me. Just letting me be this quiet timid young woman, watching and listening and learning, until I develop enough strength to have my own voice. What I've learned over the years is that it's *okay* to not have all the answers. We still must continue to act, and not fear risking. It is only when we risk and make our thoughts known that we're going to be able to find connections and support from others.

When I observe people being fearful and apathetic, my desire is fuelled to pick apart the environments that we live in. And this sets me up to expand my own consciousness. I know the silence and apathy is not about people as individuals. It's the situations that we live in today that really oppress people's voice and we just continue to go on with the status quo. We all get up and have a coffee and read the paper and watch the news. And we accept that news as the news!

Then we all talk about it the next day at work. It's just so mundane. But it's not really the news. *This* [motions towards tape recorder] is the news!

From my experience facilitating groups on anti-oppression, I have no illusion that everybody who is exposed to a critical analysis of the world will go right out and work for social change. That's just not going to happen. And if they're coming from a place of privilege, I think that in order to cope, they gravitate towards those privileges even more. Why would they want to look at classism and racism and homophobia? It doesn't affect *them*? They just look at those aboriginal people working against racism, or those people in the downtown eastside fighting for housing and think, there's actually something a little bit wrong with them because they're poor and they don't have housing. They have alcohol and drug addictions. There's just something maybe wrong with those people and that is why they end up there. I think that is what people think, rather than seeing the systemic forces that create such poverty. I suppose if I had never been exposed to alternative analyses I would be more apathetic myself.

For me, spiritual development has been an important part of my consciousness-raising. Being politically or socially active is not separate from my spiritual life. I don't generally talk about it though. When I *have* given voice to spiritual development, it's been pooh poohed. I've felt judged. I haven't really figured out how to give voice to that yet. I find that in the women's movement, women don't talk about their spiritual life too much. It is felt that if they're going to pursue one in depth, it's at the cost of the other. It's seen as an individualistic act. But, for me, it is a source of strength. So, is my goal, through that source of strength, just to raise my self-esteem so that I can read the Sun in a better way in the morning and feel better when I get up in the morning and have my coffee and go to work? Or is it to create greater change? Is my spiritual development completely individualized? Or is it that *plus* being connected to the whole. I believe it's both.

Any analysis that I've developed about the world has helped me to understand myself in the world, the bigger connections. When I was in my 20's, my journey was very self-focused. I

was more prone to self-analyze. You see those two storage boxes over there? They're *full* of journals. I still think at times it's important to look inside, but I don't do it so individualistically now. I don't feel the need to because I have a wider understanding. If my self-esteem is suffering or I'm doubting myself, not feeling comfortable in any part of my identity, one of the first questions I ask myself now, in terms of my psychological health and my state of being, is, "What's been *constructed* in order for me to feel this way about myself?" That generally is *the* question that helps me get through anything. I come out on the other side with a good understanding of how it all worked and why *I* as an individual might be feeling the way I am. I'm much, much, much less judgmental about my feelings and my thoughts and my own personal process. It's more of an acceptance of who I am.

And this understanding of the social context makes me more motivated to create change. For example, I've been quite aware of a lot of homophobia within the group that I facilitate in my work. At first, I was really shocked by it. But I just sort of sat back and thought, people are more willing to talk about racism than they are about sexual identity. And I thought of Native youth who are two-spirited, who are lesbian and gay. It's one of the highest suicide groups. They can go home and talk about being called something racist at school, being picked on because they're aboriginal. But, I don't feel confident that they can have the safety to go home and talk about being lesbian or gay ... and be supported. So, I was aware of feeling quite impacted by the homophobia I was experiencing. But rather than think, oh I have to do something for myself to get out of this feeling, I just felt the need to go out there in the world and create more change. Instead of it being a cause to run off to therapy, it was a motivator to direct my energy down the path of educating people about their homophobia.

I've personally benefited more from a sociological understanding than any psychological one. I think that the field of psychology needs to embrace a political-sociological perspective. It just can't exist in a vacuum the way it does. I suppose that in those really deep emergent places of pain when people are just *starting* a therapeutic process and have lots of stuff coming out, it may

not be the time to be looking at a critical analysis of the world. But, it is still important to name what's happening in some small way so that the person's situation isn't seen in a vacuum. I see the role of a psychologist as being a witness to people's pain, to their process. But they could be so much more if they could contribute to a political-sociological understanding.

Consciousness-raising has definitely helped me to externalize my oppression. Without consciousness-raising, maybe I would have committed suicide. I don't know. But I do have to admit that sometimes I wish I *wasn't* aware. I think as some people become aware, they get frightened or overwhelmed by the *crap* that they actually live with that they had *no* idea about. I see that a lot. Their eyes become like little deers, like, "Oh my god! You're kidding!" There's denial, "No. No. It's not that bad." It can be overwhelming and people have to do what they have to do to cope. For me, it's tiring sometimes to be aware and thinking about and naming racism and classism and homophobia. In some ways, it's made it harder. The more I become aware of oppression, the more I attempt to be in places where either it's *not* there, or it's there in a way that people are conscious of it and actively working on it. I find those places getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Often I don't feel like I fit in a lot of places. So, from that perspective, it becomes really lonely. I get let down. If I'm not aware of how much homophobia there is, then I can walk around in the world and not feel it so much. Sometimes I look at people and think, "Wow! They're just getting up and having a coffee, reading the Sun, going about their day, making sure their purse has Kleenex and gum and a pen and their shopping list for the day and their makeup and they go to Safeway after work and they come home and watch ER and they go to *bed!*" [laughs] *I* do those things too, but I think I do them differently than the mainstream. What I mean is that I have a critical eye throughout my day that I don't hear in the general population.

So, it's a matter of trying to just navigate through life without letting it bring me down, and focusing on where can I contribute? It comes back to that individual part in terms of working for the greater good. In the work that I do, it's in part working for the greater good, but also, if I

can touch someone else in the interaction that I have with them, then I know that those little vignettes in my life have been really impactful. I can remember the women. I can remember situations where women have given voice to something and I've witnessed it. And I've been blown away. And I know that some women are blown away by me now. And so on and on. Big rallies are important. But, so is that one-to-one witnessing of another's experiences. I guess that's where I find meaning ... in those heart to heart kind of exchanges. I think I've been gifted with a way of words, not just in using words to describe and explain things, but also to support others in figuring it out for themselves as well. I find incredible meaning in that. I *love* it. I really, really love that. So, if I can participate in some way, if I can be a participant in that kind of consciousness-raising with others and for others, then, even though it may not change the world, I can go home at the end of the day feeling pretty fulfilled. Consciousness-raising can be a mixed blessing, but overall, I would have to say it has given me a *great* quality of life.

Lynn's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

Growing up in my family, I didn't really feel gender playing out as an oppression. My parents had quite an egalitarian relationship. My mother was a strong feminist and my father was very involved in the civil rights movement in the States. My home was very respectful and I always felt valued. Mostly my consciousness-raising has made me aware that, more often than not, I'm actually in a position of power in terms of my class and my race. Still, there are countless ways, I'm sure, that I've experienced sexism. At some point, there was a growing awareness that there would be certain jobs not available to me; that the work I want to do isn't valued. You don't get money for grassroots activism. [laughs] Then, there is the expectation of not being single, of having a family. Where it probably hits the closest to home for me would be around body image. But, mostly it's been an awareness of my privilege.

One of my memorable moments of consciousness-raising was in my second year of university in a women's studies class. It was the first time I'd ever done rounds, with a check in

and check out. That was my first real awareness of the knowledge that women were bringing in themselves. The professor obviously brought in a lot, but it was the knowledge that was generated among the women that really struck me. It was definitely a realization about women's history. My most meaningful consciousness-raising experience so far was another women's studies course on feminist theory from women of colour. It was about power imbalances and how certain people are privileged and certain people are not and how things are all connected and work intricately to maintain these systems. I learned a lot about unlearning privilege and identifying the ways in which being white placed me in a position of power. It felt like there was a curtain and I wasn't allowed to look behind it. It was there to distract me, to help me ignore colonialism and our whole history of oppression in Canada. It was a way of *not* knowing about Native people of Canada, of *not* knowing about immigrants. When I started reading and talking with people, it felt like something had lifted. But, it was something I had to struggle against. I still feel like I never have the words to describe it. And I think that is partially because that's how the system works. It puts you in a position of pretending that your way of seeing and thinking is the only way. So, it is a struggle to begin to think about these things even though everything in your life is encouraging you to *not* think about it. It's a struggle to begin to *not* be quiet, and to actively become a good ally.

A recent example of this kind of consciousness-raising for me was in my work with immigrant women, newcomers to Canada. I had a call from a pregnant woman who could not get medical coverage until January. But, she was due in November. So I called MSP because I couldn't believe that. Of *course* they've got to cover it. No, I was told, she's not a Canadian citizen. So I phoned insurance companies. No, it's a pre-existing condition. Then I called the hospital so I could at least let her know how much she's looking at. $2,000 a day for mothers! Plus $330 for the baby and doctor's fees and anaesthesiologist. And that's for *uncomplicated* pregnancies. "Well, the baby's going to be covered isn't it?" I said. "It's a Canadian citizen. It's born in Canada!" "It depends on whether the father is Canadian". I couldn't believe it. In an

instant, I realized how huge those barriers are. I felt so angry. I mean, mad at the system that puts people in that position. But also mad that I didn't know. How is it possible that I didn't *know* that? And yet, of *course*. I'm white, I'm heterosexual, so a lot of my own values and reality easily fit in with mainstream ideology. So for me, it's about acknowledging that *my* reality is not everyone else's. I feel so angry that I don't know the history, you know, about head taxes and the whole history of immigration to Canada, exploitation of Chinese labourers and now of domestic workers. About people coming to Canada with such high expectations and qualifications and university degrees and what do we do? We create a system where people are forced to take care of our children. Nobody mentions how globalization and capitalism create these cheap labour markets. These aren't things that we're being taught or that are focused on in the media.

Consciousness-raising helps me stay focused and reminds me that it's *okay* that I feel so mad. It's about wanting to change, and that's a good thing. But it can also be quite a disturbing process. Something I've been struggling with recently is the idea that if you get an education eventually everything will work out, that it will open up doors for you. And that nearly everyone can always go to school and that can only be a good thing. That's a very white, middle-class value, you know, that Christian sort of work hard, get ahead ideology. Now I'm learning that, no, education can be just soul destroying for a lot of people. And financially not viable. Then there is the issue of newcomers being stripped of their credentials when they come to Canada. Part of what I'm struggling with now is whether to go back to school. Taking women's studies really made me want to just get out into the community. So I have to decide if I'm willing to give up on the community. It's been quite hard to let go of the idea of going back to school because I love academia. I *love* being a student. School was always where I've been an expert. I fit in. I fit in completely. It's what I love.

So, consciousness-raising can definitely shift you, especially when you're coming from a position of privilege. You have to let go of that idea that you're a nice person. I *want* to be a

good feminist. I *want* to think I'm great. But, actually, there's nothing pretty about power. The more I have my consciousness raised, the more I realize that to not have to think about issues is a luxury. If you're experiencing oppression, you have to think about it all the time. So for me, it's a way to deal with guilt and shame around my privilege. I need to get out and do stuff, to speak out and not hide behind the fear of saying something wrong. That's something I'm still struggling with. It disturbs me that if somebody's going to bring up racism, it'll be the woman of colour. Yet, it's obviously less risky for me to do the challenging ... if I could only get past the guilt and the fear.

At work, I hear many stories of people's experiences, stories that are quite traumatizing, disturbing. One of the ways I've found to deal with that is to go and get my consciousness raised about it. I have a real need to find the theory behind it. It's a way of making sense, making sense of the crisis, the chaos, to find some kind of meaning, as opposed to, why are horrible things happening to these people? Because I know that it's not retribution. The dominant model says that you must have done something bad. But no one deserves to have their children killed in front of them. There's so much painful, horrible stuff. So, even if the reason this is happening is because that's what capitalism does, at least it's some kind of framework that rings true. And that really takes away the apathy. I think once you've had that consciousness raised, you can fight for change. For me, it's a way of being at peace with the world. I know that at least I'm *doing* something.

Although consciousness-raising can be a disturbing process, it is also very empowering to be able to recognize the oppressive systems at work. For example, at work, we have not been getting core funding lately. A lot of us have been wondering, "What we are doing wrong?" Then I went to the World March of Women and the woman from NAC said, "No. This is part of a systemic cutting of funding on behalf of the federal govt to undermine the political will or the political space of feminist organizations." I immediately thought *Yeah*! This is the struggle that *all* women's organizations are going through. It has nothing to do with personal *skill* at raising

money. The reason we're all feeling burnt out is because we're not getting paid enough and there's not enough people to do this work and the work's not *valued*. So, that's definitely made it easier to get through when you put it in that wider context.

I think that one of the effects of *not* having your consciousness raised is that you think it's all an individual thing. The dominant thought that keeps on ticking is that if you work hard, you'll get ahead. If you're nice to people, especially women, if you're nice to everybody, then you'll have a good life. And that's just not true. People lose jobs because of restructuring and women get into relationships with abusive boyfriends. At least if you know the system's there, you know that you're not going crazy. I think it must be a huge psychological burden, incredibly tormenting, to be knowing in your heart of hearts that what everything is telling you is wrong, but not having anyone validate that. Consciousness-raising has to be an immense source of validation. It is giving words to the feeling you already had.

The field of psychology is *so* individualistic, so inward looking. Sure, that's part of it, but a lot of reasons why we feel the way we feel is because of the social context, because of systems of power which are oppressive. I think psychological well-being is connected directly to where you are within the world, which is much more global than just your family. Like eating disorders, for example. It *can't* be just about family. You need to look at the society that sexualizes women and [sigh] little girls. Your family is informed by the social context. And those dynamics are going to play out in the therapy room as well. There needs to be an awareness of power imbalances. For example, assertiveness tools just aren't going work in certain situations. Talking back to your employer, or "paraphrasing" him, may just be too risky. I love the popular education model which relies on women's own knowledge. Women have the answers in themselves and can learn from each other.

Consciousness-raising has definitely affected my psychological health. I'm *so* much stronger. I feel very whole as a person. I think a lot of that is due to just talking to other women, learning from different people's experiences. The ability to pull yourself out of an "individual"

situation and see the bigger context, I think, increases your self-esteem. I was at work today and feeling vulnerable and anxious. One of our consultants had been giving me instructions and I was feeling flustered and angry because I just couldn't get it all done. But then I thought, no, you know what's going on here is that she's taking advantage of me because I'm younger. And I'm not asserting myself *because* of that. That's how ageism works. But once I realized that, I decided I'm not going to feel upset anymore. And I told her I wasn't going to do the work. So, I think that realization is a way of distancing yourself from a lot of emotional turmoil. It gives you back control too, in a sort of ironic way. I might not have any control over it, but at least I don't have to feel bad.

My consciousness-raising around gender and body image has also been very empowering. It makes me feel like it's okay that I don't like my body. It has been much more of a feeling of belonging and self-acceptance, building up self-esteem. When I was a teenager, I didn't really see myself as sensual or sexual. My response to men and macho boys was to become more androgynous. I felt vulnerable in high school. I had really horrible, competitive girlfriends. My escape was through school. I was the brainy girl. I wasn't very active. I didn't locate who Lynn was in my *body*; it was all intellectual. I didn't express that as an eating disorder or anything like that. It was more of a discomfort.

It was a process throughout my whole undergraduate program. Mostly it was from taking women's studies classes, and also talking with women, and friends, finally making women friends who really thought about that. I also did a lot of poetry writing. Gradually, I started feeling that it was possible to be sexy and loved and feminist at the same time. That was really part of finding power, feeling really good about being a woman and feeling like it was possible to reclaim that. To be sexual, but not *have* to be.

Right now I live in a house with four other women. Two are quite heavily involved in the environmental movement and the women's movement. Our daily interactions include talks about things like body image. This past year we've been into just dyeing our hair different

colours and wearing different clothes and going to the gym. It seems so girly, not very feminist. But I think for all of us, it's a reclaiming of identity, of space. We all went through high school where the only role that was available to you was to be this overtly sexualized teenager. Instead, not wanting to do that, there was a sort of swinging the other way and becoming almost completely androgynous. So for me, it's been a way of reclaiming my body as a good thing, looking good and not hiding. Not *hiding*. So if I want to go out dancing and wear red or wear tight clothes, then I'll do that.

Consciousness-raising has taught me to really value my female friends. They're a huge source of support. It has also made me a lot more critical about whom I want as a partner. I don't want to have to ever explain feminism to a partner ever again. When I was taking the women's studies course I mentioned earlier, I was doing a lot of thinking about what is was to be white and what my privilege was and about relationships with women of colour. The guy I was with was also one of the supervisors at work. We worked with a woman of colour who had been labelled the trouble maker. We kept fighting about what she was doing. He really believed she was just stirring trouble up. He felt that as long as you are individually good and individually fair in your interactions with people, then nobody should be complaining. But, she was complaining about systemic stuff, about how we didn't have any representation of Asian people even though most of the people using our services were from South East Asia! I said, No! She has every right to complain. It became very clear to me that he was not going to budge on his values. He found it okay for me to say *I* should be empowered as a woman. But it was not okay for me to say that *he* should have some privilege to give up. What I was simultaneously trying to work out for myself was that *I* had privilege as a white person that I should start giving up. That was our breaking point, my realizing that my life was never going to match his, even though we loved each other. He wanted to achieve within the mainstream, get a house, get a dog, have a partner. Had I not had those consciousness-raising experiences at university, I could have much more easily fallen

into staying in that relationship. Certainly I would have felt less comfortable being single then. I really wanted a sense of belonging. But, I think I would have been really unhappy.

So, the fallout of consciousness-raising is, perhaps, being single. It has seemed for a while that maybe I'll live my whole life as a single person. Maybe I'm not going to get married. I'm not going to have a life-long partner. On good days, I feel okay about that. On bad, well, sometimes it can be quite painful. But, consciousness-raising has also opened up possibilities of alternative ways of living. A couple of years ago, I went to Philadelphia to shadow a lawyer friend of my Dad's. She was an amazing woman. She was 60 at the time. She had started off as a nurse and then had done social work and then became a lawyer. She was going tack to university to do something on anti-racism. She was *single*. And she was *happy*! I mean really happy. I loved how she meditated in the mornings. That was when I really thought, yeah, okay, maybe I'll just live my life as *me*, alone. My sister is a huge role model as well. She's 36 and has been single for a long time. She travels a lot and has a lot of different friends. If I can look back on my life and say I have some really good female friends and community, I think I'll be happy.

Right now I realize that my entire life is surrounded with women. I work with *all* women. I live with women and it's great because we're all single. It kind of begs the question then, of whether I should not be looking at, am I *really* straight? I mean, if you *love* women and you love working with women, and you . . . *adore* them, then why am I not just entering into relationships with women? So, I've thought about it and I still feel straight. I've come to the conclusion that I *do* like men. I like men, but I want them to have all the attributes of feminists. I'm doomed! Perhaps this is one area where my consciousness needs to be raised right now, around issues of sexuality.

