

**Feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s and 1980s:  
West Yorkshire women's groups and their impact on women's lives**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

This thesis considers feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s and 1980s in West Yorkshire, England. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to the women's movement, my analysis is based on data collected from interviews with 20 women who were involved in women's groups in West Yorkshire during this period. The political dimensions of women's experiences were articulated through the women's movement slogan (first documented by Hanisch, 1970). "the personal is political". This statement is emblematic of how c-r changed women's understandings of themselves and their collective situation. This thesis interrogates some of the dominant stories that have been told about consciousness-raising in literature from and about the women's movement. As well, I demonstrate that transformations occurred within these collective contexts, through the reshaping of women's relationships with ideas, with each other, and with themselves. Through exploring the groups' theorising practices, I demonstrate that women engaged intellectually in ways that shifted their relationship to the realm of ideas. I also argue that friendships formed in these contexts supported subversive ways of being at this time. Opposing the tendency to frame the effects of social movements in terms of benefits to future generations, I argue that women's groups effected personal-political changes in the lives of the women who participated in them. I suggest that, by describing changes in the feminist movement in ways that take account of the life course of participants in the movement, it is possible to avoid overly emphasising the input of future generations. Ultimately, the thesis evidences the personal-political effects of West Yorkshire women's groups on participants' lives in a way that shows c-r to be compatible with shifts in feminist thought after the influence of poststructuralism.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Consciousness-raising (c-r) groups were pivotal to the informally organised movement that transformed the lives of many women during the 1970s. From a sociological perspective, c-r groups have been seen as ‘probably the most valuable contribution by the women’s liberation movement to the tools for social change’ (Freeman 1975a:451). Springing up all around the USA and Britain towards the end of the 1960s and during the early ‘70s, such groups – also known as “women’s liberation groups” or simply “small groups” – have been the subject of individuals’ reflections on second-wave feminism (e.g. Brownmiller 1999), and have featured in historical accounts of the movement (Carden 1974; Banks 1981; Ryan 1992). McWilliams (1974:162) notes that c-r has been depicted as a preliminary to ‘concerted group action.’

My thesis challenges the idea of c-r as a precursor to political action by exploring the impact of West Yorkshire women’s groups of the 1970s and 1980s on the lives of their members. Through exploring how women talking amongst themselves can be seen to constitute a political practice, I demonstrate that it was a subversive act for women to meet together in this way at this time. With reference to the idea that the political usefulness of women talking with one another about their lives is not dependent upon a belief that they were speaking the absolute “truth” in these groups (Valverde 2004), I argue that consciousness-raising as a feminist political practice is not incompatible with poststructuralist-influenced feminist theory.

C-r groups began to form in major cities across the USA in 1967 (Banks 1981). Elements of imprecision are inevitable when attempting to locate the origins of these meetings which took place in group members’ homes without minutes being kept. Although there is some debate about the whereabouts of the very first meetings, the first documented c-r groups met in New York and Chicago (Banks 1981; Freeman 1975b). New York Redstockings are credited with the initial idea of applying the idea of consciousness-raising to women as a feminist method (Brownmiller 1999). However, there is also evidence to suggest that women were meeting in Chicago around the same time. Freeman (1975b) claims Chicago women organized the first independent women’s liberation group, however, her later writings suggest this was

not a c-r group in that they did not talk about themselves (Freeman 1998). Whereas the Chicago women felt that talking about themselves was not political enough, women in New York were defending c-r through their proposal that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970).

Word spread rapidly across the USA, as well as to the UK, so that by 1969 women's liberation groups had started to meet in several London districts (Sebestyen 1988), as well as in Leeds by the end of 1969. Interviewees suggested that, as the first two in the UK, the London and Leeds groups served as a lynchpin for the British women's movement. Women travelling between Leeds and London to visit friends would pass information between the groups. Spreading to other major cities, c-r peaked as a major movement activity during the early 1970s, when it was being widely practised amongst feminists all over the UK and the USA (Ryan 1992).

My thesis focuses on a limited area and period of activity – specifically, West Yorkshire during the 1970s and 1980s. I wanted to find out about the impact of small, informal c-r-like groups upon the lives of women whose stories have not yet been documented within academic accounts of the movement. Focusing on West Yorkshire allowed me to access a mixture of the rural, the urban, and the 'rurban' (Smith 1998). More rural parts of the UK, and in particular the North, have been neglected within historical accounts of the women's movement in Britain, with academic reflections tending to focus their attention on London (e.g. Setch 2002). The movement thrived in Leeds, but there were women's groups meeting in other towns and cities, and in more rural contexts too, providing variations in the social and geographical contexts within which West Yorkshire women's groups formed and developed. In accordance with scholars' growing focus on *local* women's movements (e.g. Staggenborg 1998; 2001), I take the position that movements take shape 'around the limitations and possibilities of local geographies' (Enke 2007:6). As such, I seek to develop an impression throughout the thesis of the strong regional identity of the West Yorkshire women's movement. West Yorkshire is small enough to be imagined as one place but sufficiently large to contain a diversity of geographical and cultural contexts. Women commonly travelled around the region to attend feminist events; interviewees tended to know of feminists in other parts of



the region, and had often attended meetings or events relating to their political, social or work-related activities in other towns and cities within the region.

As the setting for this research, West Yorkshire during the 1970s and 1980s provided a geographical and historical context that was not only convenient (as home to the Feminist Archive North), but also rich in potential, with Leeds especially having been a thriving context for the women's movement. Leeds was home to the group of radical revolutionary feminists who defended political lesbianism against its heterosexual feminist critics in the infamous, '*Love Your Enemy?*' paper (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1979, published in Onlywomen Press, 1981). As a nationally renowned group, Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group has recently been studied by Rees (2007; 2009). Another exception to the relative dearth of writing on West Yorkshire feminism is Comer's (1988) chapter in Sebestyen's (ed. 1988) '*'68, '78, '88*'. Leeds was one of the first cities to hold a Reclaim the Night march, organised by feminists in response to the police issuing curfews on women after a series of attacks by the man known as the Yorkshire Ripper.<sup>1</sup> Leeds women were angry about how the police and the media responded to these murders – by warning women to stay indoors after dark, as well as implying that prostitutes deserved to die because they were not respectable women (Fairweather 1982[1978]). Although Leeds in particular is known to have been a hub of feminist activity at this time, there were indeed other pockets of excitement throughout the region, and I aim to portray some of the particular flavours of movement activity across West Yorkshire throughout the thesis.

Consciousness-raising is derived from Marxist ideology (Banks 1981) and tends to be associated with radical feminism more so than the other strands of feminism (Carden 1974; Banks 1981; Ryan 1992). Based on the notion that feminism requires political analyses of women's personal experiences, c-r was in conflict with liberal feminists' state-centred understanding of power relations (and accompanying focus on legislative reform). The personal does not tend to be recognised as political by liberal feminists to the same extent as it is by radical feminists. However, the groups discussed in this thesis did not necessarily identify as part of particular strands of

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<sup>1</sup> "The Yorkshire Ripper" (Peter Sutcliffe) killed thirteen women and girls between 1975 and 1980, mostly in West Yorkshire (but also in Lancashire and Greater Manchester).

feminism. Strands of feminism are historically constructed as a way of retrospectively making sense of the movement; they do not reflect clear-cut divisions within feminism itself (Banks 1981). Rather than restrict my focus to particular types of feminism, I discuss the experiences of women who participated in a diverse range of women's groups, all of which practised something they deemed to be consciousness-raising.

My project takes an interdisciplinary approach and stems from a concern with feminism having lost touch with the original political meaning of c-r group practices. Endeavours to explain the relationship between small group consciousness-raising and feminist social transformation vary in terms of the extent to which they see consciousness-raising as a significant political act in its own right (McWilliams 1974). Through a sociological consideration of the experiences of participants in West Yorkshire women's groups in relation to women's movement literature on consciousness-raising, I argue that changes brought about in the lives of group participants were both personally *and* politically significant.

Within feminist political theory, consciousness-raising constituted 'a new theory and strategy for women's liberation...based on women's shared experiences, not on abstract speculation' (Bryson 1992:183). These small and supportive groups allowed women to share personal experiences in such a way as to 'bring out their political implications and develop a strategy for change' (Bryson 1999:26). Transformations occurred in women's sense of themselves in relation to one another, as 'many women found that their own bad emotional, sexual or family experiences were not simply personal misfortunes, but seemed both to be widely shared with other women and to build up into a general pattern of male use and abuse of power' (Bryson 1999:26-7).

The life-changing effects of c-r groups on participants' lives have been documented in personal reflections and women's movement memoirs (e.g. Brownmiller 1999). Attesting to the personal significance of her involvement in the women's movement in London, Asphodel (1988:10) recalls, 'The struggle to raise our consciousness and free ourselves from the ultimate oppression – of believing that men had the right to oppress us – was the most important thing that ever happened to me.' Although

personal reflections register the impact of groups on their participants' lives, this matter is under-explored in academic work on feminism, which, I argue, attempts to explain c-r in relation to hegemonic notions of power relations and the political realm. Transforming understandings of the political was at the heart of consciousness-raising (e.g. Hanisch 1970). However, feminists' endeavours to recognise the political nature of women's experiences are downplayed within academic representations of the women's movement, particularly in their de-emphasising the effects of the groups on the lives of their members.

Since original proponents of c-r expounded their intentions for the practice, there have been significant cultural changes, particularly relating to a proliferation of public discourses for talking about personal experiences (Alcoff and Gray 1993; Furedi 2004). Whereas c-r groups defended themselves against accusations that what they were doing was merely therapy (Sarachild 1973), since this time there has been increased recognition that therapy can constitute a valid feminist practice (Burstow 1992; Enns 2004; O'Grady 2005; Corey 2009), such that it may now be possible to see c-r as both like therapy *and* political.

