

M E N ' S G R O U P S
:CONTRADICTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND POLITICAL POTENTIAL

by

BOB PEASE

School of Community Services and Policy Studies
Phillip Institute of Technology,
Bundoora, Victoria

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In this paper I will outline my early experiences in a men's consciousness raising group in the mid 1970's, charting the early development, rise and fall of the group. I will then place these experiences in the context of theoretical debates about gender issues for men and men's groups. Finally, by drawing on my current involvement in Men Against Gender Injustice in Melbourne, I will consider the extent to which men can engage in a collective anti-patriarchal practice. Thus I will move from experience to theory and then back to experience again.

I co-founded a men's consciousness raising group in Tasmania in 1977. The motivation for setting up the group came out of my need to reassess my behaviour, my attitudes and my experience as a man. As is often the case, the initial impetus came from my intimate involvement with a feminist woman. It was through my relationship with her that I began to feel the impact of feminism on my life.

The group was comprised of eleven men, with a core of six. We were all 'middle class', all late 20's to early 30's. All but two of us were heterosexual. We were all Australian born and a small number of us had socialist politics. Most of us knew each other before so the group was formed largely out of existing networks.

We developed three major purposes or aims. They were:

- i) to explore ways in which we as men felt stunted and limited by sex role socialisation;
- ii) to become more aware of sexist attitudes and behaviours in ourselves so we could begin to overcome ways in which we as individual men oppressed the women in our lives; and
- iii) to explore alternative ways of relating to each other as men that broke with traditional male bonding.

None of us at that time, had a clearly defined theoretical perspective on gender issues for men. Most of us had some level of commitment to feminism, though as we were to discover, we all meant different things by that. We also started out with very few clearly articulated principles of practice, though there was a conscious attempt to move away from intellectualising. We recognised that we could easily become insightful at an intellectual level without changing our underlying attitudes and behaviour.

We met weekly for about fourteen months in each others' homes on a rotating basis; usually around a meal and a cask of wine. Meetings would often go for as long as five or six hours into the early hours of the morning. No attempt was made to develop any formal group structure, though we closed the group when membership reached eleven, because we found it more difficult to develop intimacy and trust as the group became larger.

There was no formal leadership or group facilitator, though inevitably a small number of men who were more experienced in group process and more well read in feminist theory influenced the direction of the group.

Our meetings were initially focused around set topics on each night. We looked at issues like: housework, homosexuality, contraception, sexual experiences, pornography, rape, masculinity, jealousy and love, work and money, etc. Sometimes we would all read something in common, but most often we would talk personally from our own experience and perception.

As the intimacy level developed within the group, we would put aside set topics and respond to the immediate issues that some men in the group were facing in their lives at that time. Our relationships with women was the most constantly recurring theme. And many of us used the group as a supportive forum, to explore our conflicting feelings towards women.

This issue was to become a source of many difficulties within the group and opened up a number of contradictions. Most of us were endeavouring to overcome the barriers that separated us and to achieve a closer emotional and physical intimacy. Relating to other men as emotional beings, especially to their pain and their distress and to offer physical comfort, was a very new experience for many of us. It meant directly confronting our homophobia and that was scary.

However, the emotional intimacy we developed also made it difficult at times to openly confront sexist attitudes and behaviour within the group. Sometimes supporting men's struggles meant bolstering their ego and reinforcing sexist behaviour. And this became an issue of tension within and outside the group.

The organised womens movement in Tasmania was divided on the question about whether the formation of the group was a progressive move or not. Many feminist women supported and even applauded the formation of the group. "At last a group of men were getting together to do something about their behaviour". Other feminists however were deeply suspicious "Now what are they up to?" So our formation became something of a divisive factor between feminist women as they debated the potential such a group might have in developing an anti-sexist practice.

Meanwhile a parallel debate was going on inside the group. One group of men came to want to focus primarily on ways in which they felt stunted and oppressed as men. They didn't want to hear about the privileges we held as men or the social power we held over women. A second group of men came to the conclusion that we were hopeless oppressors, and that very little could be done about that personally or politically. So these men, while being opposed to patriarchy, had no coherent strategy for struggling against it at either level. This consciousness of our oppressor status left many men paralysed by guilt. A third group, of which I was a part thought, that there had to be another alternative, though we didn't know what it was at the time.

