

WORKING WITH MEN TO OVERCOME GENDER CONDITIONING



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In the late 1970's, following a number of years of facilitating emotional self-defense workshops for women, I was approached by a small group of men concerned that if they did not demonstrate rapid and dramatic shifts in ways of seeing, thinking and behaving, they would lose intimate relationships with women, relationships they had come to value and depend upon.

These men had sought to form consciousness raising groups on their own and then had enrolled in a therapy group with a male counsellor. They expressed feeling frustrated at the slow pace of their progress, which they felt was largely intellectual. They wondered if working with a female psychologist whose focus was assisting individuals to overcome sexism, racism, ageism, and other conditioned prejudices would be a good next step. After careful consideration, I agreed to accept this opportunity to advance relationships between the sexes and further my own learning about the path from oppression to freedom.

The men who initiated this request as well as those who participated in the men's groups I facilitated over the next ten years were somewhat atypical. Many of them were social and political activists involved in union organizing, student protests, the civil rights and peace movements. A few had explored humanistic psychology. I considered their denial of the privileged position of men in society to be less extensive than the denial of the majority of their male counterparts. They considered themselves "unlike sexist men". They were attracted to and involved with female partners who were committed to overcoming the psychological oppression attributed to gender conditioning.

While there were some similarities in the two sets of groups, "for women only" or "for men only", there were many more differences. What was similar was the starting point: a cognitive overview of the conditioning process and

internalized oppression, a political analysis of the gains and losses to those in oppressor and oppressed roles, personal sharing of each individual's awareness of the impact of parents, extended family, teachers, peers, religious affiliation, cultural milieu and the media on current attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Both sets of groups agreed to the use of psychodrama, gestalt techniques, body work, guided visualizations, breath work, and interventions designed to access deep seated emotions and, where appropriate, to facilitate the expression of those emotions.

Some of the differences between the groups were predictable. As anyone familiar with gender issues would know, women benefit from accessing and expressing stored anger, increasing self-confidence and self-esteem and reclaiming authority usurped by experts, generally by men and certainly by individuals with a patriarchal mind set. Granting temporary authority to women sharing the group experience served as a step towards each woman accepting herself as a final authority in assessing her own life experiences and in finding her voice in discussing public affairs and other external matters.

Men, on the other hand, benefit from accessing repressed fear, sadness, and loneliness. They, generally, need to learn to nurture one another and to accept nurturing from other men. They progress when they begin to question the authority they are accustomed to taking in virtually every endeavour from philosophical theorizing, to historical and political analysis, to scientific research, to medical practice, and to literary criticism. This is especially important when that authority is unwarranted, namely in cases where theories developed by men are incorrect or incomplete. In these instances, it is the opening to new frames of reference and paradigm shifts that is empowering. Everyone benefits when men learn the difference between

power rooted in talent and knowledge—"power from within"—and power rooted in the control of others conditioned to be submissive—"power over".

One of the differences I had not predicted was the greater homophobia in the men's groups, a barrier that had to be addressed and removed at the outset. This was not apparent to me in the beginning. After considerable reflection about the resistance I was observing, I intuited that many of the participants feared allowing gentle touch because of the greater sexualization of physical and emotional intimacy that most men are subjected to in sex role conditioning. This fear of gentle touch first surfaced when I was teaching a few of the men to properly hold the head of a baby or infant in the course of a psychodrama intended to provide nurturing male caretaking to participants who had missed this experience. Providing physical affection and emotional support was not part of the role behaviour taught by their fathers. Once the issue of homophobia was addressed and resolved, progress was much easier. In fact, many of the men who met for the first time in these groups or who had only a casual prior acquaintance formed lifelong friendships that they have since stated is attributable to the trust and openness developed within these groups.

An important difference between the groups was in my role as a female psychologist. In the women's groups I was more of a participant observer able to validate the perceptions of group members. I had to discourage tendencies to defer to me as yet another authority figure. In the men's groups, I had to kickstart certain processes and then get out of the way so that the men would turn to one another for the emotional caretaking they were accustomed to receiving from women. I also had to allow men to engage in some deferring

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to my observations so as to offer them a role model of a female able to assert her authority without undermining theirs. This experience of respectful listening to a female facilitator contributed to the men listening more attentively to women once the group experience was over. (This respectful listening included both women with whom they interact directly and those female writers, academics and politicians whom they read and/or hear).

There were other differences in strategy that I felt called upon to use in assisting the two sexes to overcome gender conditioning. I took great care to acknowledge reduced sexism in male participants without allowing them to bask in the all too frequently excessive gratitude of female partners so accustomed to subtle condescension and disrespect. Respectful treatment and nonsexist behaviours were greeted as more of an unexpected gift than as a natural outcome of restored decency. The changes women made in overcoming gender conditioning were seldom greeted with the same applause and admiration by the significant others in their lives. Quite the contrary women often

had to deal with criticism and counter-attack from associates who unfairly accused them of becoming "selfish" owing to their new assertive behaviour. Therefore, I deemed it appropriate to make a bigger deal of

the progress women made in overcoming their gender conditioning. I found myself frequently assessing all interventions that I made with either sex to assure that these interventions did not inadvertently perpetuate sexist choices in the very individuals seeking to be less sexist.

Women seemed to demonstrate a greater commitment to overcoming gender conditioning. This is undoubtedly attributable to their gains in economic, academic, and political status.

By contrast, men had to come to terms with foregoing many advantages afforded them by male privilege, advantages so taken for granted as to become invisible. These men had to face the fact that many of the successes they were accustomed to attributing entirely to "merit" were a result of an unfair playing field. Open discussion of these facts was sufficient to motivate them to sustain their initial openness and willingness to change.

One of the men who participated in a series of groups was quizzed by cynical friends about the process and why he kept returning. Not easily intimidated or put on the defensive, he quipped: "You cannot imagine how much my life has changed since the first group I enrolled in." Presumably these were positive changes as a few of his buddies eventually signed up for their own group experience.

Once men and women had completed a few weekend groups for "only men" or "only women" with intervals of a month or two in between to integrate the changes they had begun, I agreed to facilitate five-day groups with both female and male participants. I considered it a privilege to witness each succeeding step in the journey to wholeness as the men and women became allies, assisting each other to acquire whatever was missing from the full repertoire of human characteristics and behaviours. A number of couples included remarriage or recommitment rituals as part of the group experience. This was a testimonial to their changed expectations and agreements. One of the couples had been married for 18 years at that time, another couple had been living together for over 30 years and a few were at the beginning of their journeys together. There were also participants who were able to face having married for the wrong reasons or to face a desire to discontinue the relationship with their current partner. They reported making the transitions with greater understanding, acceptance and compassion because of the improved communication and authenticity they attributed,

for the most part, to their journey in the groups.

An important recognition shared by most participants was the awareness of the necessity for continued vigilance to sustain and extend the gains they had made. Indeed, it has been my own observation that overcoming sexism and other oppressive forms of conditioning is a lifelong process. The increase in the depth and joy of relating between the sexes makes it well worth the effort. In addition, there are benefits to society as a whole from the collaboration of men and women who overcome gender conditioning. ■