The 1970s and 1980s were very different cultural and historical moments in comparison with the contemporary context in which interviewees told their stories and I analysed them. However, the transformations that have occurred since this time have not necessarily been the changes feminists of this period were looking for (Armstrong 1990; Kitzinger and Perkins 1993).

There is already a significant body of work charting the emergence of the women's movement in the UK and America (Banks 1981; Bouchier 1983). I have not sought to produce another historical account of the UK women's movement, but have instead tried to raise the profile of consciousness-raising – as a practice of articulating the political significance of personal experience – within women's movement scholarship. Recent re-articulations of “the personal is political” signal a renewed interest in consciousness-raising as a feminist practice. For instance, Natasha Walter has reflected on the resurgence of sexism in the last ten years; whereas in her earlier work on feminism (*The New Feminism*, 1998), Walter argued

that feminists could put aside arguments about how women made love, how they dressed, and whom they desired, she has recently retracted this suggestion:

I believed that we only had to put in place the conditions for equality for the remnants of the old-fashioned sexism in our culture to wither away. I am ready to admit that I was entirely wrong (Walter, *The Guardian*, 25/01/10).

Walter's comment underlines the relevance to looking again at feminist practices such as c-r.

Historical accounts of feminist consciousness-raising groups in the USA construct their emergence in terms of the paradoxical moment in which women identified how they were being oppressed within organisations supposedly striving to create a more equal society. Evans' (1979) account of how women came to form c-r groups tells the story of already politicised women becoming critical of the role of women within new left organisations, and leaving these behind to form women-only contexts. Feminism, Evans (1979) argues, was born as women came together to create spaces in which they could experience themselves anew.

Although the first women-only groups were organised by women who had been involved in mixed left political contexts, later groups comprised more "ordinary" (i.e. previously un-politicised) women, as consciousness-raising spread. In the UK too, women who had been involved in male-dominated political groups began to create their own separate spaces, where they could have a say in what constituted relevant political discussion. Sargent (1981) summarises women's departure from the male left as a move that symbolised the beginning of women defining 'their own politics, theory, and culture' (1981:xix).

Social movement scholarship has traditionally lacked systematic analysis of 'the relationship between ideological factors – values, beliefs, meanings – and identification with social movements and participation in their activities' (Snow and Benford 1988:197). In this thesis, I address the question of how women's group practices relate to what Snow and Benford (1988:197) refer to as the 'ideational elements' of the feminist movement. For instance, I consider how the ideology of sisterhood relates to women's experiences of relating to one another in c-r groups. I

also explore how the feminist aspiration to produce theory that was accessible and relevant to ordinary women relates to actual practices of women interacting with ideas in groups.

In the following three chapters, I undertake a review of literature relevant to my investigations. In Chapter 2, I examine original movement texts on consciousness-raising. Distorted representations of feminist c-r are as old as the practice itself, with Sarachild (1973) noting that ‘the original purpose of consciousness-raising, its connection with revolutionary change for women, is all too often getting lost’. As such, Chapter 2 follows the suggestion that scholars return to ‘the original sources’ (Sarachild 1973) as a way of checking out how c-r was understood by the women who pioneered the method. Drawing on various articles and pamphlets produced by individuals and groups of women who were practising c-r and wanted to spread the word to other women, I describe what consciousness-raising groups were like in the early moments of their inception as a second-wave feminist practice.

Having outlined the intentions documented by initial proponents of c-r groups, including their critique of the distinction between the personal and the political (through the notion that the personal *is* political), I proceed to assess more recent representations of c-r in Chapter 3. I argue that academic accounts of c-r have written out the political significance of women discussing their own lives. As such, women’s groups were only partially successful in challenging the personal/political dichotomy, with dominant theoretical understandings of the practice reifying the distinction between consciousness-raising and political practice.

Chapter 4 explores how early constructions of consciousness-raising have been critiqued through subsequent developments in feminist theory. Whereas original documents portray c-r as a method through which women spoke the truth about their experiences, Chapter 4 explores how feminist theory since this time questions the idea of raw experiences lying in wait for the right moment to be vocalised (Scott 1991). I propose that, in post-liberatory times (Butler 1997), it is inappropriate to see c-r as a method of revealing true selves, formerly hidden under layers of patriarchal conditioning. Rather, we might see c-r in terms of post-structuralist understandings of practices of the self (Foucault 1984 [1983]; McLaren 2002).

Having considered representations of c-r that were contemporaneous with the groups themselves, as well as more recent ways of conceptualising the practice, I go on to present a discussion of the methodological underpinnings of the research, detailing in particular the process of interviewing women about their experiences in women's groups (Chapter 5). I then move on to my analysis chapters. In Chapter 6, I consider how feminist consciousness-raising was practised amongst groups my participants were involved in, as well as characterising the effects of West Yorkshire's specific cultural milieu on the regional practice of c-r. I then develop more detailed and focused analyses, concerned with how women's groups provided contexts in which women developed new ways of interacting with ideas (Chapter 7) and each other (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 explores the continuing significance of feminism in interviewees' lives in order to develop a critique of the tendency for feminist generational relations to be portrayed in terms of conflicts between second-wave feminists and younger women (McRobbie 1999; Kelly 2005; Levy 2005; Snyder 2008).

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has been concerned to set out the main contours of my thesis: its focus on consciousness-raising as a political and personal activity of second-wave feminism, in the social and cultural milieu of West Yorkshire in the 1970s and 1980s. It has introduced how the thesis manages and marshals both theoretical material and data collected through interviews with participants, and finally made claims that the thesis will demonstrate how c-r as a feminist practice is not incompatible with poststructuralist theory.

## **Chapter Two: The C-R Group Process as described by Original Proponents**

Instrumental to the spread of consciousness-raising across the USA and to the UK were the early writings that emerged from groups of women who wanted other women to know about the process that was changing their lives. This chapter explores some of the facets of the c-r group process as it was laid out by these original proponents, in what were often hastily written and mimeographed women's movement texts. The documents I consider in this chapter vary in terms of format; they include manifestos, instructional texts, and reflective accounts by women who were in the midst of consciousness-raising at the time of writing. As will be revealed, authors discuss the intentions behind keeping c-r groups small and the importance of attempting to avoid or manage hierarchical structures, as well as suggesting particular topics for discussion. The documents also consider the role of analysis in the group process, as well as the issue of where consciousness-raising should lead.

Many of the texts I review here were produced in the USA since, as I have already noted, consciousness-raising was practised in the USA before spreading to the UK. It is likely that American texts influenced British women, although it is beyond this project to explore how texts from the USA made it over to the UK (or to West Yorkshire specifically). As well as through informally produced movement documents, other means by which ideas and practices moved across continents involved women's transatlantic travels. The spread of radical feminist ideas and women's liberation groups to the UK can partly be explained by the presence of American women in London (Banks 1981). A number of feminists travelled from Britain to America and vice versa, and there were several North Americans amongst the members of the first women's liberation groups to meet in London.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the earliest writings to come out of the UK movement were Sheila Rowbotham's (1969) pamphlet 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics', Lee Comer's (1971) pamphlet, 'The Myth of Motherhood', and Michelene Wandor's (1972) edited volume *The Body Politic*. Through these early publications, authors attempted to address the issue of the scarcity of writings that were relevant to women's lives (see

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<sup>2</sup> See Anon (1982:571) in Rowe (ed) *Spare Rib Reader*.

Comer 1988: 86). These writings were part of an emergent body of work addressing concerns that were being explored within women's groups. As well as enabling women to access writings that were relevant to their lives, women's movement authors also helped to spread the word about consciousness-raising as a political practice.

Although Sarachild (1973) issues a warning about the authoritative tone of 'a number of formalized "rules" or "guidelines" for consciousness-raising which have been published and distributed to women's groups...as if they represented the original program of consciousness-raising', these texts are nevertheless useful to return to in preparation for analysing data on West Yorkshire groups. It is important to note that what follows is an account of how original proponents of c-r viewed the practice, not how c-r was actually practised.

### *Spreading the word about consciousness-raising*

Early writers on c-r were women who realised, as the New York Radical Women did, that 'women could be doing on a mass scale what we were doing in our own group', and that 'the next logical radical action would be to get the word out about what we were doing' (Sarachild 1973). As authors published hasty reflections on their experiences of the groups of which they were part, they facilitated the spread of the practice and the growth of the women's movement in ways that could not have been predicted at the time. It is interesting to look in detail at how consciousness-raising was conceptualised within these texts, particularly as they were written when the full impact of the practice could not be known.

Feminists who were already engaging in c-r wrote about their experiences in the hope that other women would join and form new c-r groups, sometimes explicitly stating their intention to extol the benefits of c-r to readers. In an edited volume, *Radical Feminism*, Koedt et al (1973) provided a 'working sheet' on consciousness-raising, which was intended to serve as an introduction for use by new groups. Another early account of how to do consciousness-raising was the USA-published '*Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation*' (Allen 1970). Allen co-founded New York Radical Women and then moved to San



Francisco, where she joined a women's liberation group in 1968 (Flannery 2005:174).

***Intended outcomes: the aims of consciousness-raising***

At the time, authors had various ways of conceiving of the value of consciousness-raising as a feminist practice. One of the intended outcomes was for women to develop worldviews that were independent from ideas they had been socialised to believe. For example, Allen (1970) wrote: 'The small group is especially suited to freeing women to affirm their own view of reality and to think independently of male-supremacist values' (Allen 1970, reprinted in Koedt et al eds 1973:272).