We eventually came to see a starting point in trying to get a better grasp of what women were saying about men. And so we set up a study group on feminist theory. Thus the larger group dissolved as men went off in one of these three directions.

Four of us then embarked on a systematic study of feminist theory. We started with Wollstencraft (1965) and followed the major texts through chronologically. We read deBeauvoir (1965); Frieden (1963); Firestone (1971); Mitchell (1971); Johnston (1973); Atkinson (1974) and others. We would then share our intellectual and emotional responses to these books. They weren't purely intellectual discussions, rather we were endeavouring to locate our experience in a context of feminist theory, although we recognised that we read such theory as men.

However, this development generated further tensions among feminists. Now we were reading their literature; books that were written by women, for women. Concern was expressed by some feminists that we were studying the enemy and that we would use what we gained to further oppress them.

I remember being defensive about this at the time. I didn't think it was right to assume that a man could only have bad motives and I didn't think that being a biological man should prevent me from learning the discourse. And yet I have to acknowledge that there were times when I would draw upon my intellectual understanding of feminist theory to win an argument with a woman. There is nothing simple about a man's connection to feminist theory and this continues to be a tension in my life.

The feminist reading group met for about twelve months until travel and jobs took us in different directions. The group clarified a number of issues for me. It helped me to change some of my practices in the private sphere; in relation to housework, sexual expression, child care, nurturance and the use of language, etc.

However, it didn't help me to clarify what I would do in the public realm. How could we move from the lounge into the streets? Was it possible for men to engage in collective political struggle against patriarchy or was this a contradiction in terms? Intuitively at this time I was aware of many limitations and dangers of men's groups from my own experience and I was unclear about their political potential. To begin to address these issues I started to work my way through the theoretical debates about men's groups and to consider these in light of my own experience. I will now review some of the debates and issues that I worked through.

In the mid 1970's three books were published which promoted the idea of a men's liberation movement that would run parallel to the women's movement (Farrell, 1975; Nichols, 1975; Pleck and Sawyer, 1974).

Proponents of men's liberation argue that sexism oppresses both men and women by prescribing stereotyped sex role behaviours which are dehumanising and which cause great emotional suffering. They see consciousness raising groups as a vehicle by which men can get in touch with their feelings, free themselves from sex role stereotyping, learn to be more caring for other men and struggle together against the imposition of the socially oppressive male role (Hornacek, 1977: 123-124).

These proponents accentuate the negative aspects of the male role, affirming the oppressed rather than the oppressor qualities of being a man. They deny a hierarchical structure of oppression between men and women and they give little attention to the role of men in the oppression of women (Snodgrass, 1977: 138).

The message is that if only men could become expressive, gentle and interpersonally sensitive and if only women could become independent, assertive and strong, then men and women will have liberated themselves. (Ehrlich, 1977: 141).

All three books are directed towards men who are white, middle class and heterosexual. There is little awareness of institutionalised sexism. There is no mention of fighting male privilege. There is no mention of feminism and there is no mention of male supremacy. (Lamm, 1977 : 155).

One gets the impression from these books that men's liberation is just that; that it has little to do with freeing women and much to do with increasing the well being and furthering the self interests of men. What we see here is the idea of liberation within self-prescribed limits. Reducing machismo may enrich the individual male personality, but it can easily exist with the institutionalised oppression of women, as Ehrlich (1977: 143-144) has pointed out so powerfully:

"An individual man may reject what he sees as the undersirable elements of his role, but because he is male, he will still retain certain privileges of his caste, even if he doesn't want them....in terms of institutional versus personal sexism ... A man may refuse to oppress women he knows, he may share housework and child care, he may reject every unsavoury element of machismo. Yet if he makes more money than his female co-worker, or is hired in preference to an equally qualified women ... or is listened to in a discussion because he is a man ... or can routinely walk past strangers without being whistled at or propositioned, or fearing rape or need never worry about the ill effects of contraceptives on his body - he is still part of a privileged group".