My consciousness-raising has made me really want to work in either a women's organization or with newcomers or against racism and globalization. It's strengthened my commitment to working within grassroots activism. It's really motivated me to action, to fighting against globalization and patriarchy, to incorporate anti-racism advocacy into my life. I want to

start a group with white women talking about their racism. It's really given me a huge passion. Although I'm still learning and trying to sort things out, it's the one thing that I feel really good about. I really think that consciousness-raising is the best thing that women can do. It can *only* empower you to find that depth of knowledge that's within you. It activates you to become a full participant in your life, and in the world that's around you. It opens up so many alternatives and possibilities for how you live your life. It's a process of empowerment and learning. If there's a truth out there, it's from women getting together and talking and acting. I was 17 when I went to university. And for the first time I was surrounded by strong women and alternative ways of being. How can you *not* be empowered by that? I feel so blessed. It has given me a real sense of well-being in being a woman. For all of the frustrations of going through consciousness-raising, I wouldn't give it up for anything.

Marilyn's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

I've experienced oppression on at least three levels in my life. Overall, number one has to do with the fact that I'm a woman. That's been continuous since birth, no doubt, although I suppose I wasn't aware of it then. Later, I experienced oppression as a worker. And since then, I have experienced *very* distinct oppression as a woman with a disability. Then, of course, there's the combination. It's bad enough not having credibility and power and voice when you're a feminist. But, try being a feminist in a *wheelchair!*

For example, getting into a taxi. It would be bad enough to be a woman who walks and jumps in and sits down in a taxi. You've probably had the same experience with taxi drivers where they don't do what you want them to do. They don't take the route you ask them to take. Sometimes you have to make quite a big deal out of it. But, when you use a wheelchair, it gets worse. There you are strapped down in the back of the cab. They *ignore* you. It's as though they're thinking, *I don't have to pay any attention to you. You don't know anything. And I'm going to do it* my *way.* So, you think about every other aspect of your life where there are people

making decisions about things that affect you that you ought to have some kind of control over. But you tend to get ignored sometimes. Or ... challenged. Always challenged. It drives me crazy, actually. And it happens over and over and over, every day. I guess it tends to make me ... a little bit more snappish sometimes.

But I know you have to give people a chance. I know that, by and large, people are really quite wonderful. Even if in that niceness they're being condescending and patronizing. It's a really hard place to feel as though you're giving yourself the respect and the credit you know you deserve, while at the same time, needing things more than most people do because of the disability. Sometimes when I want to get through a door and it's wet and cold, *I don't care* who opens the door. They could be helping the "little woman" as much as they want, *I don't care*. I just want to get in out of the rain and through the heavy door. But, there are other times when I don't want to accept that. It's difficult to learn how to negotiate or navigate through all that stuff, and remain a fairly well-balanced and centred and happy individual. Occasionally I do. And occasionally I don't. [laughs]

Fortunately, I think I have tended, over my life, not to internalize a lot of oppression. I mean, I've sort of known all along that I'm just as good as anybody else. And that's a pretty good place to start from. Whether you've a feminist or a trade unionist or you have a disability. Maybe you can't walk. Maybe you have breasts. Maybe you believe in workers' rights. But, by god, you're just as good as they are. Perhaps you're even better. [chuckles] I don't mean to say that my consciousness has never needed raising, but I've always had a fairly strong sense that I'm as good as anybody else. I may not be perfect, but I know I'm okay.

Interestingly enough, that came from my Dad. Since my Mom died when I was six, Daddy was the main influence in my life for a long time. He was a pretty swell guy. I got from him a sense of confidence and self-knowledge. Also, my class analysis. I mean they just have more money. They're not any *better* than me. They just have more *money* (i.e., power). Where did they get it from anyway? That led then to a labour perspective. It didn't take anything for me

to understand that workers deserve better. Of *course* they deserve better – who does all the work, anyway? And it wasn't a big stretch for me to understand that rich people didn't necessarily deserve to be that rich. That certainly translated into knowing that you may be from a different place and have a different coloured skin and eat different food, but, hey, the food's yummy. You're no better or worse. People are pretty much people. It's how you behave in the world that makes you a better person. So, I don't think I've internalized a lot of oppression.

That doesn't mean to say that when I first got my wheelchair it wasn't difficult to feel as though I was the same person I always was. That was when things really changed. Even before the wheelchair. I used a cane for about a year. I can remember feeling *crazy*, a little bit nuts because I didn't think I knew who I was anymore. I wasn't who I used to be. I went to see somebody. That only lasted a couple of sessions because I realized that she wasn't likely going to help me. What *really* helped me was one comment from a friend. I can still remember it. We were going for lunch somewhere way out east on Hastings. I was using my cane as we crossed the street and I felt like … well, you know, Hastings is a pretty busy street and I don't think we were crossing at a light. I felt compelled to go *faster* to just get across the street. I felt so … I guess, self-consciousness. And *stupid*. Or something. I said to my friend, "I feel really dumb. Do you feel embarrassed being with me with this cane?" And he kind of *looked* at me and said, "What are you talking about? *Of course not.* Don't be so stupid." [laughs] He thought that was the stupidist thing I'd ever said. And as my honours supervisor, he'd heard me say some stupid things. But that was the best thing I could have heard. And it was good that it happened so early on. Just that *one* comment from him did *way* more than seeing a professional for a couple of sessions. It was a great moment of consciousness-raising.

As women, our self-identity is so wrapped up in how we look. This is not a big surprise. You know, *I'm too fat; I'm too short' my hair's too fine*. And on and on it goes. Well, then you take all of that stuff and you sit it in a wheelchair, or put it together with a cane, or whatever else

it might be that affects the way you present yourself to the world. And it certainly has an effect

on your confidence and how you relate to the world.

That's why it would be so nice to have some good feminist counsellors out there. There

are a lot of people who didn't have a friend say, "Don't be so stupid." I've been working

nationally around woman and disabilities and in my contact with women across the country, what

comes up quite often is that women want to find not only a good counsellor to talk to, but a

counsellor who understands about disability, and understands about feminism, and about the

intersection of those two aspects of our lives. It's been 20 years since I started sitting down – *all*

the time. 20 years worth of dealing with all the stuff that we've been talking about. There have

been times I would have appreciated some help. One of the hardest things I've *ever* experienced

was coming off the medication that controlled my spasticity. I finally found a doctor who got rid

of my spasms, so I just stopped taking the medication. *Well*, nobody told me about the

withdrawal symptoms. Depression was a huge one. I never went to see anybody though because

I don't think they'd have been very helpful. It's a bad situation because there aren't any good

women counsellors out there. And few people who enter the profession have experience with

disabilities.

It's a fairly specific place that *nobody*, from a professional counselling point of view,

knows anything about. When I say counselling, I'm including psychiatrists, psychologists, the

mental health professionals. They don't get it. They don't understand the analysis. They're not

feminists. There just isn't anybody. If you look at the statistics, post-secondary education is

pretty darn limited to people with disabilities in general. So, there has to be more attention paid

to the kind of access that is available to women with disabilities to enter any profession. There

needs to be more of us in all of the professions. There needs to be more women who have a

feminist analysis. And there needs to be more feminists with disabilities.

There also needs to be more educational information for people going through their

training. I am sometimes asked to speak to classes of nurses. I spoke once to a kinesis class of

jocks but I've never been invited to speak to a bunch of training psychiatrists. That may come and it *should* come. It needs to happen. I'm sure the same thing can be said about issues such as race. Little by little, we've got to start making changes in consciousness, to influence even just the odd person to think about these issues.

Another very specific moment of consciousness-raising for me was about three years into my disability experience. Prior to that, I'd been working in various communities: the women's movement, the labour movement, the far left. All of a sudden, all of those worlds became inaccessible to me. They were all *upstairs*. Suddenly, I couldn't participate. In 1983, with the Social Credit government ripping the guts out of social services in this province, there was a big rally at Empire Stadium called by the labour movement. The place was crammed with over 50,000 people. Everybody was pissed off. It was a very exciting moment. At one point, there was a band, the fire-fighters' band. *Well,* those fire-fighters are, almost without exception, *really* cute. [laughs] I'm sure every woman in the stands was thinking the same thing. As they went around the oval, every section would quiet down and then they'd go by and it would be noisy again. When they stopped, the noise level went up again. And then things started happening on the stage. The first or maybe second person to speak was a man named Rick Watson. He had pretty severe cerebral palsy, a lot of spasms, and his voice was *really* hard to understand. So, there he was, speaking on a stage to over 50,000 people. Before long, you could have heard a *pin drop*. Everybody was paying attention. He was articulating a clear disability rights perspective. His analysis was fabulous, about how the Socred government is hurting us. *We rely on a lot of services that have just been taken away. They had no right to do this. What about our rights? What about our worth as human beings?* And I remember feeling ... *proud*. It was a wonderful moment. A real epiphany. Now, he and I may have been the only two people in wheelchairs there, but statistically, 16.8% of Canadians have disabilities. Not all physical disabilities, so who knows how many people in the audience somehow or another had disabilities. That was a

moment of consciousness-raising, by golly. That was really big. It was a wonderful moment. It just felt really good to have a reason to feel ... *validated. Proud. Strong.*

It wasn't just Rick and what he said, although it was certainly that. It wasn't just the cute fire-fighters. It was the fact that the place was just jammed, crowded. 50,000 people! And everybody was there for the same reason. It was a very wonderful feeling of solidarity. We were *all* there together to oppose the kind of discrimination that had come down from the Socred government. Rick had been so articulate and so *brave*, and strong, and courageous to just be there. I don't even know how he got onto the stage. They must have carried him up. And there he was with his huge speech impairment addressing 50,000 people. I thought, if *he* can do that, well by golly, I should be able to do *something*. It was wonderful. I felt that was enough to carry my through *anything*.

So, the analysis just gets deeper and stronger. What I took from my early life was that *nobody should be able to jerk anybody around.* Then, *women are just as good as men.* Then you put that together with *workers do all the work and deserve to have good working conditions, not to mention fair wages* and so on. And women workers, especially. As you put all that together, you're starting to get stronger and deeper and clearer. Then to that, it's not such a big stretch really to add disability.

Another experience that helped me to get very, very clear about the labour angle, was back in 1980. I was on my union's negotiating committee. We had a 6 week strike and negotiated for 18 months, fighting for equal pay for work of equal value. Nobody had *heard* of equal pay for work of equal value. They weren't even too sure about equal pay for equal work. It was *really* hard because we had no power. They had all the power and they just kept saying, no. "*No!* Under no circumstances. We won't move an inch, not one inch." We were so frustrated. It was just five women and we'd never done it before. At a certain point, rather than burst into tears, we used to send notes back and forth to each other. We'd nod wisely. Or else

laugh. Anything. It didn't matter. Just something to kind of shake 'em up a little. Or we'd just imagine them all without any clothes. It helped when there was nothing else.

Sometimes it's so fucking hard. But, I think all these experiences have made me stronger ... about who I am and what my role is in the world. Whether I undertake it at all times and whether I do it successfully is a whole other story. But, I'm pretty clear about what the job is and I take it on as much as I can. Now, that doesn't mean to say that I don't still think of myself as being too fat and too short and all that stuff. And let's not talk about sexuality from a disability point. However, I think all in all, as a person, I'm alright. When I was younger, I used to think that things would get less complicated and easier. I can almost remember the day when I realized that that was not true and it was never going to be true. It was a terrible day. However, I've since realized that we have more skills and more tools to deal with things as we get older. And I wouldn't want to be 20 again! So, it's not as bleak as I first thought. I'm definitely stronger. Having an awareness absolutely has helped me to not internalize oppression. My *body's* fucked, but I think my head's okay.

I shudder to think what it would be like to not have had these experiences and awareness. It's a scary thought. I can't imagine. I suppose I'd be stuck in a leaky condo in Surrey with four children and a piggo husband. Sometimes I feel very lucky on all sorts of levels. I feel lucky for having had a bit of a head start back in the old days. I'm talking about the 70's mostly, when consciousness-raising was something that women did. I never did any of that, partly because I didn't feel the need in my life. I always knew that it wasn't my fault, that I was good enough, smart enough, hard working enough, or more! That always felt to me something of a privilege, I guess, relative to women who *hadn't* got there, who were still blaming themselves, or not able to appreciate the real causes of their oppression, you know, patriarchy, capitalism, racism, ableism, all that stuff. There are a lot of women who still aren't even there yet. They have to stay in abusive relationships. They have to stay in bad jobs.

I think I have very high standards because my Dad was a wonderful man. So, I'm not willing to put up with anything less, really. The downside may be being partnerless. Not being prepared to lower my standards causes more loneliness perhaps. It causes you to perhaps take a harder path and therefore have more obstacles, more difficulties, more things to overcome. There are little places along the way where you think, Oh, wouldn't it be nice if *he* could do that, or if there was somebody here to blah, blah, blah. But, I don't think that even holds a candle to what it would be like to be an unaware and unliberated, to use an old fashioned kind of word, woman in this society. So, it's not all bad. It depends on how you define bad. Do I *want* to be in a ... stupid relationship? Well, no. So, is it bad that I have high standards around men? I don't think so. Once again, it reinforces my understanding that patriarchy is *wrong*. Because what makes us *believe* that that's ideal and that anything less than that is not good enough? These kinds of attitudes surround us. Patriarchy and capitalism can pretty much be blamed for everything.

I think that the more we learn about each other and about the parts of our lives that require struggle to deal with and the more we share that with each other, the better it is for all of us. The greater understanding we have, the more *power* we will acquire and the more control we can have over our lives. It's the old solidarity is strength, really. You know, let's do it together and do it as clearly and as comprehensively and as *inclusively* as we can. We'll all be better for it. The benefits of having a raised consciousness are practically ... incalculable. Every possible aspect of your life *could* be improved, *could* be made richer, *could* be made easier. It *could* be made happier. If we work together, we can make things happen. And that can be on an individual level or on a group level. It doesn't matter. Just start talking to other women. And being open. Be open to learning something. It's always a good thing to learn something. The odds are pretty big and they're stacked against us. Sometimes you don't get to feel very powerful or very in control of your life. But, you can get a little bit of a sense of that if you take action in concert with others, like-minded others. Then the action is more likely to be efficacious. It comes down to some pretty basic stuff, really. Goodness and ... ethics and ... happiness.

Amanda's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

It's different growing up in Chile. You're born into a society where you are always aware of class issues, political issues. It's not that you have much choice. It's always, always, always there. I think you start fairly early on in life, being aware of what class you were born into, the neighbourhood where you live, the jobs your parents have. Obviously, I didn't belong to the upper class. I remember I wanted to change my last name when I was a kid. It was such a middle class, middle of the road, lower middle class last name. I wanted to be Undurraga, like the wine. They had money. At school, I was aware there were classmates who had more money and I was one who had less money. You could identify rich people immediately by their behaviour, their last name, their clothes. You're always aware of the situation and you're ashamed of who you are for not being rich. So, you choose your social circles according to class because you know very early on in life you're not going to be accepted in upper class circles, unless you happen to marry into one. The system is designed so that it perpetuates the status quo. If you want to study medicine or law, you can't because it is really expensive. A worker kid is not going to go into medicine.

When I was about 8 or 9, I had a little friend who lived across the street. She was the daughter of a factory caretaker. She would always prefer to play in our house, so one day I just insisted that I wanted to see her house. When I went there, of course, I realized why she didn't want to show me. The whole family lived in just one room, Mom and Dad and the three children. There were only two beds, one where Mom and Dad slept, and one for the kids. One room, with a dirt floor! What really shocked me was the fact that they didn't have a floor. Then I realized why she was always so hungry. She would come to my place and eat and eat and eat. These things were just so present. Kids are always asking, "What does your father do?" because that places people in different categories. My father was an accountant. And because my Mom had a profession, that put me in a higher status.

The political stuff came later on, in the 70s. I was still fairly young, but I knew the difference between the left and the right wing parties. You just learn, from listening to conversations or TV or radio. The political situation was the most important thing in the country. I had kind of distorted ideas, but still I was very aware of poverty. I was aware of people having less than I did and also people having more, *way* more, exploiting people. It was so sad when the father of two of my classmates died. He used to sell things on the street and so the family was left with no money. Forget about any kind of welfare or social system. So, you're aware. Not that I was in a position, being so young, to do anything about it. But, at least I knew.

It was when I went to university that I became more aware of the political stuff. It was at the time of the dictatorship, the political oppression. We began to understand how it's so important for the upper classes, the old money people to keep the status quo and why they needed a military. People in shantytowns and people interested in changing the status quo were getting killed. Education was a big thing. My sister was involved in popular education and in literacy programs. Because I loved to read so much, I was shocked that there were adults who didn't know how to read. It's a whole process, gaining more awareness as you grow older.

But one of the things that wasn't a big deal was feminism or women's rights. In Chile, it's different dynamics that go on. Chile is such a collective society; it's more about class and power and oppression. Women's issues are just not a priority because, if you're being oppressed by a dictatorship, they'll kill you equally, whether you're a man or a woman. The common objective was to get rid of Pinochet, so, it would have been a waste of time to worry about who was making coffee. If you were going to help someone who was being followed by the police or who needed to get out of the country, you weren't going to think in terms of women or men. You'd think, "Come to my house." As you become more and more aware, you fine-tune your consciousness. But, for me, it's been a different process. It offends me when feminists here take those issues and analyze them from their very safe, cushiony North American perspective. It's the wrong analysis to be made. Women now are more at a point when they can look at gender

issues in Latin America. But, we'll do it whenever *we're* ready. A bunch of white women coming from the North telling women what to do is like the Spaniards going there and killing people. Don't oppress me more than I have already been oppressed.

So, I came to Canada and all of a sudden I realized, "Oh, wow. How interesting. I'm an immigrant." Having an accent and looking differently. Suddenly, a whole new oppression. You pick it up right away. It's not that I needed any major incident to realize that. It's the way they approach you and they look at you and they say, "What do you mean? Repeat yourself." I had never, *ever* perceived myself as being dark. *Never*. Suddenly, I was a different *race*. About the first or second week I was here, I was walking up and down Robson Street, fascinated. I was looking at clothing in a store and a woman said to me, "Oh, you have a nice tan. You must have been on holidays." She was so ashamed when I told her it was my normal skin colour. It didn't bother me too much. Well, I guess it did. You start feeling different.

I got involved in feminist organizations for a couple of years. And I had some really bad experiences. Really bad, bad, bad. I felt discriminated against because I was heterosexual and I liked men. I found those women *quite* oppressive. They placed me as a "women of colour" and, therefore, "We have to help you. You don't know anything. You're a poor immigrant. We'll give you your voice that *men* have taken away from you." You know, I have a big tongue. I can defend myself. I felt used, definitely used. I was helping *their* agenda. Nobody ever asked me if I wanted to call myself a woman of colour. I was just *given* that identity. I really resent that, you know. What colour are you talking about?