Another intended outcome of c-r was articulated in terms of ending women's sense of isolation, thus enabling them to feel less alienated from one other. As an offshoot of diminished isolation, it was claimed, increased confidence would result for many women. An article on consciousness-raising in a collection produced by the UK women's liberation magazine *Spare Rib* explains the changes that occurred through c-r:

We spoke of our families, childhood, friends, colleagues, lovers, our painful experiences, fears, secrets and happy times, our future dreams and plans...all of which sparked off talk on many other subjects. We were continually surprised, encouraged, and excited by the similarity of our experiences, and as this sharing went on many of us found the confidence to do things that really mattered to us, however trivial... Through consciousness-raising there is the realization that you are no longer alone (Philpott 1982:586).

Authors commonly articulated the value of consciousness-raising as a feminist practice in terms of its relation to society beyond the group. Payne's (1973[1971]) article, '*Consciousness Raising: A Dead End?*', reflected critically on the way in which members of her New York group did not try to relate their problems 'to the structural problems of women in society nor did we think about how they could be dealt with beyond the personal level of these particular women in their particular situations' (Payne 1973:283). As such, extending analysis from the particular to the general was seen as key to developing *political* understandings of (and solutions to) women's (personal) predicaments. Payne (1973:283) registers her frustration that

group discussions did not seem to be leading anywhere, as she recalls asking herself, ‘What is the point of just continuing to talk about ourselves? Why bother? Where is it leading?’ Payne goes on to explain her view that c-r groups met a need at the beginning of the women’s liberation movement. As groups proliferated, more and more women realized what they shared, but as Payne (1973) saw it, groups were in danger of becoming stagnant:

My staying in a small group which just talks and which does not relate to the rest of the movement is stagnation. It is pointless to develop the self-confidence to challenge assumptions about women’s roles and an understanding of the way society channels women without then collectively doing something about these problems (Payne 1973:284).

***Group size, “closing” groups, and facilitating the formation of new groups***

Limits were set on the appropriate number of women for an effective c-r group meeting, e.g. six to twelve women. Koedt et al (1973:280) suggested that, ‘groups larger than ten or twelve are less conducive to lengthy personal discussion and analysis.’ Original texts recommended that groups declare themselves closed once they reached their optimum size; this issue provoked debate within groups. Uncomfortable feelings arose around decisions to refuse new members, due to what was seen to be the exclusion of women who might potentially benefit from the process. An article in the *Spare Rib Reader* details the difficult but necessary decision of a London-based c-r group to close their meetings:

We had enormous problems about the size of our ‘small’ group. Sometimes fifty or sixty women would arrive; each week six to ten were new. We had already talked through many problematic areas and wanted to move forward together; yet the group was becoming unmanageable, even disintegrating as women left it in frustration at the increasing numbers and the necessity to return to issues that the core group had already explored. Eventually we decided to close the group to newcomers. We were accused of elitism, but we felt the group would collapse otherwise. In retrospect, we think we were right (*Spare Rib Reader* 1982:571).

In an attempt to resolve difficult emotions around the issue of groups closing once they reached their optimum size, some authors promoted the practice of members of existing groups enabling new groups to form. Sunshine and Gerard (1970) were part of a ‘New Group collective’ which developed out of their small group in New York

City to encourage more women to engage in consciousness-raising. Facilitating potential c-r group members to start their own groups was deemed more effective than admitting new members, who, it was suggested, would be at a different stage in the process, thus disrupting the group relations that were already developing between existing members.

***Organising meetings: attendance, location and structure***

In her consciousness-raising 'road-map', Dreifus (1973) outlines that attendance at meetings was mandatory. Turning up regardless of other obligations was a demonstration of commitment to the group, which was necessary in order for group members to feel supported by one another. The unspoken implication of any individual's non-attendance at a meeting was that they were letting the whole group down.

Almost by definition, consciousness-raising groups met in members' homes. In a chapter called 'The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Consciousness Raising', Dreifus (1973:21) described members' homes as 'the warmest, most intimate places for meetings', allowing group members to 'see directly the ambience and atmosphere' of one another's homes. The necessarily intimate location of meetings heightened the importance of groups being small, due to practical considerations about how many women could comfortably fit into someone's living room. An informal and comfortable location was deemed vital to the success of the process, particularly as many of the occurrences women reflected upon together had taken place within the domestic sphere. It was recommended that groups avoid making one member play hostess more so than any other. In her self-published account of a c-r group in Clapham, Sue Bruley (1976) explains the importance of rotating meetings around members' homes:

Firstly, everyone had to act out the hostess role, and secondly, even if things were a little cramped, it was important in building up a mental picture of each other that we become aware of the material conditions of our home environment (Bruley 1976:7).

The hostess role carried the risk of women judging one another on the cleanliness of their homes, or the quality of refreshments provided. The group process was at risk

of being undermined if relations between group members resembled conventional feminine role-playing.

The ostensible leaderlessness of c-r groups was the focus of Freeman's (1972[1970]) widely referenced paper, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*. Freeman (1972) had been involved in early women's liberation 'small groups' in Chicago, and drew on her experience to argue that small groups should not strive for the unfeasible ideal of structurelessness; it was not structure *per se* which was dangerous, but the presence of unacknowledged structures that hindered the group process. Without formal structure, informal structures would inevitably creep in, Freeman (1972:2) argued, due to the fact that 'we are individuals with different talents, predispositions and backgrounds.' According to Freeman (1972), formal leadership has a less destructive effect on group relations than the denial of power differentials. Allen (1972) held a similar stance to Freeman on the inevitability of hierarchies, positing that c-r groups needed to acknowledge structure:

We are a group which believes that there is always a structure, that the issue is to consciously choose one that will encourage growth rather than just hope that it will happen. We think this way because our early activity was consciously unstructured – we thought – and we found that letting things just happen meant that the strongest personalities controlled the meetings and that it was very easy to avoid areas of discussion that were difficult (Allen 1970:272-3).

In her account of being in a consciousness-raising group in New York for a year and a half, Payne (1973) alludes to the inevitable dominance of some individuals within the group:

Sometimes we used the approved consciousness-raising technique of choosing a subject and having everyone speak about it. More often, whoever wanted to speak about something initiated the discussion. Doing this created problems because the people who were the most vocal or the most competitive tended to dominate meetings and we spent many evenings struggling with destructive tendencies and personality conflicts (Payne 1973:283).

Other accounts articulated a positive role for group leaders under certain conditions. For instance, Dreifus (1973) recommended that groups might utilise a particularly well-qualified group member's experience by giving them a leadership role.

Readers were warned that groups ran into trouble when they declined to stick to certain rules or expectations about how consciousness-raising should be practised. By the early 1970s in the USA, there were certain ways of practising c-r which had come to be seen as a standard or movement-approved way of doing it. However particular groups did not necessarily strictly adhere to emerging conventions. Particularly around questions relating to structure and leadership, early writings explored and modified the emergent small group method in ways that in turn fed into how c-r was being practised. To reiterate, this chapter surveys how groups were characterised by original proponents; the groups themselves may or may not have resembled these representations.

### *Topics*

A survey of the written materials on consciousness-raising revealed a transcript of a taped consciousness-raising session (Rainone 1973[1970]), from a series of sessions aired on a New York City radio station during the day in an attempt 'to reach women who, because they have children and other female responsibilities, are often unable to join a CR group' (Rainone 1973:63). This article was one of several original documents to provide lists of common/recommended areas for discussion (e.g. Koedt et al 1973), which included adolescent puberty rituals, housework, masturbation, and monogamy (Rainone 1973). According to Allen (1970), Koedt et al (1973) and Dreifus (1973), other topics included:

- Job experiences
- The women's movement and experiences in other political movements
- Relationships with men (male chauvinism, recurring patterns)
- Relationships with women (adolescent experiences – how they affect present feelings towards women; competition between women (for men); feeling attracted to other women)
- Appearance and self-image
- Communal living

- Therapy
- Rape
- Race
- Religion
- Homosexuality
- Childhood and adolescence
- School
- Marriage/marital status
- Family: ‘Discuss your parents and their relationship to you as a girl (daughter). Were you treated differently from brothers or friends who were boys?’ (Koedt et al 1973:280)
- Motherhood: pressure to become a mother, pregnancy, childbirth
- Sex
- Behaviour: ‘What is a “nice girl”? Discuss the times you have been called selfish. Have you ever felt that you were expected to smile even when you didn’t feel like it?’ (Koedt et al 1973:280-1)
- Age: fear of aging, differences for men and women
- Ambitions
- Health/the male medical system

How meetings were to be arranged and structured varied according to different authors’ accounts. Some groups specified topics to be covered in advance of meetings. For instance, Allen (1970:275) suggested participants be given a chance to prepare ‘for the discussion for a week or so’, to ensure the experience of sharing would be productive. While several authors similarly recommended agreeing on topics in advance, there were variations from group to group, and within particular groups over time. Koedt et al (1973:280) argued that it was not ‘necessary to rigidly adhere to a one-week/one-topic schedule.’

### ***The personal is political***

As women worked out how ‘their self-doubts and lack of self-confidence were related to their being women’ (Payne 1973:282), what were previously seen as women’s personal or individual problems came to be understood as political

problems. Early writings on c-r argued that if particular problems were faced by all or most women, these could not be attributed to individuals' inadequacies, but were rather a feature of the social positioning of women generally. As Allen (1970:275) explains, 'what we have found is that painful "personal" problems may be common to many of the women present...the basis of many of our problems is our status as women.' Through consciousness-raising, it became possible to recognise the political magnitude of personal issues or experiences, and to challenge the system of attribution, from holding individual women responsible for their suffering, to blaming the social system:

The consciousness-raising process is one in which personal experiences, when shared, are recognized as a result not of an individual's idiosyncratic history and behavior, but of the system of sex-role stereotyping. That is, they are political, not personal, questions (Koedt et al 1973:280).