So I became clearer about the ways in which men's liberation theory and practice was sexist and heterosexist and how it maintained and supported race and class privilege.

In response to the limitations of this trend, in the late seventies a second perspective on gender issues for men began to emerge and we saw the development of pro-feminist and anti-sexist consciousness raising groups for men. (Tolson, 1977; Snodgrass, 1977).

Those writers argued that sexism is an institutionalised way of life in which women are systematically oppressed by men. They agree that sexism and the imposition of stereotypical sex role behaviour is dehumanising to all people, but argue that while men are alienated and limited by sexism, they are not oppressed by it. They argue that those who gain considerable material, psychic and other benefits by the subordination of another group ought to be recognised as the oppressors; not as the oppressed. (Hornacek, 1977: 124).

This is not regarded as merely a semantic disagreement. It constitutes a major difference in the purpose of men's groups. Hornacek (1974: 124) argues that men's consciousness raising often supports male domination by reinforcing men's sexist consciousness. Whereas anti-sexist men's consciousness raising is designed to support the women's movement by changing men's male supremacist consciousness.

Schein (1977: 131-132) postulates a number of principles as a foundation for anti-sexist consciousness raising groups:

- i) As acceptance of feminist theory and practice and a recognition that although both men and women suffer under patriarchy, our suffering is not the same and is qualitatively less than that of women;

and

- ii) We as men can never speak for women. We must not endeavour to assert any major influence on the women's movement.

Hornacek (1977: 123-128) further elaborates upon the characteristics of anti-sexist consciousness raising groups:

- i) It is proposed that there should be a leader in anti-sexist consciousness raising groups. It is argued that because men are socialised into the sexual oppressor role, when they meet to struggle against that role, they need an experienced, feminist consciousness man to guide them.
- ii) The importance of relating shared personal experiences to feminist writings is stressed. So the group should involve itself in the study of feminist theory.

iii) The final portion of the meeting should be devoted to criticism and self criticism; a process in which men attempt to point out the sexism in their own and other's statements.

iv) After some months it is proposed that the group should search for a larger purpose; i.e. some form of political action against sexism.

It was some months after my first men's group experience that I read Schein (1977) and Hornacek (1977), but they both validated for me the political direction that I had begun to move in at the time.

Schein (1977:132-134) also highlighted the dangers that I had come to observe myself in men's groups, even when there was some level of commitment to feminism.

i) The group may be used to collude against women. Very often when men join a group, they are hurt, afraid and confused and they look for emotional support. There is a tendency to betray women to gain sympathy and reassurance.

ii) We may misdirect our anger towards the women who have forced us to confront our sexism rather than directing it towards the patriarchal society which has shaped our consciousness.

iii) We may give up the struggle with our individual sexism. After the group has met for some time, close emotional ties are formed. When you become more sensitive and more aware of men's vulnerability, there is a tendency to avoid challenging sexism because you don't want to hurt those you care about.

iv) Consciousness raising may be contained within the group. It has always been a concern of mine that the consciousness that is learnt in the group should lead to an anti-patriarchal political practice. We must criticise sexism outside the group and publicly bring to the attention of men that sexism is prevalent in our society.

While the elaboration of a profeminist model of men's consciousness raising groups validated my experience and confirmed my intuitive rejection of men's liberation, it also led to some problematic outcomes.

The first of these is to do with male guilt. The men's liberationists see guilt as something that men ought not to experience at all in relation to women. deGaris (Conway, 1982:59) complains about men being stuck in the male feminist guilt phase. He claims that men have been made to feel unduly guilty because of their alleged oppression of women.

The feminist and anti-sexist response has been that men ought to feel guilty. What could be wrong with that? (Bradshaw, 1982: 177). Certainly guilt is something that runs through the anthology by Snodgrass (1977) where the various authors bewail their own past sexism. One result is to intensify men's guilt. (Carrigan et al, 1983) So anti-sexist men's groups have often centred themselves around self abasement.