To me, life is not about men or women. That's a North American issue, not mine. I don't want to be part of it. It's *so* divisive. I think it has to do with growing up in a very collective society. If you're going to fight against something, you don't need to divide yourself. I've had wonderful experiences with men. I feel the men in my community are more my allies than my oppressors. If you look at immigrants and refugees, it's not just women who are oppressed. It's men and women and children. For a woman with an accent, from a different

country, it is not a gender issue. Of *course* I experience sexism. But, the boundaries get blurry. Are you going to ask someone, "Are you being racist or sexist?" It's not that I don't see the gender issues. It's just the approach that I'm completely against. We need to work together and listen to each other's experiences. When men hear women's stories, there's a different understanding, instead of just feeling blamed. And we need to listen to men too. So, feminism is not my thing. I can talk about it; I'm aware of it. If it's needed, of course I will raise my voice. But, if I have to choose where to put my energy in terms of advocacy, that would not be it.

Somehow, I instinctively moved toward other Latinos, toward the Chilean community. And I belonged! All of a sudden, it wasn't a class issue. We were upper class, middle, lower class. It just didn't seem to matter where you came from. It was a different type of bonding. In the 80s, there were a lot of refugees coming from Central America. Although we spoke the same language, we were so different. I got really pissed off about the way they were treated and I found myself advocating for a lot of Latinos. That made me feel part of the Latino community and I started developing a Latino identity. I moved between sometimes feeling really Chilean, sometimes really Latino. It depends on the context.

I discovered over the years that I have a lot of power. Once I'd lost the fear of sticking out, which was a matter of survival under the dictatorship, I realized that no one can stop me now. Maybe I speak too much, [laughs] but it's a resource I will always have. As I work with a lot of Latinos, I became aware of police violence. So, we organized ourselves and had conversations with the cops. It was *horrifying.* We were *terrified* of these guys because that brought up a lot of our experiences of repression. I hadn't realized until after I came here that I was dealing with trauma. Dealing with the police, we all re-experienced the trauma. The nightmares about cops coming, the hyper-arousal. Fear blocks you from speaking out. And it blocks you from seeing your potential because you've been scared to death to do things. It's so disempowering. The police know that and they use it to intimidate us. Still I spoke out. I was able to sit at the table

with these cops and scream and shout and say, "You guys are a bunch of racist pigs." Maybe not in those terms, but it had a physical impact on me to be able to say that. It was wonderful.

Another thing that has been empowering for many Chileans has been the solidarity work. When I first came here, the Chilean community was working hard to raise awareness of Canadian society about the violations of human rights in Chile. It was also a way in which people could feel connected and *be* connected. It kept people emotionally safer, emotionally healthier. It kept them alive. I've talked to people who have told me it was what helped them survive exile. They were doing *something*. And it was effective. It *did* create a lot of international awareness and political pressure. Connecting with the Chilean community was so important for many of us.

When I feel the most comfortable is when I'm in a group of Chileans. My friends, music, wine, empanadas. I know I can do or say whatever and they're not going to laugh at me. We're going to laugh together. But then, it just takes one person who doesn't speak Spanish in that room and we all change to English. Boom, I withdraw immediately. Not anymore the same person. We all compromise to make this other person comfortable. And I wonder, is this about internalized oppression? Maybe I should feel comfortable and say, "Well, if you want to hang around with Latinos, *you* learn Spanish." We had to learn English to be in this society. If *we* are critical of Canadian society, people just say, if you don't like it, go back. So, you have to know when to open your mouth, what to say, and be ready for that. This is one of the things that I still find oppressive. It bothers me, but there's not much I can do about it.

There was a time at the beginning, when I first came to Canada, that I wasn't sure whether I was coming or going. I was obsessed with working on my accent and changing it. I just didn't want anybody to know that I had an accent. But, then I realized, that's bullshit. I'm not going to change it. If people don't understand me, I repeat it, and if they still don't, well, go and learn Spanish. There were little things that affected me. But, I can't really look at it as just self-esteem, me, myself and I. It's so linked to the cultural identity. Oh, I had a lot of support. You need that witnessing effect, that cultural validation. It's been a process. A lot of support and

a lot of my own work internally, becoming really comfortable with who I am. My cultural

identity is what makes me strong. And I know that if I'm feeling low, I just know that I need to

connect. I put on my music in Spanish, I dance, I read, and it's like, *whew*! I'm fine. I'm

absolutely fine. At the beginning I remember being upset and frustrated and my self-esteem was

low. I was *exhausted* until I realized it had a lot to do with functioning in English. So, I would

phone my Chilean and Latino friends and say, just talk to me. Okay, I'm fine now. I'm not

crazy. I felt *normal*. It's a safe and sacred place, my community, where I can go and be

normalized, because all of us have had that experience at some point.

And I began to see the advantages of belonging to two different cultures that allows me to

make connections and observations that other people can't. I could see myself as gifted. I have

much more life experience than a lot of people here. It's the same when I go back to Chile. I can

look at things that Chileans don't. I can be part and an observer of two different cultures. So,

there's that awareness. And that has really helped me to deal with the shame and to see it as a

positive thing, the richness of having two cultures. But, the last time I was in Chile, some people

asked me if I was Chilean. It was absolutely painful. They perceive me as being different. So,

it's a new identity, returnados, people who live in exile and go back. A lot of people go back and

find they don't fit into society. Sometimes I feel that I missed out on something. Then, I come

back here and, well, I don't belong as much here either. And I think, where do I truly really

belong? Well, here, yeah, to some extent. Sometimes, some days. Some days I don't feel I

belong at *all*.

Coming here was a shock more than anything. To suddenly find I'm dark, I'm different.

It was hard for a while. But, what I know from my experiences is that in spite of how oppressive

it was, it gave me such a bigger understanding of life. I don't want to be a rich woman in West

Van. I wouldn't change my life for a million dollars. I'm pretty happy with who I am. I've

always had a strong belief in what is right. I think about equality in the world, men and women

and kids alike. People having access to education, to health services, to decent treatment as

people. That's the basis of my experience. That's why I became a counsellor, to help people raise their voices. I work with a lot of immigrants. I'm not much of a traditional counsellor. The field of psychology is all about control and power. It's about *we* know better. *We* know how to teach people. *We* know how to help and solve and cure people. It's slowly changing.

I think counsellors should be advocates. We *should* get involved in the basics first. Before you can get into any emotional issues, you need to first deal with practical issues. That means making phone calls and looking for treatment places or transition homes, or dealing with welfare workers or immigration lawyers, or helping them find a bed. I think that really helps build up trust. *Then* people can focus on whatever is emotional. Otherwise, I don't think you're being very useful. And maybe you're even oppressing people. That's why I like narrative therapy. It goes beyond the individual to social issues like racism. The counselling profession has a responsibility to be aware of social issues.

I remember a client I once saw, a survivor of torture. He was a refugee from Iran who ended up in emergency with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, when in fact, he was having PTSD. His psychologist had *noooo* idea what she was dealing with. She didn't even know the difference between Iran and Iraq, so he spent his time teaching her about Iran. This is bad practice. Counsellors and educators have a responsibility to be aware of social and political issues, class, gender. We need to ask, "Would it be different for you if you had a First Nations counsellor?" "Would you prefer a counsellor who speaks your language or a gay counsellor?" It means we need to be very humble and ask those questions and know when to refer out. We can help to expand people's awareness of themselves in the world, of social processes, as opposed to just individuals in isolation going through emotional crises. Seeing the larger picture can help move them from guilt or whatever the issue. The beauty of being consciously aware is that it allows you to make all kinds of connections that, hopefully, will improve people's lives in terms of giving them tools to look at their own situation at home and whatever conflicts are going on for them in their lives.

Once you have this kind of awareness, it's so much easier to understand social processes. What's happening at home can be extrapolated to the way the world is working. A father being oppressive to his wife and kids, for example, is not much different from the U.S. oppressing small countries. Consciousness-raising really gives you more tools to understand life. Oppression is not something that happens in isolation. There are much larger dynamics. And we're constantly repeating patterns, as people, as families or communities or nations. Having that awareness really gives you the tools for becoming a strong and resourceful person.

My own experience of consciousness-raising has given me such meaning and purpose in life. It has brought me into a more spiritual realm, knowing that there is a reason why I was born in Chile, for the choices I made in coming here and the work I do, helping people, organizing. Perhaps, if I didn't have such awareness I would have been really happy just taking care of my own business. But, I think I would just die of boredom. I don't regret for a minute any of it. It is when I am with people who are questioning and doing things and talking about movies and, oh my god, what's happening in E. Timor and Iran ... that I become more alive. That fills me up with meaning in life and wanting to do things. I certainly wouldn't change my life now to be rich and isolated somewhere. I don't think that would make me happy at all.

Being aware truly does make you a much bigger human being. What's neat about having a much bigger view of life and the world, is that it really helps you to not feel alone. It connects us to life. It's comforting to know that there might be some other woman in Burma who's feeling the same as you do, for different reasons. It's normalizing. There's something about being alive and being aware that, to me, talks about the essence of being human. If you can connect to someone, to the pain of someone somewhere else, in a remote village in Nepal, there is connection and meaning. And I think there is something hopeful about that. There's hope that things could change in the future.

Christina's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

I've definitely internalized far too much sexism. That's hard to avoid. My life began with an egomaniacal patriarch for a father and a very "good" mother/wife. By "good," I mean she doted on us all, served dinner in a timely manner, and somehow kept the house clean despite having 4 children and an alcoholic husband. I remember one night sitting around the dinner table. One of my sisters said, "Thanks for cooking my favourite meal, Mom!" He suddenly flew into a rage and screamed "How DARE you! I'm the bread-winner here." A normal family dinner one minute, silence and tension you could cut with a knife the next. Nobody questioned his authority. We just did as we were told. So, these were the kinds of things I learned were normal.

Then, there was the sexual abuse. Of course, we'd been taught well to never to question or disobey him. I only knew at the time that it made me feel yucky and uncomfortable. These are the roles we all learn from our culture to varying degrees. As an adolescent I learned how important my physical looks were. It was what made me who I was. It was what made me valuable, desirable, okay. My relationships with men over the years were full of what I called "double standards." I didn't then know the word patriarchy. If I ever tried to articulate what was wrong with the way I was being treated, that made me a "bitch." I also learned, in the subtle ways that we all learn, how important class and status are. So, I was always driven by that need to work hard, make money, go to school, secure a "good" career. All of this would make me okay. Then I would be okay. I could go on forever about how I've been affected by these things.

Fortunately, having my consciousness raised about these issues has changed me into a completely different person. One hundred percent! There is very little left of the person I used to be. And thank goddess for that! Some of the biggest consciousness-raising experiences that come to mind are the two months I spent studying in Cuba, taking women's studies and Latin American studies courses, reading feminist and other political books, volunteering in a feminist organization. Also, being surrounded by like-minded people. I've gone on several political

activist/solidarity trips to Cuba and Central America. These were amazing eye-opening experiences.

It was an easy transition to make, really. As much as I had bought into mainstream values about money and the importance of being thin and beautiful as a woman, I always knew there was something very wrong with it all. But, I never stopped to really question it or to think there could actually be an alternative until I went to Cuba. That was the beginning. All of these consciousness-raising experiences shattered my worldview. In a way, it's kind of depressing. It's almost like waking up one morning to find you're living in the midst of a nightmare. Still, it's definitely made me stronger ... and happier with myself. Some days are still bad, but overall, I now know there's nothing wrong with *me*. Some days, I even feel pretty proud of myself.

Learning about the brutal effects of capitalism and globalization and repression and classism, and on and on and on, things that every one of us in this country are complicit in, motivates me to fight for social change. When I was younger, in my 20s, life was meaningless. *Now*, although it might be a constant battle, bashing my head against the wall hoping to change the world, it's anything but meaningless. People I know living out the mainstream story of working 9-5, making their mortgages payments, saving for a new SUV, seem to be miserable in their jobs. And they often tell me that my life seems so interesting compared to theirs. I have to agree. But I also remember how terrifying it is to give that up.

I hate to think what I would be like or what my life would be like if I hadn't become aware of these things. I can't imagine turning 40, being single, being so in debt with student loans. I would feel a complete failure. I'm pretty sure I would have ended up committing suicide . . . because I would believe that I was completely worthless. In a culture that says that a desirable woman is young, skinny, and beautiful (according to unattainable standards imposed by corporate advertisers), and that a respectable person has wealth, a nice car, an expensive home, savings in the bank, nice clothes, and so on. I simply don't rate. So, that makes me worthless, according to these values. Fortunately, they're no longer my values. In fact, I would be more

ashamed to have wealth than to be poor. Sometimes I'm disgusted by mainstream people. I can't stand being in the same room, forced to engage in inane conversation, the niceties, talking about the latest fashion or sports or the so-called news. As if that has *anything* to do with reality.

I still have to face their judgements however. And it's hard. It makes me insane sometimes. I went to a doctor last year about my constant fatigue. He actually told me that my fatigue was just my way of avoiding responsibility for paying my student loans. It turns out I had severe anaemia. But he didn't even bother to check that out. I could go on and on about the patriarchal medical profession, about student loans, about Protestant work ethics and values about money and "hard work." Let me tell you there's no work harder than single motherhood. But single mothers are denigrated, instead of being admired and respected for doing such a difficult and important job. So, I am very thankful that I now know better. I no longer have to accept these ideologies. It's still hard though. It's hard to go from an intellectual analysis to a place of feeling *really* okay. I guess what I'm saying is that it's hard to not internalize these things.

As for body image and my "physical attractiveness," I think that's the hardest. I do know better as a feminist, but it's a tough one to overcome. It's like you let down your guard for a minute and all those images on billboards and magazines come back to haunt you. I *still* feel uncomfortable when I pick up a magazine and am bombarded with pictures of beautiful young thin women. I can't help but notice that I don't look like that. I used to . . . well, close enough. But, that was because I had a medical problem that made me seriously underweight. I weighed 95 pounds at 5'6." Women envied me! Men loved my body. And I still felt fat. Even then, I looked at those magazine pictures and felt inadequate. I remember being at a wedding reception once, watching a woman dance. She was much skinnier than I was. Someone told me she had anorexia. Part of me wished I did too.

Now, I look at those pictures and still feel a little knot in the pit of my stomach. But it's only a little knot. Now I have a very powerful tool to fight that feeling. It's called a feminist analysis. I remind myself that these are not healthy or normal bodies. I remind myself that very

few women really look like that. And that most who do are literally starving themselves to death. There's no quality of life when you're constantly weak from hunger. And I remember that it is capitalism that requires us to feel inadequate in order for it to survive, and thrive. The uglier, the fatter we feel, the more we will buy their cosmetics, their diet aides, their clothes. I used to spend a fortune on those things, money I *did not have*. I remember the excitement of coming home with new bags of clothes or make-up. And I would feel good walking around in my new outfits – for the first few days. But, it never lasted. Because we can never live up to those corporate images. So, I have these little talks with myself. It's an ongoing struggle, especially since I continue to age. Every time I start to feel okay about myself, I suddenly realize, oh my god, I'm older and therefore less desirable. So, it takes more little talks with myself. It's an ongoing battle.

I have to say that what is really the most helpful, more than my little talks with myself, is when I get into conversation with other women. I'm reminded that we all feel the same way, to varying extents. *That* is what is therapeutic for me. *That* is when I really feel normal and okay and relieved. So, I think we need to be reminded on a regular basis, because lord knows those commercial images just never stop glaring at us. The other thing is reading. It works in the same way because when I read stories of other women's experiences, it continues to open my eyes about how much we all suffer from this fucked up society. It's so healing. I can't say that enough.

Another area that I'm still working on, and that I think needs more consciousness-raising around, is about being single. It's interesting because I think it's something that doesn't get talked about much. Among feminists, it feels like it's not okay to talk about. You know, *strong feminists need a man like a fish needs a bicycle*. It doesn't feel okay to say, "I'm lonely. I would love someone to share my life with." That seems to be taboo. We're not supposed to "need a man." Maybe if I were a lesbian I'd feel more comfortable admitting that I'm lonely and would love to have a partner. But it never feels okay to say, yes, I'd love to "meet Mr. Right." The other issue of course is that he doesn't really exist. But I can still wish, right?

On those rare occasions when I do hear other women saying that they feel the same way, I find it such a relief to hear. Because most of the time I can't help feeling inadequate to be having this desire. So, when other women admit these thoughts, I feel much better about myself. It makes me feel not only okay to be having these thoughts, but it also reminds me that I'm not the only single woman around. Sometimes it really feels like I *am* and I wonder what's wrong with me. It's easy to forget that it's not my fault that I haven't met any interesting men in a very long time. Sometimes I wish I was a lesbian, 'cause I tell you, there are many more interesting women out there than there are men. Anyway, when I hear other women talking about being single, I immediately know that the reason they are single is because there are just so few decent, progressive, pro-feminist men out there. And who would want anything less? So, that's what consciousness-raising is supposed to do. When women share their experiences, they realize they are not alone, not abnormal. And they also come to realize why we've all been feeling this way individually. It's really not an individual thing at all.

No, I couldn't imagine *not* having an alternative analysis to help me resist all that shit. Still, it's not necessarily enough. In some ways, "progressive" people can also be disappointing. For example, most so-called progressive men are still sexist. And the feminist "collective" I worked at turned out to be *very* hierarchical. I often find that people on "The Left" are also very judgemental. Just like the mainstream, only it's a different set of imposed values. For example, you are expected to be a martyr. Spend your life going to meetings and doing activist work. You are expected to be an expert and have a brilliant analysis on every global issue. So, I never quite feel like I rate here either. It doesn't seem to be okay to be just learning. Activists kind of roll their eyes and peer down their noses at you.

In a way, it's kind of a classist thing. It's interesting how many activists have a university education. A lot of their knowledge came from their academic education, whether it was Latin American Studies, or political science or sociology or women's studies. But *I* studied nursing. It's also a privilege to be able to spend the time educating yourself, reading, engaging in

political activities, fighting for social change. I left home when I was 14 with a grade 10 education. Then, as a single mother, life became a 24-hour a day job between motherhood and working long hours at low wages to pay for day-care and diapers, not to mention two mouths to feed. I certainly never had the luxury of being able to lie back and actually read books. So, I really resent feeling judged for not having as much knowledge as the next person. Let's face it, this alternative information is not readily available in our world. You can't just turn on your TV and watch the 6 o'clock news and know what's going on. You have to seek out alternative news. There may be a lot of information available on the Internet *now*, but, again, it's very time consuming. Guess what? Single mothers don't have free time! So, yeah, I feel quite bitter about these kinds of judgements. It makes me feel bad about myself, inadequate. Perhaps there needs to be some consciousness raising here too.

Another negative effect of consciousness-raising, I think, is that it can be quite isolating. I'm surrounded by mainstream people. That's difficult to avoid. I get invited to parties or asked out on dates. But, I'm just not interested. I have nothing in common with these people. And what little free time I do have, I tend to spend going to meetings or writing urgent action letters or reading to try to find out what's *really* going on. It's stressful, 'cause I don't really have the time. It always feels like it's never enough. It also makes me feel kind of lonely, because there are so few people I really enjoy spending time with. People interested in these issues are a minority. You can't just join a hiking or a running club and expect to meet anyone you have anything in common with. So, that's a bit of a problem. However, my daughter is almost grown and soon I'll have a lot more free time. So, partly the loneliness is from being a single parent, and partly it's because I'm no longer interested in spending time with the kind of people I used to like to meet.