Accompanying feminist interpretations of women's problems were transformations in women's feelings about themselves and their position within the world. An article on consciousness-raising in the *Spare Rib Reader* explains that, through c-r, anger formerly directed inwards towards the self became directed outwards towards society: 'What you are voicing is no longer anger at yourself and what you took to be personal failings, but rather at a society which continues to oppress us all as women in it' (Philpott 1982:586).

Early consciousness-raising groups faced criticism in response to their belief in the political significance of what they were doing. Even women's groups were divided on whether they agreed with the idea of the personal as political. Freeman (1998) revealed in her later writings that her Chicago group did not talk about their own personal experiences:

When the discussion occasionally drifted into the personal realm, someone would jerk us back to the more general subject at hand with the admonition that we weren't being political (Freeman 1998:185).

Critics of c-r, including those within the women's movement, opposed the idea that the personal is political, suggesting that although c-r led to personal empowerment,

it did not constitute a political practice. As an instance of how group members stood up to critics, Sarachild (1968) notes that she defended c-r by ‘talking about...how very political these so-called bitch sessions could be.’<sup>3</sup> C-r was likened to therapy as a way of deriding as merely personal any diversion from properly political issues (e.g. equal pay for equal work – Sarachild 1973). In addition to defending c-r against suggestions that it was merely group therapy, some original advocates of c-r recognised its overlaps with therapy (Payne 1973; Jordanova 1981).

### *Opening up/voicing experience*

Talking about their experiences with one another was central to c-r group activities. Members would generally take it in turns to speak during meetings. C-r groups were portrayed as a distinctive kind of space, within which it would be possible for women to openly express themselves, in the most honest way possible. C-r groups, it was suggested, would enable each woman present ‘to open up and talk about her feelings about herself and her life’ (Allen 1970:273), a process that was deemed difficult if not impossible in other circumstances. As such, it was important for group members to be respectful and not judgmental of one another’s experiences. A group of British radical feminists who met at the National Women’s Liberation conference in Birmingham in 1978 proposed the importance of creating solidarity with other women and avoiding being dismissive of one other, even when women seemed to be doing ‘things that maintain their oppression’ (York et al 1979 reprinted in Gunew 1991:310). As a group member talked about a particular experience, the others present would, according to Allen (1970:275), ‘respond with recognition to someone’s account’ as well as adding ‘from our own histories as well, building a collage of similar experiences from all women present.’

A distinction was made between speaking out about, and *analysing*, experiences. An article on c-r published in *Ms. Magazine* emphasised the former:

It is important that we speak personally, subjectively, and specifically. Generalizing, theorizing, or talking in abstractions is bound to misrepresent or alienate some member of the group to whom those generalizations don’t apply (*A Guide to Consciousness-Raising*, 1972:115).

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Sarachild was in the New York group with the woman who first documented the argument that “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1969).



It was generally held to be the case that analysis should be absent from the first stage of the c-r meeting in order that experiences could be laid out honestly for the group's perusal. Redstockings' Manifesto (1969) emphasised that honesty 'in private and in public, with ourselves and other women' was the first requirement for raising consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The initial phase of meetings entailed, according to Allen (1970:275), 'pooling descriptions of the forms oppression has taken in each individual's life', after which the group could move on to create 'an understanding of the social conditions of women.' Before the collective reinterpretation of experience could occur, women had to feel able to talk freely about themselves, a process from which analysis should ideally be absent.

In order to create the collage or pool of experience (Allen 1970), particular conditions had to be put in place, including the guarantee of confidentiality and the exclusion of men. The presence of husbands and male friends or co-workers, according to *Ms.* magazine, 'makes it much harder for us to speak honestly, and to venture out from under our habitual roles and patterns' (*A Guide to Consciousness-Raising*, 1972:112). Groups were intended as places where women could escape from the practical and psychic demands of their roles, including as wives/mothers. Because it was considered by the authors of these texts to be somewhat unusual at this time for women to ask for time away from men, it was anticipated that the women-only stipulation might be met with some awkwardness. In her book of advice for new c-r groups, Dreifus (1973:21) offered the following suggestion: 'As for husbands/boyfriends/lovers/male roommates, they should be given a couple of dollars and sent to the movies.'

The process of coming to speak about oneself was unfamiliar and far from easy. Unsatisfying experiences of c-r groups were documented in addition to the more plentiful positive accounts. That consciousness-raising was by no means rewarding for all women who were involved is evident from an article in the *Spare Rib Reader*:

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<sup>4</sup> Redstockings (1969) referred to women's class consciousness, which meant their consciousness of themselves as a sex class distinct from men.

I was in a consciousness-raising group and I used to go and they'd say 'How are you feeling?' and I'd say 'Oh, OK', and leave it at that. What had I got to say? I was just in a muddle and you can't talk about a muddle to people, can you? (*Spare Rib Reader* 1982:389).

There were limits to groups' capacity to enable women to open up about their lives. Although some women wrote about difficulties they faced, the literature emerging from the movement at the time more commonly reported excitement surrounding the c-r process and the realisations it produced, for example:

One of the exhilarating and consciousness-raising discoveries of the Women's Liberation Movement has been how much insight and understanding can come from simple honesty and the pooling of experience in a room full of women who are interested in doing this (Sarachild 1973).

However, just gathering experiences did not in itself transform women's understandings of their lives; analysis was also necessary in order for women to reinterpret their experiences according to what they had in common with other women. As such, groups moved into the next stage: analysis.

***Analysis: transforming understandings, producing new interpretations***

The analysis component of consciousness-raising is what separated it from the practice of moaning about men, which was by no means new. Drawing attention to this distinction, writers reflecting on early consciousness-raising groups emphasised the importance of avoiding lapsing into usual ways of talking about men. It was suggested that women needed to cease to put men first, in order to begin putting themselves at the centre of their own lives. However, this new way of being felt somewhat precarious and needed to be defined and defended within the group: 'It is easy to lapse into old ways of talking to each other, to only talk about problems with men and not talk about what we want our group to be, what we need from the group' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21).

As well as opening up about feelings and sharing experiences, it was deemed essential that women's groups progressed to analysis and abstraction, through which their thinking/theory could develop (Allen 1970). C-r groups analysed their

experiences by working out what could be gleaned from them about the position of women within wider society. They aspired to produce interpretations that were accessible and relevant to ordinary (i.e. non-intellectual) women. The theories their discussions generated confronted and opposed ideas about women produced within traditional disciplines such as psychology.

Groups faced the challenge of getting the balance right between speaking honestly and openly about their subjective feelings and experiences on the one hand, and subjecting those experiences to analysis on the other hand. The importance of this balance came across in suggestions that groups usually included some women who found it hard to open up about feelings, and others who feared analysis. Allen (1970) characterises the crucial combination as follows:

We believe that theory and analysis which are not rooted in concrete experience (practice) are useless, but we also maintain that for the concrete, everyday experiences to be understood, they must be subjected to the processes of analysis and abstraction (Allen 1970:273).

Groups provided members with rare opportunities to engage in *thinking*, which had the effect of transforming their relationships with ideas (I discuss this further in Chapter 7). It was suggested that, in being allowed space to think, women would function differently within groups, compared with how they functioned in the world outside the groups. Allen (1970:271) notes: ‘We have defined our group as a place in which to think: to think about our lives, our society, and our potential for being creative individuals and for building a women’s movement.’

As a method of resisting patriarchal knowledge, c-r produced analyses that were seen as a collective rejection of ‘male definitions of our lives’ (Bunch 1975). Women’s groups encouraged one another to refuse to make sense of their experiences using ‘preconceived theory, especially one devised by men’ (Allen 1970:277). These new theories about women’s lives were intended to challenge rather than add to their oppression. A group of British feminists that first came together at the National Liberation conference in Birmingham in 1978 declared that, ‘only people who suffer from an oppression are able to talk about it; only they can describe the experience and only they can produce analyses which do not pull their

punches' (York et al 1979, reprinted in Gunew 1991:310). For original proponents, c-r constituted a new practice of understanding power relations from the perspective of those subjugated by them. These women-only political spaces existed in contrast to mixed political contexts in which women were required to accept male-produced versions of reality that denied women's experiences of oppression (see Rowbotham 1974:12).

***Collective identity formation versus individuality and heterogeneity***

Women developed confidence in themselves in c-r groups, having previously relied too heavily on male approval. However there was a danger that women's dependence upon male values and institutions would be replaced by a new dependence upon their women's group.

Original documents assumed that many women would be unconfident in articulating their political ideas and beliefs and that group members would support one another in developing the confidence to discuss these matters with one another, and maybe eventually beyond the group. With reference to their New York City group, Sunshine and Gerard (1970) allude to women developing individuality and the confidence to go against popular/men's opinions:

Political beliefs, however mild, are suppressed by many women due to fear: fear of sounding stupid, of differing with popular belief and even in some circumstances of joining popular belief. Often a woman holds the political convictions of her husband, lover, brother, father or whoever is the essential male figure in her life (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:20).

As they go on to explain, the small group context was intended to serve as an arena for *encouragement*, where women could develop their individual politics with the support of one another: 'Whether her politics are left or still in the quasi-liberal circle, each woman should be encouraged to express that belief, to learn to "talk politics"' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21).