Goldberg (1976) has argued that men's groups must fail because they are based on guilt and drive men further into it. However, I think there is a positive place for guilt as a catalyst for cutting through complacency (Rowen, 1987:52). Guilt is often the first overt manifestation for men of their commitment to fight their sexism.

However, men's guilt can also be oppressive to women. We can turn all of our energy inward and become passive and defensive. Men can be guilty and not necessarily give up their one up position (Steiner, 1978:18) When you feel guilty simply because you are a man, it may prevent you from freely examining what actual responsibility you have in your life for oppressing women. Also guilt and passivity can engender guilt in women. Women will sometimes be unable to bear the sight of a man's unhappiness and will endeavour to rescue him from his guilt.

It becomes a problem when men dwell on their guilt, for then it becomes another way of avoiding change. Men can allow themselves to be paralysed by guilt and do nothing. (Bradshaw, 1982: 177)

The question as I see it, is how can men get beyond guilt and passivity while never forgetting that they are part of a social dynamic that oppresses women? The task I believe, is to develop a notion of power involving energy and strength that is separate from machismo. How can we be strong and powerful but non oppressive?

Those of us who have struggled to be responsive to feminism have discovered and legitimated those aspects of ourselves which have traditionally been labelled feminine; for example openness, expressiveness and nurturance. (Kaufman and Timmers, 1984:169) However there have been personal losses in the areas of energy and joy. Many soft men have come to equate strong energy with violence and being macho. (Bly, 1982:32) Pro-feminist and anti-sexist consciousness raising groups seemed to imply a total repudiation of all that is masculine or male. (Rowen, 1987:53).

Some writers have begun to explore good ways of being a man and having power (Rowan, 1987; Bly, 1984; Kaufman and Timmers, 1984) and I believe that this is a path we must now follow.

* | A second problematic outcome of pro-feminist men's groups has been the uncritical acceptance of certain feminist ideas. Feminist women are often perceived as the sources of "political correctness". (Intervente, 1981:63) An uncritical approach to feminist analyses is illogical because there is no one feminist analysis. As Intervente argues, to treat individual women as the guardians of political virtue, assumes there is something known as the women's movement which they can represent in a holistic way. There is a tendency to regard any statement made by a women's organisation as the feminist position on that issue; thus reducing feminism to a set of commandments which men can follow. (Intervente, 1981:64)

There is also danger here that men come to rely upon women in order to change. This can lead to an abdication of responsibility for taking chances. Clearly men need to listen carefully to all feminist critiques recognising that they will not all be in agreement with one another. However, we also have the right to the insights and errors of our own work and experience in its current state of development. (Nelson, 1987:161)

Some writers believe that distortions can be avoided through joint consciousness raising groups comprised of both men and women. Farrell (1975:248) argues that mixed groups will avoid the distortions about who is preventing whom from developing and that dominance, interrupting, condescension and automatic role assumptions can be stopped while they are happening. So mixed groups get conflict out in the open. However, men, by slipping into sexist modes of behaviour, through aggressiveness,

domineering attitudes and competitiveness may well hinder women's development. Some women's oppression is so deep that they are unable to see what it is, while in the company of men. (Leonard, 1982: 162).

Highly emotional and volatile topics like rape and incest require a high level of sensitivity on the part of men to enable an open and honest discussion to take place. Daly (1973: 34) argues that the idea of mixed consciousness raising groups should be put aside until a reasonable degree of awareness and sensitivity in the area of sexual politics has been developed.

"It is not yet time for 'dialogue' with those who have stolen the power of speech and made all language a symbol of false words... Rather it is time for men to learn at last to listen and to hear... Perhaps very few men will want to listen, but those who do not will have chosen their own non being".

I think that some men and women are ready for dialogue. I think men involved in anti-sexist practices need to create spaces in which women are welcome. While we ought not to depend upon women, we should invite and accept monitoring and scrutiny of our activities. (Tolman et al, 1986:68).

However, in spite of all the limitations and dangers I have discussed I now want to assert the right of men to have space to explore issues on their own. I assert this right in the face of three criticisms that I am sensitive to.

