

Reflections on Male Consciousness

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Réflexions sur le niveau de conscience des mâles

L'auteur décrit son expérience comme animateur d'un groupe de conscientisation chez les hommes dans un collège communautaire. Il met l'accent sur la qualité de la participation et estime que seule une interrelation affective profonde chez les participants peut en assurer le succès.

L'animateur a un rôle important à jouer, car en plus d'organiser l'ordre du jour, il doit stimuler les discussions. Il doit aussi se donner en exemple aux participants, surtout au niveau de son ouverture d'esprit et de sa liberté d'expression.

For the past two and a half years, I have been working with men's groups (at the New School of Dawson College) in Montreal. As of May 1978, there has been a total of six groups: three were team-facilitated with a counsellor from the college, and in the other three I was the sole facilitator. The groups met within the special milieu of the school, a community dedicated specifically to the principles of humanistic education. One group was made up of slightly older students in an evening section. The numbers varied from seven to sixteen, and the ages from seventeen to twenty-three, except for the evening class, which included men from eighteen to about thirty-five. In all the groups, it was our intention to involve the men in discussions and experiences related to issues of concern to them *as men*. This information is important background for the remainder of what I have to say, inasmuch as it clarifies the limits of my experience.

The credit for stimulating me to become involved in men's consciousness groups in the first place must be given to a few significant women in my life. I lived for several years with a woman who was acutely aware of herself as a female, and quite assertive when it came to her rights. She perceived the world around her as having been created by men, with subservient roles for both women and children; she was angry. From her I developed an empathetic attitude toward women in general; I became involved in feminism through the influence of a few of my female colleagues.

The high profile of women's studies at the school since its inception, and the women's persistent affirmation of feminist principles, were both admirable and to be reckoned with. So, in first embarking on these men's groups, I was primarily reacting to immediate manifestations of the feminist movement. It struck me then—as it still does—that it was essential

that men should respond in positive ways to the challenges women were presenting. If so many women were in a process of becoming more aware of themselves *as women*—their history, their sexuality, their politics, their problems, their potentials—then men had better set out to determine where they stood in relation to that movement. In this regard, the young men in the groups were curious, some intimidated, others highly empathetic, and some alienated and fearful.

My basic approach to the groups has always been to encourage the men to set up their own agenda of interests and concerns. We met in two-hour sessions, once a week, for anywhere from thirteen to fifteen weeks. The most consistent areas of discussion were those dealing with feminism, family, future, love, homosexuality, deviance, stereotypes, competition, norms, etc. Though any of the topics could have been dealt with from a personal perspective, the tendency at the outset was to emphasize the more social point of view, to theorize, to speculate, and to generalize. I recognized the need to explore many areas 'out there' that interested us as men, but I was much more concerned that we examine *ourselves* as men. That is, the awareness, the consciousness that we were hoping to 'raise', was on two levels: the social and the personal. I was further aware, as a result of my experience as a teacher in the New School, that the former was relatively a low-risk undertaking, and that the latter would require a good deal of established trust to reach. But I believed that we would be accomplishing only a part of the task if we didn't get to talking about *ourselves*.

My first men's group was held in the winter term of 1976. There were seven young men and myself. Though we weren't very clear what it was we were going to be doing together, we had a few ideas. I think that the major stimulus for the group was the existence of various women's groups in the school. Some of these were closed to men, for good reason. So if women felt the need to establish exclusivity for themselves, so did the men. We noted early on in the group the fact that we had rarely in our lives had the occasion to discuss issues surrounding sexuality in any serious or comprehensive manner, so we looked to the group to provide us with just such an opportunity.

Over the years, the topics for discussion have pretty well repeated themselves, though the central focus tended to be sexuality. Whether discussing relationships, experiences, fears, role-playing, the future—the most fruitful discussions centred on the part our sexuality plays in our lives. We recognized that so much of what we were doing and loving and hoping seemed to be contingent on our being 'male'.