Within this formulation, the value of women's group practices is assumed to lie in group members becoming confident in articulating their own political beliefs; it is seen as less important that they develop a collective political stance, although the

authors do insinuate that political awareness should develop in a direction increasingly tending towards left-wing political ideology. While the emphasis on encouragement in Sunshine and Gerard's (1970) article implies that women could develop as individuals within small group contexts, other texts place a greater emphasis on the formation of collective identity within women's groups. Consensus between group members' analyses of their shared social position and the appropriate response to it was called for within some texts, e.g. Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979) saw it as necessary for group members to adhere to a particular analysis of women's oppression.<sup>5</sup> For Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979), it was important that group members were not only all women, but that they were all lesbians; otherwise, it was feared, heterosexual women would bring men's interests to the group:

Communication with heterosexual women is fraught with difficulties, with static which comes from their relationships with men. Men distort such communication. A heterosexual woman will have a different perception and reaction to things you say; she may be defensive and is likely to be thinking 'What about Nigel?' When you talk of women's interests and the future and survival of women, her imagination may be blocked by concern for her man and his brothers. You feel under pressure to say nice things which will not threaten her (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1979:9).

The goal of creating a collective identity as political lesbians entailed excluding women who were different (heterosexual), in the interests of group solidarity. Although the value of differences between group members was noted (Dreifus 1973), there were also homogenising inclinations within c-r groups. Reflecting upon the problematic aspiration towards collective identity, Allen (1970:271) warned that, as groups became meaningful in women's lives, there was 'a temptation to transfer our identities onto the group, to let our thinking be determined by group consensus rather than doing it ourselves.' As such, special efforts were made by some groups to respect individual members' autonomy. Members of Allen's group, for instance, tried 'to resist the temptation to submerge our individuality in the group' (Allen 1970:272).

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<sup>5</sup> See also Brownmiller (1999:66) on New York Redstockings' desire to ensure that group members could demonstrate their adherence to a particular 'level of consciousness'.

Although women-only contexts ruled out any possibility of gender difference, other forms of difference could be seen to present problems for the group process, e.g. differences between group members relating to class, age, or political outlook. The issue of heterogeneity amongst women was raised within some of the texts. For example, 'Is it possible to be in a group with women who are very different from you?' (Philpott 1982:585)

The goal of c-r to create group identity among women was thought to be more easily accomplished if participants in the process already had similar experiences and backgrounds. Contemplating the significance of existing similarities between participants in the group process, original proponents were generally hopeful that women who were ostensibly quite different would begin to identify with one another as they came to realise that they all faced a common predicament *as women*. Sunshine and Gerard (1970) articulate the usefulness of c-r in terms of women coming together with others from different class backgrounds, with whom they would not otherwise normally come into contact. In this way, heterogeneity within the group could be seen to present the potential for women to get to know women who were different from themselves, and whom they would not usually spend much time with. Through creating opportunities for ideas to be exchanged between women with very different experiences, small groups could enable women to develop 'a group consciousness which speaks to and includes women from different class backgrounds – women who are in their daily life styles are (*sic*) usually isolated from each other' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21). While some groups demanded homogeneity in order to deal with the unique oppression faced by particular groups of women in terms of class or race or sexuality, diversity was mostly valued within groups (Sunshine and Gerard 1970; Dreifus 1973), with too much sameness being seen to limit the politically productive exposure of women to others with a range of different experiences.

***The development of the group: What came after c-r? Should it lead to political action?*<sup>6</sup>**

Discussions of the life course of consciousness-raising groups considered whether the group process should lead somewhere, and if so, what should follow on from c-r. Speculating on what women would go on to do after c-r, authors of various texts suggested that, through small group consciousness-raising, women would eventually be ready for feminist activism. In their introductory working sheet, Koedt et al (1973) described the life cycle of a typical c-r group in such a way as to suggest that group members should progress to political activities beyond the group:

Generally consciousness-raising groups spend from three to six months talking about personal experiences and then analysing those experiences in feminist terms. Thereafter they often begin working on specific projects including such activities as reading, analysing and writing literature; abortion law repeal projects; setting up child care centres; organizing speak-outs (rape, motherhood, abortion, etc.); challenging sex discrimination in employment, education, etc (Koedt et al 1973:280).

Sunshine and Gerard (1970:21) reported that their group reached the point where it was necessary to proceed to action: 'We had reached an impasse. The need for action through work projects was becoming more evident among some of the women. It was obvious that this was to be the next step in our development.' As the 'ultimate tool for organizing' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21), consciousness-raising was seen by some authors to play a key role in the larger-scale feminist political process.

Participants in one of the earliest c-r groups, New York Radical Women, went on to do 'zap' actions, which were 'actions brought before the public for the specific purpose of challenging old ideas and raising new ones' (Sarachild 1968). However, it was later stated that they had not intended consciousness-raising to be 'merely a stage in feminist development which would then lead to another phase, an action phase, but as an essential part of the overall feminist strategy' (Sarachild 1973). Bartky (1976:12) also suggested that c-r did not have to lead somewhere in order to be seen to have political effects: 'A "raised" consciousness on the part of women is

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<sup>6</sup> I refer to action to draw attention to the way in which consciousness-raising tends not to be seen to constitute political action in and of itself.

not only a causal factor in the emergence of the feminist movement itself but also an important part of its political program.'

The question arose as to what would happen to c-r groups if they didn't go on to do public action. Women outgrew c-r (Philpott 1982), and without the process going somewhere, there were struggles to ensure groups continued to be productive for participants (Sunshine and Gerard 1970).

### *Personal-political change*

Although some saw activism as the next step after consciousness-raising, original texts also described changes that were expected to occur within group members' lives as a politically significant outcome of c-r, regardless of other forms of political action women might go on to engage in afterwards.

The implications of consciousness-raising beyond the group setting were articulated not just in terms of producing feminist activists who would have an impact upon society, but also in terms of the impact of the process upon group members' everyday experiences. C-r was seen to provide participants with emotional interaction with other women, through which they began to like one another and become closer. The previous lack of intimacy between women was seen as a consequence of patriarchal society. Sunshine and Gerard (1970) recount how positive qualities tended to be associated with men, preventing women from bonding with one another:

Crying and laughing together makes one feel real group support. We had to really identify with women as a group. We had not realized how much we identified confidence, active work, competency, aggressiveness, with men. We wanted to try to use our small group as a means of identifying these qualities with women (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21).

Women came to count on each other more and more through the small group process. It was claimed that they felt less isolated as a result of engaging in small group consciousness-raising (Allen 1970), as they 'began to demand something from each other: loyalty, trust, warmth, commitment, honesty' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:21). In demanding these things from one another, women relied less on the



support of men. (The theme of women's increasingly important friendships with each other will be explored further in Chapter 8.)

Within accounts written by members of early consciousness-raising groups, partaking in such groups affected how women experienced their everyday lives. As Sunshine and Gerard (1970:21) summarise, 'we each saw that all of us counted heavily on the small group, it having become an essential part of our everyday lives.' As well as causing transformations in women's relationships with men, and other women, consciousness-raising also had transformative effects on a woman's relationship with herself, as it was in small groups that women 'began to have our first non-schizoid experience', which entailed seeing other people 'see you as you see yourself' (Sunshine and Gerard 1970:20). As such, original texts constitute evidence that c-r was seen by some feminists at the time as more than just a precursor to political action.

### *Conclusion and further comments*

For the authors I have discussed, to talk about women's experiences (including their relationships with themselves and each other) in a way that recognised these experiences as politically significant was in itself transformative of women's lives. Original proponents suggested that, through consciousness-raising, women worked on their relationships with themselves (becoming more confident) and each other (becoming less isolated). As a feminist personal-political practice, consciousness-raising was seen to constitute a radical departure from dominant conceptualisations of political practice at the time.

Although some of these texts promoted recognition of personal change as politically significant, the authors of these original texts (and the groups they were part of) were not in agreement as to the nature of the relationship between the personal and the political. Early writers on consciousness-raising reflected on the contested role of c-r groups in relation to the movement. The question of whether c-r groups were doing enough by changing themselves was debated within groups, and members disagreed over whether or not doing action beyond the group was necessary:

We never resolved the question of what a women's liberation group was supposed to do. There was always a conflict between those who favored the personal, psychological approach and those who felt that a women's group should be building a bridge between the personal insight gained by being in a small group and political action with a larger body of women (Payne 1973:283).

Some original proponents of c-r saw it as a politically significant practice in its own right, while others, such as Pam Allen, saw c-r 'primarily as education preparatory to action' (Flannery 2005:178). For Sarachild (of New York Radical Women, later Redstockings) c-r was political in its own right, evidenced by the fact that it was perceived as a threat:

There turned out to be tremendous resistance to women simply studying their situation, especially without men in the room. In the beginning we had set out to do our studying in order to take better action. We hadn't realized that just studying this subject and naming the problem and problems would be a radical action in itself, action so radical as to engender tremendous and persistent opposition from directions that still manage to flabbergast me (Sarachild 1968).

According to Sarachild's (1968) analysis, the potential for c-r to transform gender relations is evident in suspicious attitudes towards it.

In the following chapter, I shall argue that subsequent representations of c-r have denied its political significance, accounting for the practice in ways that reinstate women's issues in the personal sphere. The original intention to develop women's groups as a political practice has been lost from (or written out of) subsequent representations of c-r.

## **Chapter Three: Social Scientists' Reluctance to Theorise Consciousness-Raising as a Political Practice**

Although it is possible to analyse the women's movement in a way that portrays consciousness-raising as 'the significant political act' (McWilliams 1974:162), I have observed a certain reluctance to do so. I turn now to consider how the practice has been represented from a social science perspective. I outline how scholars have reduced consciousness-raising to personal change rather than seeing its effects in terms of social transformation (Young 1997). Although critiques of c-r as personal rather than political are as old as the practice itself (Freeman 1998), this view has been developed through subsequent social scientific accounts, to take on new forms, as I illustrate in this chapter.