Straight leftist men will criticise men's groups for their middle class composition and what they see as their self indulgent preoccupation with personal life. Gay men will criticise men's groups for their reluctance to confront the relationship between the oppression of women and gay men, and as a consequence their basic homophobia. Feminists will criticise men's groups as simply a new form of male bonding that reproduces patriarchy. (Gilding, 1982: 38-39)

I have defended my current involvement in a men's group against all three sources of criticism. I know from my own experience that men's groups contain these tendencies, some more so than others. I now believe however, that there are progressive possibilities as well. As a socialist, nongay man struggling with my homophobia and my sexism, these criticisms now hurt. They hurt, because the potential I now see is not widely recognised by those movements that I identify with.

I now believe that through an exploration of the depths of our male consciousness, we can struggle against the dangers I have outlined and begin to clarify the social dimensions of our masculinity. Like any successful consciousness change however, it must be connected to progressive political practice; in this case anti-patriarchal practice. Some embryonic experiences have now led me to believe that such political possibilities exist. It is these possibilities that I want to talk briefly about.

I am currently involved in a group in Melbourne called Men Against Gender Injustice (previously called Men Against Sexism). I became actively involved in the group about eighteen months ago at a time when the group was at a point of crisis. They were wanting the involvement of new men, new energy and new ideas. What became known as the cross-roads meeting attracted a number of men such as myself out of the woodwork. Many of us went along initially out of curiosity to see where men's politics was at in Melbourne.

There was a strong sense of deja vu for me at the meeting. All of the issues I have talked about were still alive and well. The gay-nongay tensions were present. The men's liberationist tendencies were evident, as was the cynicism of hardened politicians. However, I also found men like myself; men who were struggling to reconcile the personal and the political and who were interested in exploring the potential of anti-patriarchal practices in the public arena. And so, out of that meeting, among other things, a new group was formed of six men who made a commitment to take these issues further.

I now want to elaborate upon some of the initiatives we have taken to develop an anti-patriarchal politics by men in the public arena. All of these initiatives are at very early stages, and it is too soon to evaluate political outcomes, though some of them are already the subject of controversy.

- i) We organise a series of monthly forums (some of which are open to women) on issues like pornography, domestic violence, rape and sexuality, etc. A recent forum which became the centre of controversial debate was on children by donor insemination. This followed a request to us from a lesbian collective to donate sperm in light of the discriminatory policies of the hospital sperm banks. The legal, moral and political issues arising from this request had to be dealt with both individually and collectively as we were pulled into the reproductive technologies debate. How did sperm donation fit with emerging developments in fatherhood that emphasised the importance of active involvement of fathers in nurturing and caring? How should we respond to the desire of the individual women for anonymity with the potential desire of the child to know her or his father? What responsibility or right did we have to concern ourselves with the situations within which the children would be born, or was it more like one man expressed "just like giving blood"? Heterosexist attitudes came to the fore as some men questioned the appropriateness of bringing up children away from the direct influence of men. Others saw an opportunity to confront heterosexism by supporting opportunities for gay women to have children. Here the political and the personal had to be brought together as we formulated our responses to the request.

- ii) We intend producing a series of booklets on topics like those discussed at the forums. Our first one, on men's responsibility in contraception, is almost completed. This is targeted specifically at men and emphasises the various ways in which men can increase their level of involvement in this area. One section which we are expecting will engender much debate is our promotion of non-penetrative sex as an alternative form of sexual expression. We challenge the view that penetration is the only meaningful kind of sex and emphasise the benefits to be gained through other forms of sexual pleasure. (Stoltenberg, 1977:38; Ryan, 1987:24). We have two other booklets planned on men's sexuality and men and rape.

iii) We have recently established a Men's Contact and Resource Centre.

The aims of the centre are:

- to provide a resource library of materials related to male conditioning and male sexuality, etc.;
- to act as a contact point for consciousness raising groups in the Melbourne region;
- to devise and co-ordinate seminars and courses;
- to provide a drop-in centre and a referral service for men.