But, overall, I am *so* thankful to have had exposure to these alternative perspectives. For one thing, I think it's made me a better person. It's made me more aware of the many privileges I experience. Although I often have a hard time believing that I could possibly be privileged, (I certainly don't *feel* very privileged most of the time) I do know that I would be worse off if my

skin weren't white, if I were in a wheelchair or facing homophobia. In a million ways, I know I am privileged. So, I can use the experiences of oppression that I *am* familiar with, and relate to other people's oppression that I have never experienced. I also have to face how I've benefited from these privileges. That's tough to do. But we have to own up to it. And try to change. I know I have a lot to learn, and I'm working on it. This is something that the white, middle-class privileged male may *never* be able to grasp. They have *no* personal experiences to relate to.

Consciousness-raising has also done more for my self-esteem and self-confidence than any therapist I ever saw. I've had so many awful experiences with therapists. The doctor I just mentioned who I saw for fatigue was actually a psychiatrist at the Sleep Disorders Clinic. I knew that my fatigue problem was more than just insomnia because even when I slept well I still felt exhausted. But I ended up there because I thought sleeping better would still help. So, of course, he put me on all kinds of drugs, which ended up making me feel *much* worse physically. And even *caused* depression. I was just too exhausted and drugged to function. So, life was getting very depressing at that point. How drugs were supposed to cure my diagnosed "irresponsibility" I'll never know. Anyway, it was devastating being told that my physical exhaustion was my own fault, I was just being irresponsible, and that I needed psychotropic drugs to treat my "mental disorder." It almost destroyed me. My self-esteem plummeted to rock bottom in one ½ hour session with that man.

Another time I saw a therapist was after my daughter's father fled the country to avoid paying child support. I had already been struggling enough with only having 4 days/month free time, well, if you could call catching up on laundry and homework and housecleaning free time. Anyway, suddenly I had absolutely no breaks. It was 24-7. It was one reason I developed insomnia in the first place. I was so stressed I was ready to snap. I couldn't believe he could just abandon his own daughter for the sake of taking a stand against court ordered child support. So, I went to see this therapist. She was a psychology PhD student, doing her practicum training. She would tape record our sessions, listen to them with her male supervisor and then come back with

their analysis. All they wanted to focus on was *my* anger! They wanted to use their anger management, behaviour modification techniques on me. Talk about inciting anger. The thing is, I had no one at the time to debrief with, to tell me *they* were wrong, and that, yes, of *course*, I should be angry. I had every right to be angry. And that I am not alone. There are so many women who sacrifice their lives and raise their children on their own because our society tells men it's okay for them to not look after their children. That's still, today, women's work.

So, yeah, the field of psychology has a lot to learn about women's oppression. Without that basic understanding, it can be even more oppressive. These so-called experts just convince women that our problems are our own individual problems and reinforce that there is something wrong with *us*, not the world we live in. Yeah, I think it's a very damaging profession. It has far too much power to label our problems as individual inadequacies, something that we have to change within ourselves. Aside from one or two helpful moments, I have been damaged far more than helped by the professionals I've seen over the years. The fact that we are so desperate that we're actually willing to pay people to have them listen to us, when they're harming us rather than helping, is a pretty sad commentary on our society if you ask me.

What's missing from the field of psychology is any understanding of how oppression works in our world. It's so important to have that analysis. So helpful and healing. It's not enough, but it's definitely a necessary start. I'd be terrified to think where I'd be personally without it. So, it's a start. I think it's saved my life really. I might have died from boredom, from working myself into the grave so I could buy that house, that nice car, get my face lifted and my tummy tucked. And I would have spent my life in a meaningless job that I hated. Life would be pretty meaningless. I suppose consciousness-raising is also a burden, because once you realize what's going on in the world, you have no choice but to fight it. That's a lot of work too. And once you have that awareness, there's no going back. Hopefully though, when enough of us have this kind of awareness, things will change. The world will be a better, more just and more nurturing place. And we won't need to have our consciousness raised.

Karey's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

As a woman, I have been affected by oppression in many ways. It has shaped my personality, my values, my behaviours, and my fears. I internalized this oppression and grew up believing that girls are to be "nice," not angry (bitches). I am to serve a man, sacrifice my needs and wants for siblings, children, and men. I must protect the male ego, hide my intellect (appear stupid, helpless). I must let my man guide me and make major decisions. I must be subservient to male authority (for example, in secretarial work). My work choices and activities are totally determined or at least limited; for example, girls can't fix tires. As a woman, I value (and am valued by) relationships, emotional life, finding a man, helping serve a man, being a wife, mother and homemaker and doing domestic work (not as a career woman). I am also measured by how beautiful I am. Other lessons I've learned are: do not take jobs away from men; my self worth is in finding a man, in meeting his sexual needs, being a wife, a mother, looking good and being subservient. I have also learned to be self-conscious of my body, to blame my mother and myself, to fear male authority and rape, and to be dependent on men.

These are also all areas where my consciousness was raised; otherwise I would not know to say them. In addition, other areas where I've experienced consciousness-raising are sexism in religion teaching, public education, political history, personal family dynamics, social interactions, and the workplace. My first introduction was in American History. The prof said, "you have all had white male history; I am going to teach you Black History, Native American History and Women's History." My reaction was shock, anger and grief as I recognized that I had been given a distorted view of myself, just like I had been given a distorted view of Native Americans, not to mention that I had been betrayed and lied to. I also felt scared as I began to see the reality of what I learned in the newspapers and television and the lives of my friends - about work and abuse.

From that point on, I took other classes and read books. When I took a class on women artists (I am an artist and writer), it raised my feeling of worth to learn of other women artists and

writers. This awareness was also transferred to my spiritual life where I saw that the image and ideas of the divine were lacking the feminine (Jesus). The honour for white males (like Washington and Jefferson) fell a few notches. White males weren't as near to God anymore. I was more sure of my self and less trusting of others. Again, as in all my classes, I was shocked at the new information, and shocked at the failure of the so-called authorities I had trusted. My trust in all things was really broken. The books I read and classes I took also provided relief, however. My world seemed to make a whole lot more sense. I felt understood and, in an ironic way, more secure. I felt less self hatred and less self blame for things I would have previously deemed my fault; now I see them as patriarchy's failings, not mine. I saw my scapegoat role for men. I also grew in self-understanding.

I realized that ending up doing clerical work was very much caused by internalizing what I was taught. EVERYTHING I was was determined by what I was taught to be as a female. I attribute this to an abusive mother and father and my need to do as I was told or get hurt. Even under such conditions of physical torture and rape and social pressure, I still didn't fit the roles. I rebelled very early and there were certain things I could never do. I lived with feelings of failure. Even today, I still carry tremendous feelings of failure for not being able to do what I was supposed to, even though I know it is actually a strength that I didn't. One of the ways I couldn't conform was to wear the girl outfits and makeup . . . I'd do it a bit for a time . . . but never could I do it for long. I never dated, because I wasn't comfortable with being sexual. The reasons why have to do with abuse. I rebelled and I still am in rebellion.

Having my consciousness raised changed my relationships with friends, family, communities. It created conflicts as I no longer was in the same realm of thinking as them. I lost friends. However, I was better informed to make better decisions in life. It strengthened my belief in my self. I could avoid actions that would lead to repeated patterns of sexism. I re-examined my work life and grieved the loss of life I had because of being a girl. I was angered over being a domestic slave for 30 years. Thirty years of serving others and now at 43, broke and

destitute AND owing my ex-husband child support) . . . but because of knowing the reality, it actually helped me to cope. It changed my worldview. It changed my goals. It changed me.

Yes, consciousness-raising has definitely changed me. But I am in process. I still have much of the same because I simply can't change everything at once AND deal with current oppression because of past abuse and oppression. There are minor shifts, however, as in the areas mentioned above. Yes, it has changed the way I identify myself and how I see myself.

As a result of learning women studies, as well as being abused through the court systems by my ex-husband (I am what happens after a domestic violence victim gets out of the home and the abuser continues to abuse financially and emotionally through the court systems ---and there is no help . . . women's shelters are too busy helping keep women safe physically and are not equipped to help women financially and emotionally), I ended up withdrawing and separating from all my family and friends. This helped me, though I still feel like a sponge and unprotected. Things happen before I can catch them. I respond in old ways, but at least now in time recognize it. For example, I have a male friend who has hurt me in regards to his behaviours around sex and my body. I recognize his sexism, I respond in old thinking, and I hurt . . . yet. I haven't been able to overcome this issue, 'cause I have bigger ones to deal with first. It's a case of you can't do everything at once and change it all overnight! There is also a period of time between awareness and action into change, especially when you have symptoms such as post-traumatic stress from abuse.

But also - Yes, it has helped me not to internalize. For example, in court, I definitely saw how sexism was operating and my reality was not only ignored, but when I would try to speak it, I was cut off, told what I said was IRRELEVANT, and if I got upset, I was perceived as the problem. There were a few women (a judge and lawyer) who admitted that what was happening to me wasn't right, but said they had to do their jobs. None of them would give up their jobs for what was right. But at least I could be somewhat objective about it, reminding myself that this wasn't personal, it was the patriarchal system in operation. On the other hand, my rage and

feelings at how I was being treated came spewing out and added to the conflicts. Perhaps some of the conflicts were actually *due* to my knowledge and making different choices. However, if the same events had happened and I didn't have knowledge, I might have committed suicide, or had made more negative choices - like drinking, using drugs or marrying another abusive man, or getting caught up in the mental health wheel with the *what-is-wrong-with-Karey* cycle going round and round . . . WHEN *I* am not the problem.

It is hard to say what my life would be like if I hadn't been exposed to alternative perspectives or critical thinking. I guess more of where I had already been. I'd be lost in self-hatred and self blame, praying to A patriarchal God, trying to find answers in church and counselling, married and dependent. It is hard to imagine where my work life might be. Again, I am still in process; many of my awarenesses have not been translated into action and results . . . yet.

Yes, the experience of consciousness-raising has been both good and bad. It comes with loneliness, as I am mostly in a world of others who do not understand. There is separation from my old life - siblings, friends, parents, a chasm that now exists between our realities. For awhile, I could not stand to be around anyone who was not open to women's issues. Similar to domestic violence victims, who are at higher risk during the process of leaving an abusive relationship, I think I have experienced an increase of abuse and conflicts as a result of not co-operating with sexism around me. Although the awareness was good, it is very difficult to be aware, especially when there is no help and resources and you can not make adequate changes yourself. I fell through the cracks and didn't have any women's groups to help me. I tried to start a women's group but it didn't fly. I am in a rural area. I find myself actually now creating women's workshops and being the leader when in fact I need someone to follow.

Feminism also has it's limitations. Sometimes viewpoints are too rigid. There is a lack of feminist studies on men to help create nurturing and healing relationships with them. Instead, my relationships with men are intensive in power plays and struggles, and men don't have a place

to go like women do. As well, feminism carries some of the dominant culture's ideology which perpetuates things such as individualism and values of achievement and accomplishment.

As a result of consciousness-raising, I'd say on one hand I have experienced a move toward better mental health by less self blame and hatred, more self understanding and taking better care of myself. Yet this is counter balanced by all the additional conflicts in all my relationships as a result of not co-operating with oppression. This has been mentally taxing. The positives are that I shared my awarenesses and knowledge with others. Some of my friends were open and they are now going through a similar process. It opened up new choices for me. I have a more accurate view of my reality and my self. I have a clearer sense and connection to the social environment. I definitely have more self worth. Seeing women in other roles and in history and seeing that my spiritual life (Jesus) was patriarchal and lacking a mirror for me, all helped increase my worth.

I think the implications for the field of psychology are massive. There needs to be more acknowledgement of the cultural context and a view that in many areas does not pathologize women or make them "wrong" when they are really right on. Many views of "wrongs" can actually be turned into positives. A focus on present day and social changes is good rather than inner child limitations. It also needs to be recognized how psychology is repeating sexism in it's own behaviours toward women. Also how they are repeating historical habits, keeping patriarchy alive.

No matter what, consciousness raising is worth it. It isn't easy to face the reality of our lives as women, as we raise our consciousness and then deal with it. I really feel that I am looking at a milder form of a holocaust. I know so many people who have been abused, died and have had their lives ripped apart, as well as their souls. All are suffering without an understanding of what happened to them. More groups and networking are needed. There also needs to be patience between women and space for those who are still in the dark, for those who are still living out some form of their internalized oppression. For example, women shelters have

the PROBLEM of women going back. Women go back because enough resources and help are not available. It is also extremely difficult to make the changes required. There is so much loss for a woman to bear. Women should not have to make so many sacrifices; community needs change so women don't have such a burden. It does begin with consciousness raising.

I do not believe consciousness raising makes people feel more oppressed. Definitely not. There is a time period after awareness, where new information is digested and women continue in oppression, but then changes take place after awhile. This is not producing more oppression; it is the process of getting out (actually I don't see how we really get out). Women can get hopeless, overwhelmed and think not enough change is happening fast enough. But as long as there is hope, support, and knowing that the future can be different from the past, oppression is being overcome.

Nomi's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

As a feminist Jewish Lesbian ageing woman with a hidden disability, I have experienced and fully realize the personal and societal toll created by the "ism's." Living in a dominant culture which enforces the theme of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory Christianity, youth, physical and mental "normalcy" and financial middle-classism, in essence, white, male, classism, women and their needs, desires, sexuality, etc. are not only left behind, but we remain invisible … still the "other." As a counsellor, I am painfully aware the oppression has made me an empathetic, caring, strong advocate for women. But the cost to my being and spirit has been excessive.

Born into war (Israel), into poverty, and into a family of crazed wounded people (holocaust survivors) I cannot easily measure how or what my life would have been without consciousness-raising. Having survivors as parents, losing most of my family tree due to Anti-Jewish oppression which led to genocide throughout Europe, I didn't have to "bump into the walls of oppression" – it came with mother's milk. Coming from this background, born in Israel

in 1948 during times of hatred from the Arab nations and of war, I did not have the chance to live through a period of ignorance and apathy. My worldview, how I see the world and my place in it, has been shaped and thoroughly modified by being a Jewish Lesbian daughter of Holocaust Survivors. My yardstick of "normalcy" has always been a pretzel-shaped rod.

Internalized Oppressions: Misogyny, learned helplessness, anti-Jewish feelings, anti-woman feelings, etc.: I realized as a young teen that my mother's dynamic of helplessness was quite the norm for the way women were portrayed in this country. Before moving here, I thought my mother, being a survivor of rapes, beatings, starvation and losing loved ones, was reacting within a normal range, i.e. cyclical depression, helplessness, needing care and gentle love, needing to be allowed her tears and nightmares, etc.. My father, himself having lived through horrors of labour camp, was often tearful but stronger than my mother; he certainly needed less "parenting" from my siblings and me. But then, he was not raped repeatedly and forced to endure what women endured during the Holocaust. As a young adult, I fought to "never be like my mother – to be stronger than she." Of course, strong women have always been killed . . . in all societies, through all of time. Sometimes by other women.

I soon realized Canada had it's own version of Holocaust – a war against women and children, against peoples of colour, new immigrants, people in poverty, disabled peoples, people who try to "buck the system" – a war that's not talked about nor recognized. Propaganda for the war effort is abundant – it comes in commercials on T.V., in detective novels, in hate literature, in pornographic material, it is pervasive in school systems, and is ignored or perhaps tolerated by most. It takes only One rapist to keep a whole community of women in control and living in fear. Women often become the Kapos (Jews who assisted in cleaning out the gas ovens and sorting the gold teeth and eyeglasses for the gift of more food / or of life). Women may think they are benefiting by this behaviour, but I believe that women fool themselves in thinking they are considered special "allies" to the enemy. All women are destroyed, spiritually if not physically, by woman-hatred. All women can be raped, snuffed, underpaid, used and abused by systems.

Those who gain from this war are few. Rich, white, upper middle class able-bodied youthful men. Except, I feel, no one really gains by anyone's slaughter.

During my early 20's I couldn't live in my own skin. I started to go to group therapy in Toronto, specifically to a "survivors" group. Other children of Holocaust survivors were in the group led by Dr. H. Fenigstein, Holocaust Survivor/Psychiatrist, who much later was charged with sexual assault by most of his one-on-one female patients. I found some similarities throughout the group. Most of us had silent parents . . . had parents with secretive furtive behaviours which we witnessed but never understood. Most of us had twisted yardsticks with which to measure proper normal perspectives, behaviours, and most of us had great problems with trust and intimacy. All of the group were Jews but for one Romanov (gypsy). Most of us had friendships in school with only others who had some "deficiency" (i.e. disabled, unliked, shy, cross-eyed, 7th Day Adventists, devil worshippers, etc.). No joke. We knew we didn't fit in. What we didn't know back then, is that most of us don't "fit in."

Therapy helped pave the way to a greater understanding of myself in relation to my childhood, perhaps painfully making me yield to the love for and of my own children. I often had to struggle against internalized anti-Jewish feelings: My early impressions of Jewish people were very belittling and thoroughly based on anger and misinformation. I remember feeling embarrassed by belonging to a race of "sheep being led to slaughter" . . . why were we not tough enough to resist? Why were we not "white enough" to be considered white? Why did we not assimilate totally – it's all of our fault for remaining unchristian. There must be core valid reasons for hatred of Jewish people. We must be "bad" for so much of the world to hate us (Spain, then Turkey, then pogroms all over Europe, then Hitler, Stalin, and of course, Aryan Nation and KKK and the Heritage Front, etc.)

My viewpoint changed drastically when I started in my 20's to take University courses, and discover in libraries, in speaking with Jewish history profs that there were a multitude of brave Jews during all of the times of Jew-hatred, during all of the anti-Jew activities, during all of

history, there were brave men and even more brave women resisting attack, sometimes to their death.

Rather than honouring Hasidic Jews, the Ultra Orthodox, I felt embarrassed by their non-assimilated looks and behaviour. Over the years, I've come to respect the differences of us all and am accepting, though never will I join them. I am thoroughly "re-constructionist" in my Jewish practise, but respect those few numbers who keep the old rules of Abraham and Moses and do not fall into assimilation of any sort.

Interesting, but due to my background, the fear of being "out" as Jew outweighed by tons the fear of being "out" as Lesbian or "out" as Feminist. As I age and come to terms with internalized Jew-hatred, I feel more caring and loving towards my self and others who are invisible, oppressed, etc. As a Jew and Lesbian, much of my adult life has been spent agonizing, organizing and politicizing oppression. Is there a "balanced" state of being for one who is even this day fearing rape by any man I meet, or a bomb at the Abortion Clinic where I work? No . . . there is no "balance" for any length of time, but there is more self-worth and self-identity and self-care having travelled the road to self-awareness. I struggle daily with my own racism (and I believe having white skin privilege has in essence made me aware of my own racism), and judgmental thoughts.