Documents outlining the process of c-r from the perspectives of those women who began doing it during the late 1960s were widely circulated. However it is impossible to know the extent to which groups adhered to these guidelines. Rosenthal (1984:320) notes that 'the women who initiated consciousness-raising lost control of the process.' As such, it came to be (represented as) something quite different from how it was described within the early movement writings discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter considers how c-r has been distorted as it has been conceptualised through the traditional disciplinary paradigms of psychology and social movement theory. Original proponents saw c-r as a method through which feminists asserted that what are characterised as women's personal problems are actually political. However, the political significance of women's personal lives is, I suggest, largely unrecognised within social science perspectives on c-r.

I begin by considering how the increased visibility of personal experience in the public realm since the 1970s was not in itself politically transformative (Armstrong 1990). I go on to argue that academic theorisations of feminist consciousness-raising neglect to theorise the political significance of women changing their own lives. In this way, the chapter serves as a feminist critique of these disciplines' failure to recognise the political impact of c-r. I look at two contrasting assumptions at work in these writings: firstly, that political action entails engaging with the state, and secondly, that c-r effected personal change, helping women to become better

adjusted and more fulfilled within their existing roles. I demonstrate that scholars implicitly and explicitly hold up dominant definitions of the personal and the political, helping to sustain existing power relations. Neither accounts emphasising personal (psychological) change, nor those emphasising that political action *followed from* c-r make sufficiently clear connections between the personal and the political. Social movement theory discourses, having emerged from patriarchal scholarly traditions, fall short of recognising the second-wave radical feminist practice of group consciousness-raising as a *political* practice.

***The personal becomes political (and then goes back to being personal again)***

During the 1970s, discourses and contexts in which individuals could reflect on their lives in the presence of others were less prevalent than they are today. The relative commonness today of the practice of talking publicly about experience does not, however, represent a success for feminism; personal testimony as a cultural form does not involve making connections between individuals' stories and the social system.

Second-wave feminism developed political perspectives on facets of social life which had previously not been subject to social and political theorising. The routine and the everyday came to be seen by feminists as issues worthy of analysis (Stanley and Wise 1983), but existing models were inadequate for conceptualising gendered power relations. Male definitions of political action tended to emphasise governments, laws, and protest marches (Kitzinger and Perkins 1993). Consciousness-raising as a feminist political practice critiqued restrictive understandings of the political. Women's experiences of housework, the family and intimate relationships were amongst issues previously deemed unworthy of political consideration, but opened up for critique by feminists. Women's personal lives were political in that, as Ryan (1992:89) summarises, 'what was happening to individual women was happening to women everywhere.' Although c-r was an attempt to transform how power relations were thought about, the broadened conceptualisation of the political has not been widely taken up by social scientists.

That original proponents defended c-r as a *political* practice against suggestions that it resembled therapy (Sarachild 1973) implies that they held onto an understanding

of the personal (therapy) and the political (c-r) as dichotomous. Through the argument that c-r was political to the extent that it was not like therapy (which could therefore be discounted as having merely personal effects), the binary between the personal and the political was left intact.

Since early writers on c-r debated whether it resembled therapy (Payne 1973; Sarachild 1973), there has been a growth in the culture of self-realization (Melucci 1989), which Furedi (2004) calls Therapy Culture. Although the spread of c-r groups occurred contemporaneously with a growth in therapy, these developments were not causally connected (Rosenthal 1984). Some forms of therapy represented a somewhat depoliticised version of the women's movement's attentiveness to the political dimensions of personal life. For while therapeutic discourses see actions increasingly as responses to emotional turmoil (Furedi 2004), they tend not to link events to systematic oppression. Although the idea of family life as the source of many problems is an aspect of the 'contemporary therapeutic imagination' (Furedi 2004:66) that was influenced by the feminist movement, the expansion in practices of, and discourses for, talking about personal experiences does not in itself fulfil the women's movement goal of gaining increased public recognition for the politics of experience, the family, and so on.

While c-r groups have arguably played an influential role in the increased opportunities for speaking out about intimate and private matters, the intention behind the practice – which was to politicise the personal, not to personalise the political – might be seen to have been thwarted within cultural inclinations, since the 1970s, towards speaking out. Discourses for talking about the political significance of women's lives have increasingly taken a backseat to individualised explanations and solutions. For Kitzinger and Perkins (1993), the growth of therapy signifies a shift in the opposite direction to that intended by feminists – that is, towards seeing *political* issues as *personal* issues. Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) evoke second-wave feminists' recognition of the political meaning of day-to-day activities, including housework, sex and relationships with family members. They recall how feminists came to develop political understandings of what had tended to be treated as merely personal issues:

There was a time, then, when feminists were clear that ‘the personal is political’. The ‘personal’ details of our lives were topics of political discussion and debate. Today, the situation is reversed. Political concerns, national and international politics, and major social, economic and ecological disasters are now reduced to individual psychological matters. The problem today is to prevent the last residues of political life from being treated as merely personal issues (Kitzinger and Perkins 1993:186).

The rise of therapy culture is not unrelated to the 1970s practice of consciousness-raising; in fact, it might be seen to be a depoliticised perversion of c-r’s intended effects. C-r was not intended to advocate talking as a solution to women’s problems. The growth of psychological and therapeutic discourses conflicts with lesbian feminists’ attempts to develop a broader socio-political critique of women’s problems (Kitzinger and Perkins 1993).

That the personal as political has been lost from feminism is also noted by Kelly (2005), who suggests that third-wave feminists do not interrogate the links between individuals’ lives and wider power structures. Despite this noted reluctance on behalf of younger generations of feminists to systematically interrogate the personal, the idea of the personal as political is still present within discussions about whether therapy constitutes a feminist practice. Feminists are divided on the issue of how to deal with the relationship between social change and personal change. For some, these two are mutually exclusive. For instance, Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) maintain that there is an inherent conflict between feminism and therapy. However, there are more optimistic positions within this debate, taken by those who see a potentially productive relationship between feminism and therapy (see Burstow 1992; Enns 2004; O’Grady 2005; Corey 2009). While earlier writers sought to distinguish c-r from therapy (Sarachild 1973), since this time, the notion of therapy as apolitical has been challenged (see O’Grady 2005). As such, it may now be more feasible to see c-r as both like therapy *and* a political practice (Worell and Remer 2003).<sup>7</sup>

Personal and intimate experiences are increasingly present within public discourse (Alcoff and Gray 1993; Furedi 2004; Berlant 2008). However, cultural changes have

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of consciousness-raising and the history of feminist therapy, see Evans et al (2005).

not necessarily been in the direction intended by the original proponents of the personal as political (Hanisch 1970). The wider repercussions of c-r were out of the hands of women who participated in the earliest c-r groups (Rosenthal 1984), and cannot be seen to reflect their hopes for how the social and political impact of their activities might have played out. Oprah-style television<sup>8</sup> has taken personal testimonies (or “I-stories”) to a wide audience. However, this media phenomenon is at some distance from the political transformations sought by feminists (Armstrong 1990). In addition to TV shows, the internet has also provided a new forum for speaking out about experience. See for example the *Experience Project* ([www.experienceproject.com](http://www.experienceproject.com)), where people can share personal stories about anything from a snowball fight to a sexless marriage. In this way, there are many opportunities for people tell others about their lives as a way of connecting with those with similar stories to share.<sup>9</sup>

As representations of the past are contingent on present interests and political positions, it is difficult to tell whether consciousness-raising became more like therapy, or whether it increasingly came to be *represented as* like therapy, including by its proponents as well as by critics. Rosenthal’s (1984) work reflects upon how c-r came to be seen in ways that distorted the practice from its original meaning and purpose. Later practitioners of c-r in the USA did not take account of the intentions of early c-r groups (Rosenthal 1984). As radical feminism declined and c-r was practised more widely, the political content was gradually left out, a shift which Rosenthal (1984:309) argues reflects ‘the power of the therapeutic view.’ This analysis is corroborated by Kitzinger and Perkins’ (1993) account of the triumph of the personal over the political.

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<sup>8</sup> Rather than provoking a collective/political analysis of personal experience, this media phenomenon produces the survivor as a spectacle, telling their story to a live TV audiences in the presence of ‘experts’, whose purpose is to legitimate, validate and explain the speaker’s experience, through, for instance psychiatric discourse (Alcoff and Gray 1993). Feminist c-r, on the other hand, was about repudiating the expert (Smith 1987).

<sup>9</sup> The website invites its users to “Meet Friends Through Shared Experiences”. The *Experience Project* brings individuals together on the basis of shared experiences by enabling users to join groups organised around statements such as: “I Am Going to Change the World” (1,345 members), “I Can’t Change the Past But I Can Change My Future” (9,812 members), “I Had An Abortion” (637 members), “I Hate My Dad” (675 members), “I Want A Boyfriend” (856 members), and “I Battle Depression” (10,439). The website boasts 3,608,287 experiences shared (by 15/12/09).

***Social science approaches to theorising consciousness-raising***

Social science perspectives reinforce dominant notions of the political, which, I argue, precludes them from seeing c-r as a method through which the women's movement brought about political change.

Prior to social movement theory becoming a field of study in its own right, the task of explaining collective behaviour fell to social psychologists. However, as a discipline, psychology looks at human behaviour at the level of the individual, declining to make adequate connections between individuals and social and political relations and processes. I argue that psychological perspectives contribute to the reduction of the effects of consciousness-raising to personal change in women's lives. To illustrate this, I focus on three studies (Lieberman and Bond 1976, Chapman 1987, Henderson-King and Stewart 1994), which, I argue, represent c-r in ways that reinforce the dichotomy between the personal and the political.