The centre is currently self funded and is located in a building with numerous self-help and social action groups. So there are opportunities for dialogue with other groups on gender issues.

iv) We are developing a Boys and Non Sexist Education Project in response to requests from Schools and other groups to conduct sessions on male conditioning and stereotyping processes. While girls are currently participating in self-confidence and career development programmes there has been a lack of programmes for boys. There has been little investigation in schools into the values associated with male stereotypes and how these limit boys' options and restrict girls' personal development.

The aims of the project are:

- to investigate and expose values associated with the male stereotype;
- to promote counter sexist attitudes and behaviour in boys;
- to make boys aware of the unequal treatment given to girls;
- to help boys develop some awareness of the sex role stereotyping that exists in literature, the media and occupational roles;
- to encourage boys to consider a variety of occupational roles regardless of traditional gender roles.

This is not just a question of balancing the efforts put into girls' projects by having boys' projects. Rather it is to suggest that part of the process of broadening the lives of girls is to change the relations between girls and boys. Changing boys' attitudes to themselves and to people in their personal lives will have positive spinoffs for girls. (Hocking, 1984: 4-5)

v) Some of us are involved in running a domestic and social violence service for violent men. The aims are:

- to conduct counselling programmes for men dealing with the problem of domestic and social violence;
- to conduct training workshops for existing health, law enforcement and welfare workers;
- to foster an awareness of the issues and causes of violence within the community in an attempt to reduce its incidence.

The first programme was established in March 1987 consisting of twelve group counselling sessions and since then the group has been involved in numerous training programmes and counselling sessions. The service is not in receipt of any state funding and is run on volunteer labour, donations, fees for training programmes and contributions from participants.

There is debate among feminists about the extent to which resources should be allocated to services for violent men, given the sparse level of funding to existing womens' services (Weeks and Gilmore, 1988:15). I accept that in a time of scarce resources, funding priorities should be placed on programmes for victims (Tolman et al).

However, in working with the perpetrators of violence, we can begin to tackle battering at a preventative level. Clearly however, we must be careful not to obscure the societal roots of violence by focusing too narrowly on individuals. (Tolman et al. 1986:71)

I feel a tentativeness about much of this activity. The aim is to endeavour to play a supportive role for the women's movement without getting in the way or trying to take control. Movements for a progressive sexual politics by heterosexual men will always be small. (Connell, 1987:276)

The premise is though, that feminism can benefit from the advocacy, self reflection and alliance of men. (Nelson, 1987:156)

As men, we cannot fully appreciate the effects of patriarchy as it is experienced by women. However, we can know how it works in terms of relations between men. (Hearn, 1987:13) I have come to believe that from these experiences we can begin to develop a men's anti-patriarchal theory. Such theory, while inspired by the vision of feminism, will be largely derived from the experience of men and would thus run parallel to feminism. (Hearn, 1987:13)

Women have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the background, while men have been obscured by being too much in the foreground. (Morgan, 1981:94) Men's experience is rarely honestly shared. It is uncommon for men to do self analysis in regard to what they are experiencing. And yet I believe that it is through the critique of our experience that we will begin to indicate how things are for men. That is why this paper is largely autobiographical. It is about me and my attempt to make sense of the complex, contradictory and multi-layered nature of my experience.

Challenging patriarchal forms of masculinity is difficult, as a man, for I am encumbered by my own collusive self interest in the maintenance of male privilege and control. Yet while I gain benefits from patriarchy, I also work in a group to end patriarchy, for my own good. I live with a mass of contradictions, some of which are reflected in this paper. I need to keep reminding myself that I can't miraculously resolve them. My responsibility is to confront them as honestly and openly as I can through reflective activism and personal change. This paper charts some of my attempts to work on these contradictions as I experience them.

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Upon reading this paper through, I realise now that there is a tension that should not go unmentioned; the tension between the demands of the private and domestic sphere and attempts to develop an anti-patriarchal practice in the public realm. This is a tension especially for those of us who are parents, who have to deal with the practicalities of child care and the exhaustion that comes from daily parenting. I am aware that the public realm is the arena of conventional politics for men. (Hearn, 1987:168) So we must be careful that we do not enter this arena, albeit to reconstruct it, at the expense of the women and children in our lives.

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