Our society creates walls of oppression that I find most women bang their heads into daily. Few can maintain the state of denial about how this anti-woman society views and treats and controls us . . . those few must be totally uncomfortable on some level, with their existence. In my opinion, there is no comfort for any of us . . . denial or full mindful awareness of our state breeds no comfort for women in this society.

Post-script

I would have to say that consciousness-raising around these issues of oppression has made me a better counsellor, a better mother and a better person overall. As a feminist mother it has helped me to raise male children in a world that oppresses women. It has also caused me to

become more politically active. Yes, it has helped me, to some extent, to externalize some of my internalized oppression. For example, several of us feminist Jews started a discussion group, studying the Torah critically through feminist eyes. Having my consciousness raised has certainly increased my self-esteem. I no longer hesitate to speak out as a lesbian. But I must admit, I still freeze when I hear anti-Semitic comments. I've worked at my current job for seven years, and *no one* has ever said happy Hanukkah, even though they know I'm a Jew. Not even happy holidays. People continue to wish me a merry Christmas. And yes, I still fear coming out as a Jew. It gets easier, but it's still a struggle, even at the age of 52. I guess it's a lifetime battle.

As a counsellor, honing in on real people's lives and doing a practicum and placements with *real* people taught me much more than five years of psychology. The field of psychology needs to look more at hands-on experience, rather than just theoretical. They need to speak to people, to women in abused women's shelters, women with real experiences. Course instructors and trainers in psychology should be sitting at kitchen tables in the homes of Latino women, women of colour, lesbians, and disabled women. And listen to their stories of how they've been impacted by the "ism's." Then I think they'd be teaching better courses. Kitchen table talk about real experiences has always been much more important than what we learn in text books.

CHAPTER 5

OUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

This chapter begins with a summarized account of our collective experiences of consciousness-raising, that is, an amalgamation of our narratives. Commonalities and diversities are discussed, relying on individual quotes to illustrate the ways in which our lives and our selves have been impacted by becoming politicized. This interpretation of the collection of individual narratives was written by the author and verified by four participants. One addition (indicated by an asterisk*) was made based on a participant's recommendation and another quote was subsequently taken from the group interview (**). Participants' feedback and comments follow the author's description of our experiences of consciousness-raising.

A condensed version of the group discussion is also provided. The initial intention was for the group to be a consciousness-raising process of sharing, discussing, debriefing and analyzing our collection of experiences. It was to be a collaborative process of making meaning of our narratives, in contrast with the more traditional research approach where the researcher determines herself the meaning of her participants' experiences. It was hoped this would reduce the inherent privilege of the researcher having the final word. Since one participant lives in the eastern U.S. and another had only offered to share her story without participating in the group process due to time constraints, five participants, including the researcher, were expected to form the interpretive group.

Unfortunately, due to illness and family emergency, only three of us were present. Written feedback verifying the author's summary has been received from both participants in attendance at the group discussion as well as two others not present (i.e. 5 of 7 of us have contributed to this analysis). This and other feedback is reported in this chapter to enable the reader to assess the accuracy of the analysis. Similarly, as discussed in the methodology chapter, "what participants think of our work" (Riessman, 1993, p. 66) is integral to any evaluation of a

feminist research project. The participants' comments also speak loudly to other criteria for evaluation: resonance, collaboration and praxis.

Summary of Our Collective Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

<u>**Similarities and Differences in Our Experiences of Oppression**</u>

<u>**Varying Degrees: Experience and Internalization of Oppression**</u>

Since our experiences of consciousness-raising only make sense within the context of oppression, such oppression is an integral component of any discussion of consciousness-raising. Our experiences of oppression varied from being ignored or pressured to conform, to rape and suffering from the aftermath of the holocaust. Two participants grew up feeling valued and respected in childhood, and therefore experienced and internalized much less oppression than others. In contrast, four women discussed childhood abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and/or other forms of trauma (holocaust effects, war, torture, military repression, poverty, genocidal loss of family). All of these experiences are related to various forms of widespread oppression.

Being born in Chile, Amanda felt her experience was different, as she had *always* been aware of class inequities. She also experienced repression under a military dictatorship as a youth. On the other hand, some oppressions were not experienced until later in life: Marilyn, when she began using a cane and then a wheelchair; and Amanda, when she came to Canada and suddenly experienced racism for the first time in her life. We all experienced and have been affected by sexism, although to different degrees. Most of us mentioned (internalizing) the oppressive ideal that women's value is based on our physical appearance, and that the ideal female is young, thin, tall, "beautiful" and/or married to a man.

Most of us have experienced and internalized multiple forms of oppression. For some, that was in the form of gender and class. For others, it was a combination of numerous oppressions. Among our relatively small group of women, there turned out to be quite a diversity of experiences of oppression: sexism, ableism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant

discrimination (which also can be related to racism), classism, homophobia, and a myriad of combinations of any or all of these. As well, several participants discussed experiences of discrimination or oppression *within* their "own communities". For example, homophobia has been experienced within aboriginal and Jewish communities. Heterosexuals have felt discrimination by feminists. And sexism is rampant within the disability culture and among the "Left" in general. Likewise, being of mixed heritage, Jay has felt racism from both within and outside the aboriginal community.

Effects of Internalized Oppression: Varied and Similar

To varying extents, many of us described a sense of self as inferior, inadequate, abnormal, or crazy. Similarly, feelings of self-blame, shame and personal pain were common. Poor body image was also prevalent and many of us mentioned feeling valued only in terms of physical "attractiveness" or being "with a man". Other comments were to do with learned helplessness, dependence on men, and feelings of not fitting in. Aspects of self-identity included self-doubt or low self-esteem. As Amanda remarked, *"You're ashamed of who you are for not being rich."* And for those who experienced new oppressions later in life: *"You start feeling different"* (Amanda); *"not anymore the same person"* (Marilyn). Overall, experiences of internalized oppression ranged from milder feelings of "discomfort" to being unable to *"live in my own skin"* (Nomi).

The Process of Consciousness-Raising

Overall, our experiences of consciousness-raising were remarkably similar. The main differences were in where we started, that is, our experiences of oppression.

A Growing Awareness / Critical Analysis

Our experiences suggest that consciousness-raising starts with a growing awareness or a critical analysis of oppression: it's existence, how it works, and how it affects us. For some, consciousness-raising was around recognizing and unlearning positions of privilege. Several participants mentioned how the dominant culture and institutions (e.g. media, church, schools)

systemically work to distort reality and to keep us unaware. As Nomi points out, *"propaganda for the war effort is abundant."* And motioning toward the tape recorder, Jay says, *"This is the [real] news."*

Our Consciousness-Raising Experiences

Some women discuss **critical moments of consciousness-raising**: *"epiphanies"*, or *"amazing eye-opening experiences"*. *"My worldview was shattered"* (Christina). *"It changed my worldview. It changed my goals. It changed me"* (Karey). Others describe their experience as a long, ongoing process of developing an awareness and/or expanding their socio-political analysis, perhaps a **series of little experiences** rather than specific moments of consciousness-raising. *All of us see it as* **a long, ongoing (perhaps lifelong) process.**

Common sources of consciousness-raising included academic classes (e.g. Women's Studies, Black History, Native American History, Women's History, Latin American Studies). Jay also described developing a critical analysis of university itself when she later got involved in political activism. Other common sources were reading books (feminist, political, Jewish history), having role models and being politically active. Two women began their critical consciousness in childhood, learning basic values of social justice from their parents (including 2 fathers). Also described as naming oppression and witnessing, talking, sharing, learning from and listening to others was integral to the process.

An Ongoing Battle of Resistance / Not Always Easy

Several participants discuss an ongoing struggle to resist internalizing oppressive notions of female beauty and body image. *I now recognize sexism, but still respond in old ways. It's difficult to change everything overnight* (Karey). *I still feel a failure, although I know my inability to conform is a strength* (Karey). *"It's hard to go from an intellectual analysis to a place of feeling really okay" I have good and bad days; I know better, but it's still tough* (Christina). *"I still fear coming out as a Jew. It gets easier, but it's still a struggle, even at the age of 52"* (Nomi). Several participants mentioned their ongoing struggle to unlearn privilege, to speak out

and be a good ally; *"I'm still learning and trying to sort things out"* (Lynn). But overall, despite the ongoing struggles, *all* of us have found consciousness-raising to be a highly positive experience.

Talking and Sharing / Learning about Other's Experiences and Struggles / Witnessing / and Normalizing

As people give voice to their experiences and name oppression, we begin to see commonalities. *"If there's a truth out there, it's from women getting together and talking and acting"* (Lynn). This has a profoundly therapeutic or "normalizing" effect. Social analysis is a tool to enable us to **resist** internalizing the oppressive dominant ideology. When we see the bigger picture (social context), we recognize our problems as being caused by oppressive systems of power, rather than as individual inadequacies. This results in less self-blame and greater self-worth. Moreover, we *all* have become motivated to fight for social change as a result of our political awareness. Interestingly, many participants discuss how their raised awareness has given them meaning, purpose, or passion in life. An important part of the process also seems to be in being surrounded by like-minded others who can support and affirm our alternative understandings.

Effects of Consciousness-Raising

Much of what has just been described as the *process* of consciousness-raising, is elaborated on here as *effects* of consciousness-raising.

Initial Reactions

Several women described initially disturbing reactions to their new-found awareness: shock, anger, grief, betrayal, afraid to see reality; and guilt and shame about positions of privilege. It was also seen as *depressing to awaken to a nightmare* and disturbing.

Effects on our "Selves" (Self-Concept)

Later, however, positive changes in self-concept were realized. Some participants describe a profound metamorphosis. For others, it was more of an extension of what was learned early in life. For all, it had **extremely positive effects**. For example:

These experiences have made me a bigger or better person (Amanda, Christina, Nomi).

"These experiences have made me stronger ... about who I am and what my role is in the world" (Marilyn).

"It has changed the way I identify [and]... see myself" (Karey).

"[It] has made me an empathetic, caring, strong advocate for women . . . a better counsellor, a better mother and a better person overall" "I feel more caring and loving towards my self and others who are invisible, oppressed" (Nomi).

"Consciousness-raising can definitely shift you, especially when you're coming from a position of privilege" (Lynn).

"My cultural identity is what makes me strong." "I'm pretty happy with who I am" (Amanda).

"I feel very whole as a person." "It has given me a real sense of well-being in being a woman" (Lynn).

Several women stated, and others at least seemed to imply, that they feel stronger. Other changes in self-concept include: greater pride; increased feelings of worth or self-esteem; less self-hatred and self-blame; greater self confidence; less self-judgement, more self-acceptance; greater self awareness or understanding; and transcending from feelings of inadequacy to feeling good about oneself; from shame to pride. For example, Amanda came to see her being "different" as a gift, a strength, rather than something to be ashamed of.

Other Psychological Effects

Feelings of **validation and normalization** were universal. Descriptions of the process or effects of consciousness-raising included: *therapeutic, healing; a relief, knowing you're not going crazy; makes me feel okay, fine, not crazy, normal, whew; my community is a safe place to go.* All participants said it has helped them to *not* internalize oppression (at least, as much). *I might still be oppressed, "but at least I [can] be somewhat objective about it, reminding myself*

that this [isn't] personal, [it's] the patriarchal system in operation" (Karey). When we are able

to see the bigger picture, we recognize that our problems are not due to individual deficits, and

our sense of self-worth is greatly enhanced.

Similarly, **social analysis works as a tool to help us resist internalized oppression**.

For example, *"little talks with myself"* and seeing commonalities when talking with other women

were found to be healing (Christina).

> *"If my self-esteem is suffering or I'm doubting myself, not feeling comfortable in any part of my identity, one of the first questions I ask myself now, in terms of my psychological health and my state of being, is, 'What's been constructed in order for me to feel this way about myself?' That generally is the question that helps me get through anything. I come out on the other side with a good understanding of how it all worked and why I as an individual might be feeling the way I am. I'm much, much, much less judgmental about my feelings and my thoughts and my own personal process. It's more of an acceptance of who I am" (Jay).*

> *"Now I have a very powerful tool to fight that feeling. It's called a feminist analysis"* (Christina).

> *"Having that awareness really gives you the tools for becoming a strong and resourceful person"* (Amanda).

Some women talked about increased **empowerment** and control and some mentioned

enhanced mental health. Most women either *said* it has made them happier or *implied it* by

saying they would be (or were) very unhappy without such critical awareness. *"Once you've had*

that consciousness raised, you can fight for change. For me, it's a way of being at peace with the

world. I know that at least I'm doing something" (Lynn). Some women alluded to better

personal functioning as a result of their socio-political awareness:

> *"Knowing the reality . . . actually helped me to cope"* (Karey).

> *I'm taking better care of myself* (Karey, Nomi).

> I'm *"better informed to make better decisions in life"*, for example, avoiding sexism (Karey).

> *Without the awareness, I'd probably be making "more negative choices - like drinking, using drugs or marrying another abusive man"* (Karey).

Most women talked about speaking out more, despite their fear. In fact, both Jay & Amanda had

powerfully impacting experiences when they spoke out.

Effects on Our Lives

Some women mentioned an enhanced understanding of self and the world. *The world*

makes more sense (Lynn, Karey). *All* of us are actively involved in **fighting for social change**.

And some of us discussed how consciousness-raising can offer new choices or new possibilities

for alternative ways of living.

Spiritual Lives. Interestingly, all participants mentioned or alluded to either finding

spirituality or greater meaning, purpose or passion in life as a result of their consciousness-raising

experiences. Karey rejected her past spiritual beliefs and no longer prays to a patriarchal god,

while Nomi uses her social analysis to critique her Jewish faith from a feminist perspective. Jay

says her spiritual life is connected to being politically active and cannot be separated; it is a

source of her strength. Similarly, Amanda is more spiritual as a result of her political

consciousness:

> *"My own experience of consciousness-raising has given me such meaning and purpose in life. It has brought me into a more spiritual realm, knowing that there is a reason why I was born in Chile, for the choices I made in coming here and the work I do, helping people, organizing."*

Most women spoke passionately about how their social awareness and political lives had

given them **meaning or purpose in life**.

> *"It is when I am with people who are questioning and doing things and talking about movies and, oh my god, what's happening in E. Timor and Iran ... that I become more alive. That fills me up with meaning in life and wanting to do things."* (Amanda).

> *"If I can participate in some way, if I can be a participant in that kind of consciousness-raising with others and for others, then, even though it may not change the world, I can go home at the end of the day feeling pretty fulfilled"* (Jay).

> *"It's given me a huge passion"* (Lynn). *"I realize that the political work is my spirituality . . . For me, passion does connect the soul"* (Lynn, **from group interview).

Work Lives. Consciousness-raising has come to influence *all* of our work lives. Karey

re-examined her (clerical) work life with an enhanced critical analysis and is now a writer and

artist. Christina is no longer in meaningless, boring, work she hated. As a result of her social awareness, Lynn is now motivated to pursue work in women's organizations or with newcomers. She also wishes to work against racism and globalization and/or in grassroots activism. Amanda became a counsellor because she has always had strong beliefs in social justice and wants to "*help people raise their voices.*"

Mixed Blessing / Double Edged Sword. As discussed in the following three sections, all of us said there were both negative as well as positive effects. However, it was unanimous that the good overwhelmingly outweighed the bad.

Changed Relationships with Others. Several women said they had little desire to be part of the dominant culture, either because they no longer had things in common with mainstream others or because they did not wish to subject themselves to abuse and oppression. Some mentioned a loss of old relationships and/or old life, *withdrawing from family, friends, communities, but, this was helpful* (Karey). Karey also found that her raised consciousness resulted in increased conflicts and rage, but she is also better able to avoid sexism in her life now. Three women said they "can't stand" to be around others who are not "aware," and all but one who are heterosexual acknowledged that a critical consciousness may mean being single, possibly forever. Several women mentioned having increased standards for a male partner and although it leaves us feeling lonely at times, it still is preferable to being "unaware".

> "*Do I want to be in a stupid relationship? Well, no!*" (Marilyn).

> "*Had I not had those consciousness-raising experiences at university, I could have much more easily fallen into staying in that relationship. . . . I really wanted a sense of belonging. But, I think I would have been really unhappy*" (Lynn).

> "*Patriarchy is wrong. Because what makes us believe that [*being with a man is*] ideal and that anything less than that is not good enough?*" (Marilyn).

Lynn says consciousness-raising and single role models have helped her feel okay with being single. Christina also finds that consciousness-raising helps her to not feel so inadequate for being single. However, **loneliness** was a common experience as we find that our raised

consciousness results in **either being partnerless or living in a shrinking social world**, albeit by our own choice. *"I am mostly in a world of others who do not understand"*(Karey). *"Often I don't feel like I fit in a lot of places"* (Jay). None of us, however, expressed any desire to go back. Rather, it means we are seeking better, healthier, more egalitarian relationships (e.g. no more abusive men or associating with racists).

Some comments were about experiences of both *increased* connection *and* feelings of isolation or loneliness. In addition to the loneliness expressed above, women mentioned: *"a clearer sense and connection to the social environment"* (Karey); increased feelings of belonging; feeling normal and not alone; and a sense of belonging, bonding and connection to the world. *"It activates you to become a full participant in your life, and in the world that's around you"* (Lynn). Several participants mentioned solidarity as an important part of social activism. According to Amanda, *"having a much bigger view of life and the world . . . really helps you to not feel alone. It connects us to life."*

At the same time, being politically aware can be "tiring", "overwhelming", **"harder in some ways"**, "mentally taxing", "a lot of work", "stressful", "a burden", "depressing", "a nightmare", and "disturbing". *But* for most of us **it also gives hope** for change in the future.

> *"The odds are pretty big and they're stacked against us. Sometimes you don't get to feel very powerful or very in control of your life. But, you can get a little bit of a sense of that if you take action in concert with others, like-minded others"* (Marilyn).

> *"If you can connect to someone, to the pain of someone somewhere else, in a remote village in Nepal, there is connection and meaning. And I think there is something hopeful about that. There's hope that things could change in the future"* (Amanda).

> *"**For all of the frustrations of going through consciousness-raising, I wouldn't give it up for anything**"* (Lynn). Despite some negative consequences of becoming socially aware, all participants unequivocally said they had no regrets. In envisioning a life without such awareness, we all described a meaningless and unhappy existence, perhaps in unhappy (maybe even abusive) relationships: *I would probably be married and dependent* (Karey). *"I suppose I'd be stuck in a leaky condo . . . with four children and a piggo husband"* (Marilyn). Or *"I would have felt less*

comfortable being single" (Lynn). Two women imagined some *potential* benefits, although they still felt strongly that having a critical consciousness was overwhelmingly beneficial.

> *"Perhaps, if I didn't have such awareness I would have been really happy just taking care of my own business. But, I think I would just die of boredom"* (Amanda).