Behavioural scientists Lieberman and Bond (1976) characterise c-r as an alternative mental health resource, proposing its role in 'alleviating psychological suffering and increasing life satisfaction' (Lieberman and Bond 1976:364). They liken c-r to other help-providing systems and 'alternative systems for helping with personal problems' (Lieberman and Bond 1976:364). As such, they implicitly refuse to recognise the ways in which c-r groups sought to understand women's problems as *political* problems. Lieberman and Bond's account of consciousness-raising, I argue, denies (by remaining silent on) the political significance of the process. As I see it, their analysis portrays c-r as valuable to the extent that it relieves mainstream social institutions and services of the burden of having to deal with discontented women. Taking account of feminists' challenges to the tendency for political problems to be passed off as mental health problems (Chesler 1974; Kitzinger and Perkins 1993; Armstrong 1994), it seems particularly inappropriate to make sense of c-r in terms of women's mental health.

In addition, Lieberman and Bond (1976) problematically describe their participants in terms of their husbands' occupations, going against the principle of c-r to enable women to define themselves as individuals in their own right rather than always positioning themselves in relation to men. Not only is it problematic to define the



class position of women in relation to that of their husbands,<sup>10</sup> but women in c-r groups consciously tried to develop ways of avoiding talking about themselves in relation to their husbands' professional status. By refusing to engage with feminists' own definitions of their activities, such characterisations of c-r assume an implicitly anti-feminist position.

As a political scientist, Chapman (1987) sought to assess the impact of consciousness-raising in relation to political parties. She considered why some women politicians (in Scotland) are 'more prepared than others to commit themselves to women's interests' (Chapman 1987:319). Conspicuously absent from Chapman's work is any acknowledgement of the politics of women's everyday experiences and practices. She does not study consciousness-raising as a challenge to conventional understandings of the political, but rather seeks to draw this form of feminist practice into the political sphere as it is conventionally understood. Chapman's (1987) work disregards feminist redefinitions of the political and deflects attention away from how c-r affected ordinary women. Disregard for the feminist challenge to the political is shown in political science more widely. For instance, Cook (1993) looks at 'Feminist consciousness and candidate preference among American women, 1972-1988'. Within this disciplinary paradigm, consciousness-raising groups are political to the extent that they have a quantifiable effect on how women interact with the state (i.e. their voting behaviour).

Henderson-King and Stewart (1994) studied the relationship between identifying as a woman and identifying as a feminist by asking women to rate, on a scale from 0 (cool) to 100 (warm),<sup>11</sup> how they felt about women and feminists. They conclude that seeing oneself as a feminist indicates stronger group consciousness than seeing oneself as a woman. I argue that Henderson-King and Stewart (1994) produce an overly-simplified representation of women's feelings about feminism. Their quantitative approach precludes an exploration of the complexities of these identities and the relationships between them. In response, I argue that an analysis of processes of collective identity formation needs to consider how feminists define

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of women and class see Abbott (1987); Delphy (1977); Allen (1982); Walby (1986).

<sup>11</sup> This methodological tool is referred to as a feelings thermometer and is attributed to Miller and Miller (1977).

themselves through distancing themselves from ordinary women (Stanley and Wise 1983; Hollows 2000) and from other feminists.<sup>12</sup> In their assumption that feeling warmly towards feminists implies identification with feminism, Henderson-King and Stewart (1994) ignore how feminists sometimes feel less warmly towards other feminists than they do towards women generally.<sup>13</sup> Ambivalence – a strong pull in opposite directions – cannot be represented on their scale, instead appearing as an absence of strong feelings either way. Feminists' conflicting feelings towards one another, including love as well as anger,<sup>14</sup> are hidden by this approach. I see understandings of feminist consciousness as requiring a qualitative approach, e.g. asking women to describe in their own words how they see themselves in relation to other women and/or other feminists. This would be more consistent with the ethos of c-r groups.

The reduction of women's experiences and feelings to numbers (Henderson-King and Stewart 1994; Henderson-King and Stewart 1999; Chapman 1987) ignores the feminist critique that suggests quantitative methods are symptomatic of patriarchal inclinations towards prediction, control, manipulation and domination, of both nature and the social world (Collard 1988). Quantitative methods in this context are viewed as resulting in the production of male-serving knowledge about, and control over, women's lives. As such, I argue that quantitative approaches to studying c-r are designed to bring the practice under the purview of traditional disciplinary paradigms in order that the women involved might be considered manageable by/within (social) scientific discourse.<sup>15</sup>

Through discussing the work of Lieberman and Bond (1976), Chapman (1987) and Henderson-King and Stewart (1994), I have shown how social scientists' depoliticised renderings of c-r depart from original proponents' descriptions of the practice. Psychologists' attempts to render c-r useful (to psychology, to the mental

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<sup>12</sup> For an example of radical feminist disparagement of liberal feminists see Dworkin (1988:321).

<sup>13</sup> Simmel highlights the importance of recognising that, 'People who have many common features often do one another worse or "wronger" wrong than complete strangers do...[T]hey do this because there is only little that is different between them: hence even the slightest antagonism has a relative significance...[T]he divergence over a very insignificant point makes itself felt in its sharp contrast as something utterly unbearable' (1971[1908]:91).

<sup>14</sup> For an example of heightened emotions in feminist debates, see the responses to the 'Love Your Enemy?' paper printed in Onlywomen Press (eds 1981).

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Kelly et al (1992) and Oakley (2000) have argued that there is a place for quantitative methods in feminist research.

health profession, and to wider society) conflict with feminists' intentions to cultivate a practice through which women could begin to confront and oppose the patriarchal tendencies of psychology. That psychologists categorised consciousness-raising alongside human resources training (Rosenthal 1984) further demonstrates that it was not recognised as a serious challenge to systems of male domination.

I wish to argue that, through disregarding its status as a political practice, psychologists have attempted to reduce the potential for feminist c-r to threaten the status quo. Psychologists have rendered consciousness-raising palatable within the male-defined discipline of psychology through portraying it as a response to women's *personal* problems (Eastman 1973; Micossi 1970).

The three studies I have focused on reflect a more general tendency within psychology and related disciplines to represent c-r in terms of how it might serve the interests of patriarchal social institutions, such as the mental health system (Barrett et al 1974; Warren 1976; Kravetz 1976; Lieberman and Bond 1976; Nassi and Abramowitz 1978). By implicitly rejecting (through a refusal to engage with) the ideas put forward within original women's movement writings, in favour of imposing their own definition onto the process, psychologists have attempted to render the practice of c-r intelligible within – and thus consistent with – patriarchal understandings of the social world. As recently as the mid to late nineties, psychologists' work on feminist consciousness has continued to neglect to consider feminist interventions in psychological discourse, or feminist critiques of the personal-political dichotomy (e.g. Henderson-King and Stewart 1994; 1999).

Scientific accounts of c-r, situated within disciplinary traditions such as psychology and political science, neglect to recognise the personal as political. Whereas psychological perspectives do not consider the political implications of personal change, the political science approach relies on a traditional definition of the political (Chapman 1987). Resembling the latter's silence around the effects of c-r on participants' lives, social movement theory also relies on narrow understandings of the political, as I discuss in the section that follows.

### ***Social movement theory***

While some psychologists have theorised c-r in ways that over-emphasise the personal, social movement theorists' accounts of the women's movement focus too heavily on institutions and formal organizations (Young 1997). Processes through which women transformed their relationships with themselves, and each other, are absent from their analyses. Instead, an emphasis on how c-r led to political action in the public sphere is favoured. I argue that, through casting consciousness-raising not as a political practice in itself, but as a *precursor to* political action, social movement theorists uphold the personal-political dichotomy.

Social movement theorists theorise c-r in terms of its role in recruiting social movement actors.<sup>16</sup> The idea of social movements needing to recruit is manifested in the free rider dilemma posed by Resource Mobilization (RM) theorists (Olson 1965). RM theory emerged in the 1960s in response to questions about what makes aggrieved groups engage in collective action; how movements recruit participants constituted a central dilemma (see Zald and McCarthy eds., 1979). Since movements produce collective goods, from which whole populations benefit (Olson 1965), a paradox arises from trying to understand why rational individuals would choose to act collectively if they could each just sit back and let the others create the changes that will improve all their lives. From the RM perspective, self-interested individuals will only act collectively if there are incentives to do so; the benefits of participation must outweigh the costs.

According to social movement theory, the personal rewards of c-r motivate individuals to go on to participate in campaigns which bring about political change. Friendships formed within movement contexts are not understood to be politically significant in themselves. Rather, they provide an 'affective bond' which helps movements bring in new recruits (Lofland and Stark 1965). Applying this idea to Alcoholics Anonymous and new religious movements, scholars have argued that friendships precipitate eventual conversion to the worldview of the movement (Snow and Phillips 1980; Greil and Rudy 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984).

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<sup>16</sup> Psychologists too have been known to see c-r as a recruiting device for the women's movement (see Rosenthal 1984).

Following RM analyses, consciousness-raising groups have been seen as a way of recruiting women's movement participants. For instance, Reger (2002:210) argues that, in the USA's National Organization of Women (NOW), c-r was viewed 'as a political tool for recruiting members and creating activists committed to changing the political system.' The idea of c-r as a preliminary to activism is evident in the work of Hercus (2005), who deploys the concept of micromobilization to describe c-r as a method of enabling women to make contact – and develop collective identity – with like-minded others in order to carry out political action. The idea of c-r as recruitment strategy assumes that the political significance of the women's movement lies in what participants went on to do *after* consciousness-raising. C-r is seen as necessary in order for action to occur but not as a political activity in itself.