The real crux of the workshops, however, the real concern I had as a facilitator, was not so much *what* we discussed, but *how* we went about it. So my role as facilitator in the groups was extremely important. In establishing a very positive and serious tone, I was responsible for showing a capacity to express myself clearly and to listen attentively to others. It became clear that one of the most important tasks of a facilitator in groups of this nature was that of role model. Clearly, it was through my example that the men were going to feel encouraged to participate at a very visceral level. I could hardly expect them to talk about themselves, their lives, their fears, their reservations, if I didn't demonstrate a willingness to do the same, first. Whenever possible, I encouraged the men to relate to the topics in the most affective ways possible. I found that whenever we drifted into theory, the discussion tended to waver and split off on tangents.

In terms of the actual topics for discussion, we had various ways of focusing on members of the group. We found various experiential activities most helpful in setting a personal tone for pursuant discussion. Guided fantasies, role-playing, touch exercises, and others—all helped to get to the issues in a more personal way. These activities also built the trust and support within the group that would prove to be so necessary for the more intimate and profound exchanges that would take place at a later stage. This was another essential task for the facilitator: to maintain a sense of timing and appropriateness in terms of the agenda. For me, this wasn't all that difficult: for years, I had been educated to develop my faculties of timing and appropriateness. But unfortunately for me I was not so well prepared to 'role-model' personal disclosure. 'Aye, there's the rub. . . .'

I can vividly recall, for instance, organizing a session about midway through the term on sexual identity. We had reached a point in the group where it was necessary for us to be

aware of one another's sexuality in order to proceed. My colleague and I had all the terms at our fingertips: 'heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, don't know . . . '—all in terms of 'experience, fantasies, emotions, fears, etc.' And we would, of course, follow our format of modelling the activity by sharing our sexual identities with the group—first. Well. We moved into the comfortable New School classroom with our trusty agenda in hand; the sixteen young men sat in a circle, chatting, waiting. We began by briefly reviewing last week's session, then we moved into 'sexual identity'. As we explained the activity we had planned, there was a good deal of fidgeting and general signs of nervousness around the room. I wrote the terms of reference (referred to above) on the board, while my colleague began to talk about himself: ' . . . an open heterosexual, with strong emotional feelings towards both men and women, etc.' He told of a few risqué sexual fantasies—and we were off and running. 'Good tone,' I said to myself. After a few questions put to my friend—clarifications, curiosities—it was *my* turn. My palms got all sticky, the faces in the room began to float, and I found myself standing in a phone booth, talking to a dial tone about my sexual identity: 'I am a homosexual . . .', a rather cold voice was saying. And then a lot of other words just poured out into the receiver, and pretty soon the faces stopped floating, and I was back in the room, back in reality. My back was soaked with perspiration, and the questions came so much more calmly than I had expected. We went on at a very visceral level: other men talked quite openly, though nervously, as so many sexual stereotypes fell all around us. The atmosphere was electric, and I began to feel a spreading awareness within myself and in the room of the importance of men's talking openly and seriously with one another. This was consciousness of one another, and of our distances from the sexually normative and disturbed society that surrounded us. And I was most conscious, probably for once and for all, of the risks of effective facilitation.



Manitoba Archives Foote Collection Nurses and Babies, Grace Hospital 1914

In terms of issues that could best be appreciated from a woman's point of view, it was impossible to attain that level of exchange. We discussed various topics—rape, childbirth, female orgasm, virginity, menstruation—and they were very valuable sessions. However, I found it essential that men hear from women on these (and other) subjects, so I always encouraged the men to join a similarly stimulating male-female sexuality group the following term in the school.