> *"If I'm not aware of how much homophobia there is, then I can walk around in the world and not feel it so much."* On the other hand, *"Maybe I would have committed suicide. I don't know"* (Jay).

In fact, three participants believed they may have committed suicide had they not become politically aware. Lynn imagined it would be a *"huge psychological burden, incredibly tormenting."* Some of us expected we'd be mired in self-hatred and self-blame, feeling "a failure, worthless" (Christina); caught up in mental health system or seeking answers in church (Karey); and unaware of real causes of their oppression (Marilyn). Jay says she would still be very self-focused instead of working to create change.

Criticisms of Our Alternative Subcultures. Interestingly, many of us noticed that, despite attempting to eliminate oppression, our alternative subcultures can also be discriminatory, oppressive, or judgemental. It was also felt by some that there is not an adequate alternative culture to turn to when one wishes to reject or resist the dominant culture. *"It is very difficult to be aware, especially when there is no help and resources" That is why women go back* (Karey). Karey sees a need for more groups and networking. That feelings of isolation or loneliness were so common certainly begs the question of why the women's movement doesn't seem to be fulfilling this need.

Several criticisms of feminism in particular were articulated: It can be rigid, oppressive, divisive, hierarchical, judgemental, and can also carry some of the dominant culture's ideology, such as that of individualism, achievement, and accomplishment. Amanda advocates for a more collective perspective rather than a divisive feminism, a separation of men and women: *"If you look at immigrants and refugees, it's not just women who are oppressed. . . . For a woman with an accent, from a different country, it is not a gender issue."* Others felt there needs to be more

inviting space for those of us just learning. For example: *"There also needs to be patience between women and space for those who are still in the dark"* (Karey).

Recommendations for the Field of Psychology

We all unanimously agreed that the field of psychology would be less oppressive, or at least could improved, if it were to embrace a **critical social analysis,** that is, an **awareness of cultural context;** of systems of power and power imbalances, of oppression and how it works, as well as how it damages us.

> *"I've been working nationally around woman and disabilities and in my contact with women across the country, what comes up quite often is that women want to find not only a good counsellor to talk to, but also a counsellor who understands about disability, and understands about feminism, and about the intersection of those two aspects of our lives. . . . They don't get it. They don't understand the analysis. . . . There just isn't anybody"* (Marilyn).

Clearly, there needs to be better access for people, especially women, with disabilities to enter the profession. There also needs to be education around these issues (e.g., disability, race, gender, homophobia, anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, etc.) within education and training programs. As a counsellor herself, Amanda also says that

> *"counsellors and educators have a responsibility to be aware of social and political issues, class, gender. We need to ask, 'Would it be different for you if you had a First Nations counsellor?' 'Would you prefer a counsellor who speaks your language or a gay counsellor?' It means we need to be very humble and ask those questions and know when to refer out."*

In a similar vein, Nomi felt that there needs to be more psychology training with hands-on experience; talking to women at their kitchen tables; listening to their stories of how they've been impacted by the 'isms' – *"Real experiences [have] always been much more important than text book theory." "Psychology has a lot to learn about women's [and people's] oppression* (Christina)." It needs an understanding of how oppression works rather than focusing on "inner" problems, as this individualistic bias reinforces individual feelings of inadequacy.

Mental health professionals need to know that critical social analysis is therapeutic, and gives people the tools to become stronger, healthier and more empowered.

"What really helped me was one comment from a friend. Just that one comment from him did way more than seeing a professional for a couple of sessions. It was a great moment of consciousness-raising" (Marilyn).

"Consciousness-raising has . . . done more for my self-esteem and self-confidence than any therapist I ever saw" (Christina).

Some therapy was helpful; some was not. What I needed was a socio-political analysis (Jay).

In contrast to *all* of our experiences of consciousness-raising, *few* of us had particularly positive experiences with mental health professionals. *"I've had awful experiences with therapists",* which *devastated me; destroyed me and my self-esteem; very damaging* (Christina). The field of psychology needs to be less pathologizing of individuals and less inner or individual focused. *"It has far too much power to label our problems as individual inadequacies, something that we have to change within ourselves"* (Christina). Such a focus neglects the need for social change. Moreover, psychology is perpetuating status quo; *it has a sexist bias, and is "repeating sexism . . . repeating historical habits, keeping patriarchy alive"* (Karey). Social *"dynamics [are played out] within the therapy room as well"* (Lynn).

Some other specific recommendations are that *"Counsellors should be advocates. . . . I like narrative therapy. It goes beyond the individual to social issues like racism"* (Amanda). Lynn prefers the Popular Education model as it relies on women's own knowledge; women have the answers and can learn from each other. In sum, *mental health professionals need to have their consciousness raised!*

Consciousness-raising is *Highly* recommended

For all of us, our experiences of consciousness-raising have either increased personal happiness and mental health *or* at least have reduced personal suffering. Moreover, it seems to be a precursor and a motivation to create social change. *No one* has any regrets.

"I feel so blessed" (Lynn).

"Consciousness-raising is the best thing that women can do" (Lynn).

"The more we learn about each other and about the parts of our lives that require struggle to deal with and the more we share that with each other, the better it is for all of us" (Marilyn).

Change begins with consciousness-raising (Karey).

"It isn't easy" but, *"no matter what, consciousness-raising is worth it"* (Karey).

"Consciousness-raising can be a mixed blessing, but overall, . . . it has given me a great quality of life" (Jay).

"I'm so thankful" to have a critical analysis. *"It's saved my life really"* (Christina).

"I wouldn't change my life for a million dollars" (Amanda).

"The benefits of having a raised consciousness are practically ... incalculable. Every possible aspect of your life could be improved, could be made richer, could be made easier. It could be made happier. . . . It comes down to . . . goodness and ... ethics and ... happiness" (Marilyn).

Feedback from Participants

Feedback on the Researcher's Summary

In order for readers of this work to assess the validity of the above account of our

collective experiences of consciousness-raising, feedback solicited from participants is reported

herein. As previously discussed, the original intention was to collaboratively derive and/or

analyze such a summary within the group. As the group was too small to represent the seven

participants, the author provided a written outline of the summary to participants for their

subsequent input. Due to time constraints, one woman had only ever offered her individual

narrative and had not intended to participate in the collaborative group. Another was neither able

to attend the group nor provide feedback on the summary due to unforeseen circumstances. What

follows is feedback from the remaining four participants. Original quotes are provided to retain

accuracy and are indicated by quotation marks. Verbal comments received by telephone have

been paraphrased and are in italics only.

"I just read the summary and it's VERY impressive. I have no problems with it except that I think fathers (parents?) could be mentioned as a possible source of consciousness-raising!" (*subsequently added to summary of experiences).

"I just looked over the 'overall themes' . . . . I don't really have anything extra to add – I think you've done a fabulous job of pulling out the major ideas and yet also keeping as many 'voices' in the document as possible. I think it's wonderful."

"I just looked over your summary and I think you did a fantastic job . . . again, it helped me for you to put it together like that. I had a harder time with seeing the similarities, but everything you put down was really great. And your questions really are good to get a look at the process. I believe I was so far in it, I couldn't see it that clearly. This [summary] *really helps me see what I have gone through. It doesn't feel so overwhelming now that you put it into wards and a summary like that. IT IS SO GREAT. Thanks so much."* [This woman had mentioned in an earlier e-mail that she had been struck mainly by the wide range of diversity in experiences and was having difficulty seeing common themes.]

It is a great summary, very rich. I can't see anything that might be missed out. On top of the stories and the themes, these narratives also suggest a wider analysis about society and power, about the status quo, and the fear of losing power. It says a lot about the oppressive nature of capitalism and neo-liberalism. I have to say, I am not surprised by the findings. I hope you're going to publish articles about it.

Feedback on the Research Process

Discussion on the process and how participants were impacted by their involvement in this project are also included in the following section describing "The Group" meeting. The following additional four accounts were from one woman who was present for the group and three who were not. The first is a paraphrasing of verbal telephone feedback from the participant unable to attend the group due to illness. The rest are written e-mail messages, including one from the pilot study participant. Again, paraphrases are in italics only, direct quotes in quotation marks.

There was great representation of society in the diversity of participants. It speaks to why people responded to your advertisement for participants. These are people who have been affected, who have been oppressed. The title, 'Women's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising', is powerful. It caught my interest. There is a need to be heard. As a participant, it felt wonderful to have someone asking about my experiences and expressing interest in who I am. There are few opportunities in life where we can just sit and talk for a couple hours and have someone listen with interest. There was also much in the stories I could relate to, much that I didn't talk about myself. There are layers to our experiences, and it's a matter of priorities. Some things I'm just not ready to talk about. I had been very interested in meeting the other women, and I'm sorry I didn't make it to the group. I am looking forward to us all getting together for dinner next month.

"Thank you again for asking me to participate in this research -- it's been such a wonderful experience and has really inspired me about the process and the empowering possibilities of research. I think the information is so valuable and so important – I have been having lots of talks with people about lots of different things -- you have sparked some change already!!!"

"Your interview with me was incredibly meaningful to me. I felt very drained afterwards but in a very good way! The questions you asked and how they made me think about things since the interview have been profound. I have been referring to our interview to friends . . . about the things that came up. It has been an incredible experience thus far and I would highly recommend it to anyone . . . . Very cathartic indeed . . . . Thank you for allowing me to take part. I've loved it!" (S, pilot study participant)

The following quote is lengthy, but is included in its entirety as it demonstrates the

importance of sharing experiences and making connections, indeed, the consciousness-raising

process.

"I read all the stories but Lynn's last night and I just read Lynn's now . . . . I jotted notes on all of them, but Lynn's [so far], so I will share them with you now.

Well, when I first started reading the other's stories, I heard myself continually saying WOW. WOW. WOW. Since my consciousness raising, I thought about the possibility of a health problem and being out of control, so Marilyn's experience helped me see how someone might have to handle that. I also noted that Marilyn's experience of knowing that she was as good as everyone else was so different than mine. I had truly believed that something was really wrong with me and I was a terrible bad person - subhuman. I still struggle with this. I universalized this experience. I also recognized that I had no parents - emotionally I was an orphan. I knew this before, but it stood out as more real. From reading this, I learned that there are certainly variations in our individual lives within oppression.

When I reread my own story, I felt like I had/was taking another step. I felt more like I was looking back at my experiences more than I ever did before. I felt I had more objectivity and distance. I also felt a regret of how much I didn't say. Of course, you can go on forever. There really is a lot to talk about. I cried as I read my story. I also recognized more clearly that I didn't cooperate with the structure my whole life, but I blamed me. So I guess you could say I got a clearer perspective in rereading my story. In reading the stories, I really liked moving out of the aloneness I had been in. I very much liked this connection, even if it was only through words on paper. Some of the words were extremely powerful.

With Amanda's story, I had more WOW's and felt that she had it really bad, worse than me. I found it interesting how her class oppression was so out there and urgent and female oppression was submerged. Sometimes I feel my life is the opposite. The female oppression is out there, but the class oppression is submerged. Even though it isn't right out there - directly - that one man is killing another over a class issue. In truth, indirectly it is happening all the time.

A friend of mine killed himself last winter, went down to the river, shot himself in the head, they found him 1½ months later. I had several talks with him right before he died. I certainly don't know his whole life, but I believed he did it because he couldn't do the job thing. He had problems for years. A lot of lower class men have to go through hell with their bodies and minds to do some of their jobs. But even the 9-5 schedule is

just human spirit killing and some of us have too much spirit to do it. Anyway, I guess some psychologist would have said he died because of some mental illness. Truth was, He (like myself) could not FIT in, could not make our lives work in a thriving, nurturing way. Point is class oppression is killing people in this country, although certainly it is not as horrific as Amanda's story. I want to say I am very grateful to hear these stories. To hear Amanda's feelings was extremely interesting and eye opening. I enjoyed her views and I thought she made extremely RIGHT ON statements about psychology.

Christina's process seemed more closely aligned with my own. I identified with her process away from mainstream. I really felt that I was no longer alone. . . .

I felt Jay's comments were extremely powerful for me to hear. I felt she spoke straight to my heart. I felt empowered. I need to hear her comment that it is okay to be quiet till we have the courage to speak. I just went through many social events where I remained quiet . . . and I had not been okay with me. Jay's comments also made me question things about myself. I can not articulate it exactly, but I felt a bit 'spun around', in a good way – gave me some things I need to think about. It felt a definite change in my energy within myself.

Nomi's comment about strong women impacted me because my mother never liked strength in me. About 10 years ago, she finally said in a very sarcastic way, 'You always were the strong one' – and I finally could Say AND WHAT IS WRONG WITH THAT!!!!! She wanted me weak and unhappy. Then I was just in a relationship with a man who wanted me strong and happy, I couldn't be weak and sad!!!! Crazy. So I am now telling myself, I CAN BE ALL OF IT and be okay! Ugghhh – but I do still have an intense fear of losing people's love and fear that people won't like me.

I can say my spirit grew and moved as I read the stories. It strengthened me. I think it has prepared me to take more risks and to stand strong in what I have learned. I learned so many things, resonated with many things. I had a hard time identifying the common themes. I believe it was so emotionally overwhelming for me and that was a block at identifying the common themes. I was very involved in all the details to see the bigger picture. I think I was more keyed into the differences and then the individual things that I resonated with. I guess I do see we had the same struggle. Yes, my consciousness was raised by reading the stories. Absolutely. I think the stories give an even clearer view of the culture. I think it is appalling. . . .

It took quite a while to read through the stories for me, because it was quite powerful. I found myself, at times, needing breaks, and my mind wondering, not 'cause I was bored, but because I instinctively removed my mind 'cause it was some hard stuff to read.

Thank you so much for the experience and the invite. I think I must certainly have gotten more out of this than you! I got much more out of it than I anticipated. It feels like a catalytic moment. I want to go out in my area and find some women and start talking, and continue this!!!! Thanks . . . . I think you did something wonderful. It certainly feels like you provided a piece of something I was looking for for a long time, but looking in the wrong places and going about it the wrong way. You have definitely planted seeds."

The Group

The most obvious observation to be made of the group was that it was disappointingly small. Additionally, we were three white women, hopefully a coincidence; certainly limited in terms of representation. Nonetheless, the discussion was engaging and inspiring, full of laughter

and camaraderie, as well as serious dialogue. Conversation included a continuation of themes raised within the narratives, noticing similarities, learning from our differences, and extending our consciousness-raising or analyses on these issues. This naturally led to discussion of naming world problems and possible solutions, that is, talk of creating change. In other words, what is to be done with the findings of this research and where to go from here? We also discussed the research process and the personal impact of participating in this project. What is particularly interesting about this group meeting is that it does indeed illuminate the process of consciousness-raising, from sharing stories and learning from other's experiences, to naming our experiences and the world, and to brainstorming for solutions.

Rather than simply summarizing the discussion, a condensed version of the conversation seems to provide a richer and more accurate description of what transpired during our four hour meeting. What follows is not a direct transcript of the meeting, but rather a cutting and pasting of quotes, with relatively minor changes for the purpose of flow. It is to be noted that this is an account of the group meeting from the perspective of the author. It was subsequently verified for accuracy by both participants.

[P1 indicates the first participant to speak. R is researcher.]

P1: *I was very glad to hear that you are one of the participants. I think it's really important and adds to the research process. It means a great deal.*

P2: *Yeah, I think it's wonderful to hear that you are one of the stories because that was a question that I had. I thought to myself that I'd really like for you to participate, to get the same feeling that I have, but I decided, that's OK, because she's an interviewer and she doesn't have to speak about her experiences. Now I'm realizing that was just a justification.*

P1: *I think it's really exciting. This is a departure from traditional research technique, which is very individualistic.*

P2: *I've been thinking about how much I've enjoyed the whole process. It's got me really excited about this form of research. I've been telling people about this research and the focus group and how collaborative it is and how it's really empowering and . . . It's really pushed me into seeing how there are different possibilities for research. This to me is so exciting because I hadn't really thought about that before. I've had a little experience with research, but it's been so individual. What's so exciting is that the process you're following is very connected to the actual product*

and the content. I think where feminist research often stops is that the content is fabulous, but it's still trapped within the confines of traditional research models.

P1: *I think your research process has been pretty much impeccable. I've been involved in research projects before and it's a very difficult thing. I keep thinking about us as sort of serving the same role as the advisory committees, which were made up of various experts. We are all experts on the experience being researched. Here you have an advisory committee of women who are broadly based, well, maybe not as broadly as we would like, but we have a lot of variety, diversity. I think that the fact that you made this happen was a stroke of genius. It's unfortunate that we're not all here, but that's not your fault. I think this was one of the best academic research projects I've ever heard of. And just the fact that you're not keeping yourself isolated and removed from the blood and guts of what you're doing. You could have.*

P2: *You gave a lot of opportunity for ownership and feedback along the way. I wouldn't have changed any of that. There've been no scary surprises in the sense of somebody feeling vulnerable. In terms of being a caretaker of the boundaries of the project, you've been very clear. That's been very well managed. And I think very ethical.*

P1: *mm hmm. That's exactly the word I was just thinking. For a lot of people being researched lately, it's rather like being colonized like the First Nations with troops of researchers and various other kinds of usurious folks coming in to research us.*

R: *Wow. I'm very happy to hear that. One of my criteria for validation is 'what do the participants themselves think of the research?'* . . . [reads e-mail feedback as quoted above]

P1: [with reference to the participant who wrote about her plans to form a women's discussion group beginning with this project] *I think we've got to start a political women's party. . . .*

R: *So, how did you both feel as you read your own and other's narratives?*

P2: *I feel very proud . . . overwhelmed, because when I did that interview I was very much in a place of rushing from one work and volunteer activity to the next. And then I actually just lost my job due to funding cuts. So my written narrative came at a time when I was pretty down. I was in a sort of inward looking spiralling down. When I read it I thought, wow, I know a lot more than I thought I knew. Actually, it was more that I have very clear ideas and values on these things that I had never really sat down to articulate. Like a mission statement on my life.*

P1: *I feel so glad and also privileged for not having packed around all that shit that some others talked about. I've reflected a lot on my life over the last while, so none of it was a surprise to me. It's something I've gone through in both different and similar ways before. So, for me it wasn't a big epiphany as it was for others. It's wonderful that that happened for them. Still, it's great to be discussing these issues. It was interesting to see, for example, in black and white, how government policy works. There just isn't the context in our lives where we can have that kind of conversation with other women. For years, I've felt the lack of a political party with which I could feel good about affiliating.*

P2: *Have you heard of the 52% coalition?* [discussion of the nascent women's coalition leads to a further analyzing of mechanisms of dominance and oppression] *Sometimes it's so hard to struggle on.*

P1: *and it's so hard to feel connected. I don't have time to see my friends very often. I don't know what we can do about that. That would go some way to addressing what you were talking about before . . . . There were so many commonalities in the narratives. There was one story in particular; I was reading away and I thought, is this me? That was wonderful to just feel less, well not that I feel particularly isolated, just to feel that here are all these clearly wonderful women who I've never met before in my life and who I'd love to meet, who all share similar analyses. That's pretty neat. At the same time, I'm recognizing how Amanda's experience of gender and race and class are different from mine. That's something I realize I have to look at. It's something that I had not really understood well or appreciated before. It's a reminder that it's so easy to leave women out. We can alienate women.*

P2: *After reading Marilyn's story, I realized that I hadn't acknowledged the experience of disability in my own interview. And as you [to R] mentioned, you had neglected to include anti-Semitism in your discussion of oppression. So, you can learn, but if you're not vigilant, it sets you back into the mainstream. Often my experience of oppression is a theoretical one. It's only really by listening and hearing the stories of other women who have that practical knowledge that I can really appreciate it. A lot of times when I read stories of women of colour, it crystallises things in a way that would have taken me a lot longer to verbalize.*

P1: *It just means that we have to talk to each other more and share our stories. Like **this!** It was really affirming to once again understand that women are strong and powerful and clear-thinking and, you know, we know what's wrong. And we could fix it too. It was very good reading all the stories. If we had the chance to sit and talk to each other, we would realize that we're all as wonderful as we all are.*

P2: *Yes, women know. They know so much. If there's truth at all, it's in these stories. I felt there was so much I can learn. So many things. I really appreciated Amanda's story because it brought in a global perspective. I know that if I revisit the narratives again, I'll learn so much more. I was amazed at people's ability to recognize what's going on. I felt empowered. Like an embarrassment of riches.*

R: *Yeah, for me it was real consciousness-raising as well. I learned a lot . . . about how there can be such different realities, all co-existing, all truth.*

P1: *and complementary.*

R: *I was just so impressed by the stories. So moved. So amazed. It made me really glad I did this thesis. I feel so lucky to have accidentally stumbled across such wonderful, diverse, interesting, inspiring and open women.*

P1: *It's not by accident. You have to take more credit than that.*

R: *But, it's not like my phone was ringing off the hook and I picked the best ones. It's such a coincidence.*

P1: *Oh, that is magic. It's not random, but it's sort of a sample of women who I might never otherwise have met, but who are all potential friends and buddies. I thought, wow, there are thousands of them out there. And we're just dealing with the lower mainland. [all laugh] It's wonderful. You had a big hand in making this all happen. It is magic, but there was a catalyst. You should think about writing a book, publishing it, whether academically, in psychology or women's studies, or an article in People Magazine. Think of all the other women who would be*

*interested in reading this. **We** all thought it was fascinating. And I don't think it was because our stories were part of it.*

P2: *It really shifts the ideas about knowledge coming from the experts. This is a real continuation of the Popular Education model where knowledge comes from within. People who are oppressed are where the knowledge is. One of the things I appreciated so much about the process is that it was relatively easy. It amazed me how much came out of an hour and a half interview.*

P1: *which I think is a credit to the skill of the interviewer.*

R: *Well, you all had such great things to say.*

P1: *We wouldn't have known . . . I mean we hadn't said it before.*

P2: *We hadn't thought about what questions to ask.*

P1: *I too was impressed by the questions. You could see when you read all the stories that there was a method to the madness. You could see there was a structure, but there were so many different and illuminating things that came out using the same structure.*

[further discussion and critical analyses of things that came out in the stories]

P2: *Another commonality I noticed was how having your consciousness raised to a certain point leads you to having a smaller and smaller circle of people you can tolerate. I think talking about and identifying the painful aspects of consciousness-raising was a good thing too because it made it okay to have those feelings occasionally.*

R: *I have to admit that was a question that I threw in at the last minute because I didn't want people to feel that they were expected to only talk about how wonderful consciousness-raising is, that I was leading their answers in a certain direction. At the time, I couldn't really think of any negative consequences, but, I thought, you never know. It turns out, even when I did my own story, I had lots to say and so did most of us. That really surprised me.*

P1: *Yes, I thought it was interesting too. Several women talked about loneliness, in a very specific way. If you have a gender analysis, it leaves you in kind of an isolated place.*

P2: *I've had conversations with my mother. And she's pointed out how **I've** had connections with other women that **she's** never had because she's married. So, there's an alternate wonderfulness that comes out of that.*

P1: *Yeah, and how many good nuclear families do you know?* [all laugh]

R: *Can I think of any woman who's in a relationship with a man and is happy with him? No, not one comes to mind. In fact, in my experience and virtually every woman I know, the biggest source of grief has been men. So, why are we still believing that that's what's going to make us happy?*

P1: *Because it serves somebody's interest to think that.*

[further discussion and analysis]

P1: *It also raises the question of how do you identify with your community without isolating yourself from everything else?*

P2: *How do you incorporate people into your life who are different from you and how do you become an ally?*

[further discussion and analysis; brainstorming]

R: *So, would you say that your consciousness has been raised by reading your own and the other women's stories?*

P2: *I'd just like to reiterate, yes.*

P1: *I'll second that emotion.*

P2: *Talking about the dominant culture, these aren't the stories that we construct unless the questions are asked out right. I think if you had asked me to sit down and write this story, I wouldn't have come up with all the depth of analysis that I did. You had deliberately thought about which questions to ask to elucidate those answers. So, it raised a lot of issues to the forefront.*

P1: *It didn't do quite the same thing for me because I've bumped into those ways of looking at things before. It's always valuable though to revisit those issues and kind of fine tune your analysis to make it more comprehensive, to include more aspects. For example, I'm going to have to think about how this gender stuff compared to race fits in with my other understandings.*

[further discussion, analysis]

P2: *One thing that really struck me from all the narratives is how consciousness-raising is on ongoing process. I think it was Jay who said it's not just one event. I really responded to that. You can have those big moments, but it really is a two steps forward, one step back process.*

R: *I noticed how consciousness-raising has been integral to virtually every single aspect of our lives: our identity, our self-worth, our mental health, our relationships, our work lives, the meaning and purpose of our lives, our spirituality, and our passion to create a better world for us all!*

P2: *That was one thing that I really responded to too, now that you mention it, was the spirituality part. For a long time, I've been telling people that I'm not spiritual. But I realize that the political work is my spirituality.*

P1: *I once spoke to a minister in the Unitarian church when I was in the hospital. They come by to visit you in your bed. She ended up being a very wonderful woman and it was nice to talk to her. I said, 'I'm not very spiritual.' And she said, 'well, political activism is spirituality too, you know.' Well, I could have just about signed up right then and there.* [all laugh] *So I realize that what I'm doing is something that can be included in the spiritual realm. Maybe I don't consult the goddesses, and I don't have any kind of spiritual practice really, but trying to help other people is surely a good thing, isn't it? I think we're all doing spiritual work if we think of the spirit of women and whether or not it can be enhanced or lightened or enriched. So, I agree. I think we **are** doing spiritual work.*

R: *That's interesting because that was one little loose end I was trying to figure out. Everybody said that consciousness-raising has either given them meaning in life or purpose or spirituality or you had said, it's given you a huge passion. I was going to ask you, in fact, do you think that's tied in there? Is that sort of the same as . . .*

P2: *Yeah, I do think it is.*

P1: *I do too.*

P2: *Because for me, passion does connect the soul.*

P1: *It's how we nurture ourselves and how we feel whole.*

P2: *It reminds me of that great quote by an aboriginal elder in Australia who said, if you're here to help me, I don't want to talk to you. If you're here because your liberation is wrapped up in mine, then lets talk.*

[discussion of the implications for the field of psychology, along the lines of that already discussed in the individual narratives and the summary of the narratives]

R: *So, what have we learned from all this? And what are the implications for other women?*

P2: *One of the things it's raised for me is that it can't stop here. That it is a part of a process that leads to change. Although for a lot of women, that may be as far as they can go. And I appreciate that for me, talking is a first step. For some women, just getting to verbalizing, they've had that many more barriers. To honour those experiences, for me, that translates to some kind of action, to get out of the apathy. However, you define that action. The other thing that consciousness-raising has taught me is to honour women wherever they stand. But, also, that it doesn't remain on the individual level.*

P1: *It reminds me of a practical experience I once had with a feminist trade union. Solidarity is strength and I don't think it's ever a good idea to remain isolated or unconnected from our sisters everywhere. Now that's a pretty big job, but, it's what you were talking about, it's a process that should go on. I'm not sure what that means in terms of everyone. I hope it goes on. And at the very least we have to see you through your MA. [laughter] But what does that mean further? That certainly has implications for other women.*

P2: *I like Karey's idea of a discussion group. I was thinking of getting white women together to talk about unlearning our racism. That was one of the things that the whole process brought up for me because for a long time, I was looking to other people for leadership, and it's just in the last couple of months I've been thinking, well, I'll just have to do it. That sort of answers the question of what should be done with this information. Partially, how it's impacted me is that it's motivated me for sure. I think it's made me a little bit more conscious of my own political . . . [pause]*

R: *brought your thoughts more to the forefront?*

P2: *mm hmm. Not that I haven't thought about these things before.*

P1: *I sometimes think I should just start getting in there more and just doing, whatever it is we need to do to make it better. But, I'm never quite sure about the priorities.*

R: *That's how I've been feeling. For the first time in my life, I'll have some free time once I finish this degree . . .*

P1: *I'm sort of semi-serious about the idea of a women's political party. The last election was ridiculous. . What can we do about that? Perhaps the 52% coalition is a good idea too. But there are so many other areas where there is political work to be done. Whatever you do is important and better than not doing anything.*

R: *Thirty years from now, we'll look back and say, 'remember it all started at your kitchen table?'* [laughter]

P2: *and how fitting that it's in the kitchen.*

P1: *While you're talking, I keep coming back to just how much we, as women, have to continue to talk to each other and get together and share our stories.*

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The stories shared by these seven women certainly support existing theory and research as expounded in previous chapters. As well, they contribute to our conceptual understandings, bringing theory to life, by providing authentic examples of the process and impact of consciousness-raising. Furthermore, these narratives serve to illustrate the emancipatory potential of consciousness-raising in resisting and re-writing our dominant cultural narrative. The purpose of a qualitative narrative enquiry is not to prove a cause and effect relationship, but rather to illumine the complexities and the possibilities of lived experience. The narratives herein indeed provide such insight into women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

As discussed in chapters one and two, existing research related to consciousness-raising is by now largely dated. As well, virtually all research is based on quantitative measures or short-answer questionnaires. And as uncovered in the preceding literature review, very few studies have assessed long term outcomes (sustained effects at 9 and 24 months are the exceptions), although according to the participants in this study, it is a long, ongoing process. Most research projects are either short-term assessments or cross-sectional designs comparing different groups at one point in time. As such, the present study contributes to existing theory and research by providing a view from a unique angle, that is, a glimpse into the richness of women's lived experiences, as women describe their ongoing lifelong journeys of critical consciousness. In the words of one participant,

> It's only really by listening and hearing the stories of other women who have that practical knowledge that I can really appreciate it. A lot of times when I read stories of women of colour, it crystallises things in a way that would have taken me a lot longer to verbalize" (P2).

Relevance to Existing Literature

In some ways, drawing comparisons with the various models of consciousness-raising outlined in chapter two is difficult due to the small and diverse sample of this study. To take a close look at any of the identity development models, for example, a larger sample of more homogenous participants, such as "Urban American Indians" or "feminists," would be required. However, the purpose of this study was not to examine the discrete stages of theoretical models, but rather to look at how women and their lives might be impacted by undergoing a process of consciousness-raising.

Moreover, some models have been criticized for neglecting common experiences of oppression. Freire, for example, has overlooked patriarchy (Nadeau, 1996), while Downing and Roush's feminist identity development model has omitted issues such as race, class, age, sexual orientation and disability (Fischer, et al., 2000). As this collection of narratives illustrates, many women experience *multiple* oppressions in their daily lives and a model which looks only at one form of oppression may be less useful for the present purposes.

As it turns out, the diversity of the present sample supports Walters (1995/1996) contention that the various developmental models of consciousness-raising are overwhelmingly similar and may be applicable to most if not all marginalized peoples. In fact, if we are to collapse the models into a broader theory of oppression and consciousness-raising in general, this diverse sample allows us to see the relevance of an inclusive model to such a wide range of women's experiences. Certainly, evident in all these women's experiences of critical consciousness is a "road to liberation" as suggested by hooks (cited in Hertzberg, 1996). As it is not specific to race or gender, Watts and Abdul-Adil's (cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996) model of critical consciousness may be most applicable to this diverse sample of women. Without looking at the boundaries between stages, we can see in this collection of experiences, a general progression from an acritical acceptance of the status quo to an eventual critical analysis of oppression and an accompanying commitment to creating social change. In this sample,

however, there is variance in the beginning stages. That is, some women grew up with basic notions of social justice and experienced less oppression than others.

Nonetheless, there is much evidence from the collection of narratives to support the overall developmental theory of a critical consciousness. In the adaptive stage, where people attempt to adapt or fit in to the system, we might see Amanda wanting to change her last name to one of the wealthy class; Jay spending years in therapy and self-help groups trying to "fix" herself; or Nomi wishing she was somehow "white enough". Upon taking alternative history courses, Karey's shock, anger and grief as she recognized her previously distorted views of herself and others, may be evidence of The Pre-critical stage, where people begin questioning their former attempts to adapt. Likewise, the later Critical Stage of greater analysis may be evident in comments such as Marilyn's: "the analysis just gets deeper and stronger. . . and clearer." Lastly, to varying degrees, all participants have mentioned their active commitment towards social and political change, that is, the final Liberation Stage.

Freirian conscientization or political consciousness-raising, and Prilleltensky's process of inculcation and counter-acting of cultural hegemony, are two other models not specific to gender and race that have relevance for this diverse sample of women. For example, in this study, as in the models, self- blame and lack of self-confidence, working harder and harder to "be okay", and learned helplessness are eventually transformed into a critical socio-political analysis, where people come to understand that their personal failures are often actually social problems of a political nature. Self-actualization and collaborative activist work for social change, as described in the final revolutionary consciousness stage of conscientization, clearly are evident in these women's descriptions. In this study, consciousness-raising invariably was accompanied by a desire to create social change, supporting Freire's (1995) claim that "a deepened consciousness of their situation [naturally] leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry (p. 66)." Perhaps the two processes are inseparable. Interestingly, the group discussion

manifested each level of political consciousness-raising described in the Freirian model of conscientization: (1) naming the problem of oppression, (2) identifying its causes, and (3) taking action to resolve this oppression.

There is also much evidence within this collection of narratives to support the models of racial, feminist, womanist, and urban American Indian identity development, particularly if we are to replace the specific references to gender and race with a more general reference to oppression, *however* that may be experienced. Attempting to combine the models, the process of consciousness-raising might be described as a transformation from acceptance of the status quo and internalized oppression to a psychological liberation, where self and group deprecation become an identity of pride and worth. It might also be described as a movement from psychological distress to greater mental health. Such internal changes also inspire direct action towards social change, perhaps granting some degree or sense of control. As previously mentioned, not all participants completely accepted the status quo in their early lives; similarly, experiences and effects of oppression varied widely. For some women, it was more as though they joined the process mid-journey, while other participants' portray their experiences of consciousness-raising as a personal metamorphosis similar to that described by Cross (1995).

Existing research has indicated a multitude of beneficial effects of consciousness-raising, many of which are supported by the present study. Commonly reported outcomes in the literature, as in this research, include enhanced self-concept such as increased self-confidence, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-understanding and feelings of personal adequacy, as well as more positive attitudes towards one's group. Similarly, greater empowerment, sense of control, adjustment, awareness of commonalities, autonomy and assertiveness have been found in previous research as in the present study. Critical consciousness has likewise been found to be a coping resource and has been shown to raise awareness of the connection between the personal and the political, shifting attributions of self-blame to an understanding of systemic causes of

"individual" problems. Changes in interpersonal relationships and increased participation in community life were also mentioned both by the present participants and in pre-existing research.

The literature on consciousness-raising describes an increased "connection with women and caution towards men" (Bargad & Hyde, 1991). In this study, several participants mentioned having higher standards around potential male partners, and some comments, though perhaps fewer than the literature would suggest, reflect a greater connection with women. Replacing women and men with one's own community versus one's oppressors, we can see a similar outcome in Amanda's connection and solidarity with her Chilean or Latino community, as well as in her avoidance of white middle class feminists who might act in an oppressive manner towards immigrants.

Another similarity between the findings of this study and existing literature is that "psychologically and spiritually the person is significantly different" (Cross, 1971, p. 22), or as Morley (1993, p. 122) describes it, a "quasi religious conversion." Present participants identify their political consciousness as being highly connected to their spirituality. For example, "I realize that the political work *is* my spirituality" (P2), or "It has brought me into a more spiritual realm, knowing that there is a reason why I was born in Chile [and] for the choices I made" (Amanda). Like findings in past research, some participants also spoke of an ability to educate or influence others or an increased interest in learning more or raising their consciousness about other issues. Perhaps the most common finding in both this study and other research is women's commitment to social change as a result of their raised consciousness.

As discussed in chapter two, there are some areas of inconsistency in the existing research. For example, enhanced body image has not been strongly correlated with later stages of feminist identity development. The current study also reflects such lingering dissatisfaction with one's body, despite having a critical analysis around the issue. It could be that our culture is so utterly saturated with a certain unattainable "ideal" that much more collective resistance is required to overcome this aspect of internalized oppression.

The main area of inconsistency in previous research was found within the middle stages of identity development models. Participants in this study were asked about their *overall* experiences and were not asked to reflect on possible discrete stages. Not surprisingly, the findings do not begin to suggest discrete stages. It could be that such stages may have been more evident had the right questions been asked, or perhaps the stages simply are less distinct than those proposed by the models. As previously discussed, the literature suggests several explanations for such inconsistent findings, including the possibility that race may be more salient than gender for women of colour. This theory certainly seems plausible based on Amanda's story. Though she had always considered herself white, Amanda experienced far greater oppression as an immigrant than she did as a woman when she came to Canada.

Another explanation for these inconsistent findings was that women entering the middle stages of identity development may need more social support to affirm their alternative consciousness (Letlaka-Rennert et al., 1997). This possibility too can be seen in the current study as several women noticed inadequate support and resources to turn to; suggestions were made by some participants for a more receptive, accepting space in alternative communities. Parham and Helms (1985a) also question whether there may be different cognitive and affective processes involved and this theory seems consistent with Christina's comment on the difficulty of going "from an intellectual analysis to a place of feeling *really* okay".

In explaining these research inconsistencies, the literature also suggests that middle stages may be a temporary period of identity confusion, accompanied by greater conflict as women begin to challenge their oppression. Examples of this explanation are provided in Lynn's description of her increased conflicts and subsequent break-up with her ex-partner. Similarly, Karey describes how her "rage and feelings at how I was being treated came spewing out and added to the conflicts. Perhaps some of the conflicts were actually *due* to my knowledge and making different choices." Overall, experiences described by participants in this study support several of the explanatory theories put forth by other researchers.

Looking at this collection of narratives as a whole, we might observe a cumulative, rather than a linear process with discrete stages, similar to that found by Fischer et al. (2000). As participants speak of their ongoing struggles, their good and bad days, or the mixed effects of consciousness-raising, we might also envision their experiences of consciousness-raising as the spiralling progression, the back and forth movement in and out of stages, and the simultaneous presence of characteristics from multiple stages, as described by Helms (1995).