All this said, I would like to conclude with a few entirely subjective remarks about the state of male consciousness. I am encouraged by the groups; I have witnessed considerable growth in most of the men I have worked with. But it's a drop in the bucket. More than ever, I am aware of the profound extent to which conditioned sexual roles in our society have entrenched themselves in the individual. Not only am I frequently struck with the amount of sexism—the ubiquitous examples of chauvinist behaviour on the part of men, and the ease with which so many women allow themselves to be objectified by men—but I am also often disappointed in many men who have worked in my groups. In so

many instances, it has proven so easy for them to slip back into the role of male power in their relationships. And the consciousness-raising seems just to have begun as another group wraps up its session. The quality of communication and the intimacy and trust achieved seemed to be such ephemeral successes. As facilitators of such groups, and as educators dedicated to feminist principles (which, after all, are only *humanist* principles taken to a logical conclusion), we must often feel like Sisyphus. There are rewards, to be sure; and we do see positive changes in behaviour. But it's difficult to conclude that the overall picture has improved that much. 'Two and a half years . . .': yes, I am impatient. I shall continue to push awareness of the issues and of ourselves as men, nonetheless.

Finally, I have realized that male consciousness is primarily an *experience* in beginning to break down the barriers of communication, both in talking about our feelings as men, and in finding new ways of understanding women. This experience is only a beginning in the process of our becoming more aware of ourselves as people in interaction.

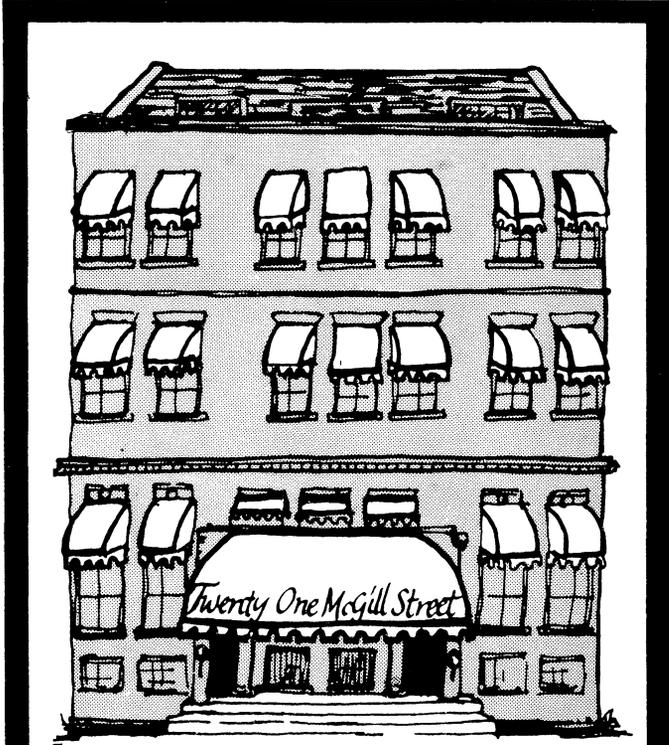
PLURIELLES

Plurielles, begun in 1977, is a new feminist bulletin, published in Quebec six times a year, and selling for 25¢ a copy. In its first year it has played an important liaison role among women's groups in Quebec. The idea for such a bulletin was conceived because of various efforts in Montreal focusing on issues concerning women. For instance, in April, 1977, there was the biggest abortion demonstration ever held in Quebec (about 1200 women attended) but there was no effective communication.

The idea behind the bulletin then is to combat the isolation of women and women's groups. Our aim is to keep women informed and the bulletin is a forum for issues of interest to women. *Plurielles* is a means for individual expression on any subject involving the lives of women. Our sole criteria for participation is that women share our desire to build an autonomous women's movement.

Articles often come in unsolicited and the issue of Summer 1978 will be three times the length of the first. We publish in French, but will translate articles submitted in English.

Plurielles will continue to be published in the Fall. It will be distributed as it is now through bookstores across the Province and at women's events whenever possible. Subscriptions are \$3.00 per year for six issues. The magazine can be obtained from *Plurielles*, c/o W. Ayotte, 129 Laurier O., Montreal.



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