Of course, some findings in the existing literature were *not* mentioned by the present participants, for example, anxiety, interpersonal-sensitivity, flexibility, and paranoid-ideation in the early pre-critical consciousness stages. And although depression in the early stages was found in some studies but not this one, three participants *did* report that they may well have committed suicide had they not gained a critical social analysis of themselves and the world. Another difference between this and previous research is that while Stake and Rose (1994) found a greater tolerance of others due to consciousness-raising, several participants in the current study actually spoke of *less* tolerance of mainstream others.

What is particularly interesting about the present study is that although not all participants fit the early pre-critical awareness stages of internalized oppression as described in the literature, they were *all* nonetheless profoundly impacted by their consciousness-raising experiences in an overwhelmingly positive manner. Another noteworthy difference is that while the literature often describes the first stage as a passive acceptance of the dominant culture, as discussed in the preceding chapter, the narratives of these women reveal many instances of resistance throughout their lives, both in the pre- as well as post-critical consciousness stages.

There were several other unexpected findings uncovered in the present study. Some are mentioned, but not emphasized within the literature, for example, the spiritual aspect of consciousness-raising. *All* participants referred to this change as an outcome of their consciousness-raising, or expressed how profoundly their lives had become imbued with meaning. That everyone experienced consciousness-raising as some sort of a mixed blessing also

was not expected. All participants voiced criticisms of our alternative subcultures and/or experiences of isolation or loneliness due to their acquired critical consciousness. However, each woman also felt strongly that the benefits clearly outweighed the negative consequences. Other surprises included the extent to which several important components of the consciousness-raising process were demonstrated in the group discussion, as well as how much several women had been positively impacted by their participation in this project.

As a whole, this collection of narratives certainly supports the various, but similar, theories and research findings reported in chapters one and two, providing a somewhat unique view from the perspective of women's lived experiences. As a snapshot of our cultural narrative, this collection of stories exposes the mechanisms of our dominant culture, the ways in which we are subdued and co-opted. Personal devaluation is necessary in order for us to accept working for low wages or providing free domestic labour. It is a pre-requisite to our accepting an unjust status quo. However, these narratives also illuminate the ways in which women continue to resist, from running away in childhood or refusing to wear "the girl outfits," to later actively fighting for social change. Though the struggle may be ongoing, as these stories reveal, consciousness-raising can indeed be a path of resistance, a path towards psychological as well as socio-political emancipation.

Implications for Psychology

Viewed as co-researchers, participants in this study were asked directly for their opinions on the implications of their experiences for the field of psychology. All articulated clearly how an increased understanding of women's experiences of consciousness-raising could improve the often oppressive practice of counselling psychology. As delineated in the preceding chapter, mental health professionals would do well to incorporate a critical social analysis into their practice. To begin with, this would involve greater educational access to psychology programs for people with disabilities and others marginalized by society. It would also require a critical socio-political analyses being incorporated into educational and training programs, though this is

unlikely to happen within the current conservative climate. Participants also criticized the field of psychology for it's individualistic focus which perpetuates an unjust and psychologically damaging status quo. Given that cultural-political context informs virtually every aspect of our existence, it is imperative that counsellors incorporate such an understanding into their underlying approach to therapy.

This study, like the existing literature, speaks volumes to the empowering and therapeutic possibilities of consciousness-raising. As revealed within participants' feedback, merely participating in this project had profound effects for several women. In some ways, the research process mimicked the common experience of consciousness-raising, as many of us felt validated by sharing our own and by hearing other women's stories. Similarly, several participants mentioned how much they had learned by reading of other women's experiences different from their own. Additionally, the process of consciousness-raising, as illustrated in this study, reflects the value of trusting that women, indeed, are experts in their own experiences. Truly listening to women's stories is important not only for women, but for counsellors as well.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of women sharing their experiences as a therapeutic tool. Groups, therefore, may be an ideal approach to therapy. Similarly, counsellors might wish to encourage women to form their own consciousness-raising or discussion groups. Women writing their own narratives and sharing them with the group could be part of a liberating process, as might a discussion group based on weekly readings of critical literature, to name another example. In an interview discussing means of liberation from internalized oppression, Noam Chomsky (personal communication, Dec. 2000) points out that "There [are] some things you can do in groups you can't do by yourself. . . . Very little is done individually. It's usually done in groups by collective action and interchange and critique and challenge." "Part of the genius of the system of domination and control is to separate people from one another so that doesn't happen." The same might be said for the process of individual counselling.

Almost all participants in this study referred to alternative critical university courses as sources of their consciousness-raising. Counsellors, therefore, may wish to recommend this course of action to clients. But because consciousness-raising also can be a disturbing and isolating process at times, it would be prudent to simultaneously discuss possible sources of social support. The findings of this research further support Prilleltensky's (1990) proposal to incorporate *denunciation* and *annunciation* into the practice of psychology as a means to counter-act hegemony. This would involve raising awareness through exchange of information and support as well as brainstorming around strategies for action and social change. The experiences of women participating in the present study suggest that such action taking not only facilitates a sense of control, but also offers hope for a better world. In a video demonstrating the use of "witnessing conversations," Eva, a young Argentinean women continuing her grandmother's crusade to speak out against military repression and the widespread disappearances of family members says, "the more political work I do, the less therapy I need" (unpublished video by Vikki Reynolds, Yaletown Family Therapy). One manifestation of political activism, says Eva, is worth about ten sessions of therapy.

However, it may be neither ethical nor possible to raise someone else's consciousness. Noam Chomsky's approach is through teaching critical thinking. "Nobody is going to pour truth into your brain. Its something you have to find out for yourself" (personal communication, Dec. 2000). As an educator, "the right way to do things is not to try to persuade people you're right, but to challenge them to think it through for themselves." Consciousness-raising is effective, not because it is coercively imparted from one party to another; but when an alternative version of reality resonates with and validates one's own experience.

Evidence of the possibility of consciousness-raising as a therapeutic process lends support to "radical" approaches to psychology, such as feminist or deconstructive narrative therapy. As a therapeutic intervention, critical social analysis might be incorporated into work with many marginalized individuals and groups. For example, it could be useful in working with

clients dealing with addictions, eating disorders, and sexual abuse, as well as those suffering the effects of discrimination and oppression based on their race, sexual orientation, "disability", ethnicity, religion, and class. This analysis is not meant to conclude that all clients' problems will be solved by a critical social awareness, nor that *all* women will experience consciousness-raising is ways similar to these participants, however, the findings of this research suggest that consciousness-raising has powerful and emancipatory potential, and is relevant to many of the typical problems clients bring to therapy.

Implications for Future Research

Of course, this enquiry has implications for the women's movement as well as any critical or liberatory discipline. An important area for future study could be the design and assessment of intervention programs. For example, the passing of the millennium may be timely for a revival of a women's consciousness-raising movement. As suggested by the findings within this paper, a contemporary approach must be far more inclusive of the multiple oppressions of women (and men, though they were not the focus of this study). While a minority of psychotherapy approaches do incorporate social analysis into practice, there has been little research assessing the outcomes of such interventions. Research investigating when and how and to whom to introduce critical analysis or to encourage seeking outside sources of consciousness-raising would be valuable. Likewise, a closer look at specific themes as potentially key factors in the consciousness-raising process could be beneficial. For example, what role does social support, or perhaps early childhood experiences of oppression, play in women's consciousness-raising?

Another area to enhance understanding might be a closer look at how women's qualitative experiences actually relate to the identity development models. Perhaps another narrative study asking women to describe their experiences within each stage of development could shed further light on the present inconsistencies in research. A longitudinal study interviewing women at ongoing intervals such as three, five or ten years could also elaborate

existing understandings of consciousness-raising experiences. This research is, after all, only one snapshot in time, open to reinterpretation by each participant throughout her life journey. Similarly, past research done on the effects of taking women's studies courses could be extended by interviewing women ten or more years beyond completion of their university classes. And as suggested by the experiences of women in this project, other readings and classes (such as alternative history, Jewish, Black, and Native, for example) have sparked processes of consciousness-raising. The effects of these specific "interventions" could also be explored.

It would be useful to conduct research on more homogenous groups as well. Perhaps other themes specific to each form of oppression would emerge. Investigations where the researcher is a "member" of the group she is researching are always preferable, for example, research specifically conducted by and with aboriginal women, Jewish women, lesbians, or women with disabilities. It also would be interesting to see if participants are impacted any differently than they were in this study. One limitation of the present study is that *all* participants turned out to be university educated. It may be valuable to replicate the study with less privileged women. And lastly, as an anomaly, this qualitative narrative exploration suggests the need for replications to collaborate its findings as well as to further enhance our understanding of other possible commonalities, diversities, and complexities in women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

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Appendix A

Women's Experiences of

"Politicization"
or
"Consciousness-Raising"

Have you experienced discrimination based on your race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, age or any other form of oppression?

Over the course of your life, do you feel you have also experienced consciousness-raising, that is, politicization around any of these forms of oppression? Other terms that might also describe such a process include increased awareness, political consciousness, critical social analysis, or conscientization.

If so, and you are interested in participating in this research project, I would love to talk to you about your experiences. We will meet individually (twice), and in a group (once), to discuss, share and collaboratively make meaning of our collective experiences. It is my hope that the knowledge we may co-construct will be of benefit to ourselves personally as well as to other women in the future.

I am a white woman, researching the impact of politicization/ consciousness-raising on women's lives as part of a Masters degree program in counselling psychology. For further information, or to participate, please contact me at (tel. number).
or lirlam@interchange.ubc.ca

Appendix B

POSTER LOCATIONS

Women's Centres

- Downtown Eastside Women's Centre
- North Shore Women's Centre
- UBC Women Students' Office
- Langara Women's Centre
- SFU Women's Centre

First Nations Facilities

- Eagle Women's Self-Healing Circle
- UBC First Nations House of Learning

GLBT / Queer Facilities

- The Centre
- Pride UBC

Multi-Cultural / Racial or ethnic / Immigrant Facilities

- Kalayaan Women's Centre / Philippine Women Centre of B.C.
- Immigrant & Visible Minority Women of BC
- Vancouver Society of Immigrant & Visible Minority Women
- MOSAIC
- Immigrant Services Society
- South Asian Women's Centre

Disabled Women's Resources

- DAWN (Disabled Women's Network)

Other Women's resources

- Women in Print
- Vancouver Women's Health Collective
- Vancouver Status of Women
- Women's Research Centre
- Battered Women's Support Services

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What are some ways you have internalized the oppression that you have experienced?

In what way would you say your consciousness has been raised? What have been some of your experiences of consciousness-raising? That is, can you recall any particular situations and how did it make you feel?

How has the experience of consciousness-raising impacted you and your life?

Has it changed you as a person? Your self-identity? Your self-concept?

Has it helped insulate you from the oppressive ideology of our culture? That is, has it helped you to *not* internalize oppression?

What do you think your life would be like had you not had exposure to this alternative ideology or different perspective on our culture?

Have there been good and bad effects of experiencing consciousness-raising?

How do you think it may have affected your psychological health? Your self-esteem?

What are the implications of your experiences of consciousness-raising for the field of "psychotherapy"? What does "psychology" need to know about our experiences?

What would you like to share with other women? If you could tell other women anything about your experiences of consciousness-raising, what would you want them to know? In other words, how do you think other women might benefit from having their consciousness raised? (Also, what do you think of the notion that seeing yourself and others as oppressed only makes people feel more oppressed or helpless or disempowered?)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Main Office
Tel: (604) 822-8229
Fax: (604) 822-3302

Program Areas

Special Education

School Psychology

Measurement, Evaluation
& Research Methodology

Human Learning,
Development,
& Instruction

Counselling Psychology
Tel: (604) 822-5259
Fax: (604) 822-2328

Pilot Study Consent Form

Women's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

Co-Investigator
Lorraine Irlam, Graduate Student
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Principal Investigator
Marla Arvay, Assistant Professor
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Director, Research Services
Richard D. Spratley
323 – 2194 Health Sciences Mall, University of British Columbia
822-8598

Purpose of Study:

To gain greater understanding of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

Study Procedures and Confidentiality:

This study is a graduate thesis research project as required for completion of the co-investigator's Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. I understand that my participation will involve one audio taped interview lasting approximately one to two hours. I understand that all material from the interview will be kept confidential between the researcher and her supervisor. Audio tapes and transcripts will be kept locked in a cabinet and any identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study, no later than March 31, 2001. Any identifying information on computer records will be kept confidential by the use of a security password. Material from this study, including portions of my interviews, may or may not be

included in the final report by the researcher, but my anonymity will be maintained. The only exceptions to this confidentiality are in cases of apparent risk of harm to myself or another person, in which case I understand that the researcher is legally bound to report such situations.

I understand that the audio tapes will be destroyed upon completion of this study.

Contact:

If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Dr. Marla Arvay or one of her associates at 822-4625. If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research participant, I may contact the Director of Research Services, University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Consent:

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without repercussions. I understand that the co-investigator will be available to answer any inquiries I might have concerning the procedures and to provide debriefing should I request. I, _____, consent to participate in this pilot study of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Witness   Date

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Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Main Office
Tel: (604) 822-8229
Fax: (604) 822-3302

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School Psychology

Measurement, Evaluation
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Development,
& Instruction

Counselling Psychology
Tel: (604) 822-5259
Fax: (604) 822-2328

Informed Consent

Women's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

Co-Investigator
Lorraine Irlam, Graduate Student
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Principal Investigator
Marla Arvay, Assistant Professor
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Director, Research Services
Richard D. Spratley
323 – 2194 Health Sciences Mall, University of British Columbia
822-8598

Purpose of Study:

To gain greater understanding of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

Study Procedures and Confidentiality:

This study of women's experiences of consciousness-raising is a graduate thesis research project as required for completion of the co-investigator's Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. I understand that my participation will involve two individual audio taped interviews lasting approximately one to three hours each and one group discussion with all other participants lasting approximately two to three hours. I will also be invited to write a narrative summary of my own experiences of consciousness-raising or may leave it to the researcher to write this summary. These summaries will be shared among the other participants and the

purpose of the group meeting shall be to share and discuss our experiences and to collaborate on the meaning of our collective experiences. I understand that all audio taped interviews shall be transcribed and that all identifying information will be kept confidential. I will choose a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity. Audio tapes and transcripts will be kept locked in a cabinet and any identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study, no later than March 31, 2001. Any identifying information on computer records will be kept confidential by the use of a security password. Material from this study, including the summary of my experiences and portions of my interviews, may be included in the final report by the researcher, but my anonymity will be maintained. The only exceptions to this confidentiality are in cases of apparent risk of harm to myself or another person, in which case I understand that the researcher is legally bound to report such situations. I understand that the audio tapes will be destroyed upon completion of this study.

Contact:

If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Dr. Marla Arvay or one of her associates at 822-4625. If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research participant, I may contact the Director of Research Services, University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Consent:

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without repercussions. I understand that the co-investigator will be available to answer any inquiries I might have concerning the procedures and to provide debriefing should I request. I, _____, consent to participate in this study of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Witness   Date

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2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

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& Instruction

Counselling Psychology
Tel: (604) 822-5259
Fax: (604) 822-2328

Group Consent Form

Women's Experiences of Consciousness-Raising

Co-Investigator
Lorraine Irlam, Graduate Student
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Principal Investigator
Marla Arvay, Assistant Professor
Dept. of Counselling Psychology
University of British Columbia
822-4625

Director, Research Services
Richard D. Spratley
323 – 2194 Health Sciences Mall, University of British Columbia
822-8598

Purpose of Study:

To gain greater understanding of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

Study Procedures and Confidentiality:

This study is a graduate thesis research project as required for completion of the co-investigator's Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology. I understand that my participation in the group discussion component of this study will involve one meeting lasting approximately two to three hours. A summary of my own experiences of consciousness-raising, whether written by myself or the researcher, will be shared among the other participants. The purpose of the group meeting will be to share and discuss our experiences and to collaborate on the meaning of our collective experiences.

I understand that this group discussion shall be transcribed and that all identifying information will be kept confidential. I further agree and understand that all participants will have agreed to keep any shared information confidential. I will choose a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity. Audio tapes and transcripts will be kept locked in a cabinet and any identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study, no later than March 31, 2001. Any identifying information on computer records will be kept confidential by the used of a security password. I understand that the audio tapes will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Material from this study, including the summary of my experiences and portions of my interviews, may be included in the final report by the researcher, but my anonymity will be maintained. The only exceptions to this confidentiality are in cases of apparent risk of harm to myself or another person, in which case I understand that the researcher is legally bound to report such situations.

Contact:

If I have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, I may contact Dr. Marla Arvay or one of her associates at 822-4625. If I have any concerns about my treatment or rights as a research participant, I may contact the Director of Research Services, University of British Columbia, Dr. Richard Spratley at 822-8598.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Consent:

This project involves two phases: (1) two individual interviews, and (2) a group discussion. This consent form applies only to the group interview. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without repercussions.
I, _____, consent to participate in this study of women's experiences of consciousness-raising.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Witness   Date

Appendix G

READING OUR NARRATIVES

Thank you all once again for your participation in shaping this project. I hope you enjoy reading each other's stories as much as I have! As you read each of the narratives (I should have asked you to do the same when you read your own, but it's not too late), please reflect on the following questions. You don't necessarily need to come with a written answer to each and every question. This is not a test. ☺ But, jot down notes, any thoughts or feelings that come to mind as you contemplate each woman's story, and as you reflect on the collection of experiences.

1. How did you feel and what did you think as you read and reflected on your own story?

2. How did you feel and what did you think as you read and reflected on others' stories?

3. What things resonated for you?

4. Were there things you hadn't thought of or mentioned in your story that rang true for you?

5. What are the common themes? (It might be helpful to highlight or make a list of some of these similarities.)

6. What are some differences? Where are some diversities in our experiences?

7. What have you learned about the other women? What have you learned about yourself?

8. Would you say your consciousness has been raised in any way by reading about your own and other women's experiences of consciousness-raising?

9. What do these stories tell us about our culture? How does culture influence the stories we construct? What are the cultural narratives being told here?

10. What can we learn from this about consciousness-raising? What does consciousness-raising mean in these women's (our) lives? How does consciousness-raising work?

11. What does all this mean? What conclusions can we come to based on these experiences?

12. What are the implications for the field of psychology?

13. What are the implications for other women?

14. What would have made this project better? What should future research look at?

15. What needs to be done with this information? That is, what good are our conclusions?

16. How has your involvement in this project impacted you?

17. What else? What other questions/aspects do we want to consider?

Several participants have mentioned to me that they are very much looking forward to meeting each other and to sharing and discussing our experiences. So am I! I think it will be a very interesting discussion. So, bring your thoughts and ideas and questions so that we can collaboratively co-construct the meaning of consciousness-raising in women's lives.

Feel free to call me beforehand if you have any concerns or questions.