RM theory presents only a very limited discussion of values, ideology and types of grievances (Klandermans 1988; Fireman and Gamson 1979; Snow et al 1986; Ferree and Miller 1985; Buechler 1990). Issues relating to consciousness formation and framing<sup>17</sup> are excluded from RM theory in favour of an emphasis on 'resources such as money and access to elites' (Young 1997:151). The rational choice model upon which RMT is based problematically assumes, as Ferree (1992:35) points out, that attitudes and preferences are 'pre-existing and stable structures, logically prior to and predictive of behavior.' As such, understanding changes in women's attitudes as they came to identify the problem of sexism (as a grievance) necessitates an approach which goes beyond RM theory. Grievances are implicit within RM theory, but, as Buechler (1990) argues, they need to be fore-grounded in understandings of the women's movement:

The argument that grievances are a constant background factor fares particularly poorly in the case of women's movements. For most women throughout most history, sexist practices have not been perceived as grievances that could be altered through movement activity (Buechler 1990:87).

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<sup>17</sup> In contrast to RMT, theories of framing are more concerned with understanding how grievances are articulated, analysing the discourses through which movement theorists frame the problems facing particular groups. See, for example, Snow and Benford (1988), who responded to the gaps in social movement theorists' understandings of how movements articulate, and propose action to address, collective grievances. See also Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) work on the cognitive praxis of social movements.

Critically deploying RM theory, Buechler (1990) emphasises the importance of considering how grievances come into being. For Buechler, the women's movement is unlike other social movements and requires a different approach. Rather than being conducive to the articulation of unvoiced grievances, c-r groups actually brought new grievances into being, through the transformation of women's collective understandings of their lives. Prior to c-r, Buechler argues, certain norms (e.g. romantic love, compulsory heterosexuality, the nuclear family) precluded solidarity between women. For women to come together in c-r groups was in itself a challenge to the ideologies that tried to keep women separate and thus dependent on men (Seiden and Bart 1976).<sup>18</sup> Feminist ideology – sisterhood and the personal is political – is crucial to understanding how women's grievances came into being and were legitimated (Buechler 1990).

A further facet of the need to approach c-r using a different mode of analysis than has been applied to other social movement practices concerns the redundancy of the free-rider dilemma to this particular feminist activity. Whereas RM theory rests on the idea that people benefit from social movements without participating (Olson 1965) this was not the case with c-r groups. Women had to participate in order to benefit; there were no free rider benefits. It was through the c-r group process of coming to see their problems as political that women experienced the effects of c-r; the practice cannot be divorced from its effects. Returning to literature produced by c-r group members, there is evidence of the view that the formation of feminist consciousness amongst group members was an intended outcome in itself, regardless of whether this led to other political practices (Bartky 1976). Recognising that the free rider dilemma does not apply to c-r, Buechler (1990) suggests that c-r groups' goals were less remote from the everyday lives of their participants than are the goals of centralized bureaucratic social movement organizations.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chapter 8 discusses in more detail challenges posed by feminist writers to ideologies serving to prevent women from coming together. Arguing that the formation of friendships within feminist contexts constituted a political practice in itself, I critique representations of friendship as merely a recruitment device (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Greil and Rudy 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Although critical of RMT, Buechler's perspective is ultimately consistent with hegemonic conceptions of social change and the political. Suggesting that centralized bureaucratic organizations are more effective for bringing about social change, his analysis neglects to consider the political significance of changes occurring in the lives of c-r group participants, leaving intact the notion that women discussing their everyday experiences does not bring about social change. In implying that the free rider dilemma still holds true for the 'more effective' political organizations, Buechler's work

In addition to the tendency for RM perspectives to deploy conventional understandings of the political, privileging government and large-scale institutions and organizations, there is an opposite tendency within another strand of social movements scholarship – New Social Movement (NSM) theory – to amplify the psychological to the exclusion of the political (Young 1997). In focusing on the (re)definition of identity (Castells 1997), NSM theory potentially elucidates some aspects of c-r ignored by other perspectives. However Young (1997:157) argues that NSM theory emphasises psychological benefits to the extent that it sees them as the sole or primary factor motivating participation.

In suggesting the least self-professedly radical feminists brought about the greatest change, Buechler (1990) evidences the tendency for scholars to assess social change in terms that recognise liberal feminist political practices and their effects more so than radical feminist practices (Young 1997). Although the radical strand of the movement exposed ‘the indirect mechanisms of power as they operate on women’s consciousness’ (Young 1997:155), social scientists tend to prefer to deal with questions of power in ways that fit with liberal conceptions of the political. They emphasise social movements’ effects on the policy process.<sup>20</sup> While this might be appropriate for studying liberal feminist organizations such as NOW, who saw c-r as a way of recruiting would-be activists (Reger 2002), the women who met in informal c-r groups had different aims in mind, so their impact should not be assessed using the same indicators.

Women’s movement scholars’ bias towards liberal feminism is an effect of its close affinity with political science as an academic field. Elshtain (1981) argues that liberal feminist discourse invokes the positivistic assumptions and rational approach of traditional political science, sharing a belief in reforming but not majorly altering

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confirms the problematic tendencies of RMT perspectives, as well as offering corroboration for a theoretical distinction between those motivated to participate in a collective context, and those who reap the benefits.

<sup>20</sup> Rather than theorising social transformation in terms of policy change, Young (1997) looks at how movement ideas influence culture, worldviews, and individual/collective actions. Although she argues that women’s movement scholars should pay more attention to the personal as political, Young (1997) does not, as I see it, take this argument far enough in her own work. This is noticeable for instance where she critiques Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) work on the personal and cultural change effected through women’s involvement in lesbian communities. Young refuses to see this kind of collective self-transformation as political (see Young 1997:163).

the existing social system. In contrast, radical feminism challenged male-serving ways of organising and making sense of women's lives. Social and political science methodologies and discourses are therefore more suitable for recognising social change in terms akin to liberal feminism; these intellectual traditions are much less inclined to conceptualise radical feminism *in radical feminist terms*. Following Elshtain (1981), it can be argued that liberal feminism – but not radical feminism – can be accounted for in ways that cohere with dominant academic conventions.

The close fit between social science and liberal feminist understandings of power and political practice relates to the conservative tendencies of the academic system, in which there are obstacles in place to prevent academics from transforming the disciplines in which they work.<sup>21</sup> It is as 'mainstream defenders of the status quo' (Elshtain 1981:239) that liberal feminists and some scholars share an interest in particular definitions of political practice and an optimism about the existing system, which they wish to change slightly, but ultimately preserve intact. Radical feminism, on the other hand, 'sees no need to compromise with existing political perspectives and agendas' (Bryson 1992:181). I wish to suggest that the social scientists discussed above are reluctant to challenge the system because of the legitimacy they seek to gain (or lose) for their work. By avoiding constructing radical feminist analyses of the political significance of the personal, women's movement scholars ensure that their work is acceptable within the traditions of academe. Aspects of women's movement activities – including, but not limited to, consciousness-raising – have therefore been de-emphasised due to being in conflict with conventional conceptualisations of social movements/political change.

King's (1986) work usefully draws attention to how women's movement scholars construct political positions in the present through the stories they tell about the past.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on some feminist issues more than others is one of the ways in which authors make (often subtle) statements about who they think "women" are

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that media representations also sided with *liberal* feminism in order to render the women's movement more palatable to a mainstream audience; it has been suggested that radical feminism was eventually filtered out of media portrayals of the women's movement (Bouchier 1979; Freeman 1975; Morris 1972).

<sup>22</sup> This analysis extends to myself and this thesis, as well as to the women I interviewed and their stories about West Yorkshire women's groups. The idea that accounts of movement contexts of the past position their tellers in relation to particular feminist collective identities informs my approach to interview data.



(Young 1997).<sup>23</sup> Through assuming perspectives on power relations aligned with particular feminist analyses more so than others, women's movement scholars carve out their own feminist identities. Invoking King's (1986) analysis, I wish to argue that portraying the women's movement in ways that downplay the political significance of c-r is a practice through which authors position themselves as liberal feminists. Through their writings, scholars dis-identify<sup>24</sup> from the early radical feminist proponents of c-r discussed in Chapter 2. For instance, they state that c-r is not a political activity but an empowerment-orientated one (Reger 2002), as well as declaring it a form of inactivity (Buechler 1990). By distancing themselves from radical feminist notions of political practice, women's movement scholars construct their loyalty to conventional definitions of the political, and thus gain legitimacy for their work within the traditional academic disciplines in which they are situated.

To illustrate how women's movement scholars align themselves with liberal feminism through subscribing to a narrow definition of the political, I wish to refer to Reger's (2002) study of conflicts in NOW over consciousness-raising. Reger describes a split between empowerment feminism (as bringing about personal change) and political feminism, linking consciousness-raising with the former.<sup>25</sup> She argues that there is 'more than one feminism', with some feminisms being more political than others. The personal/political distinction is left intact through Reger's (2002) suggestion that women empowering themselves is not a form of political practice.<sup>26</sup> Women's movement scholars are likely to be aware of the feminist critique of the personal-political dichotomy; that they nevertheless choose to disregard this critique in favour of leaving the dichotomy unchallenged suggests that they knowingly distance themselves and their version of feminism from the radical, personal is political strand.

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<sup>23</sup> The problems with making statements about who "women" are will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup> Dean (2008) defines dis-identification as active non-identification.

<sup>25</sup> Brown (1995:22) argues that 'contemporary discourses of empowerment too often signal an oddly adaptive and harmonious relationship with domination.'

<sup>26</sup> Reger's analysis is summarised by the editors of the volume (Meyer, Whittier and Robnett 2002:122) as a consideration of how a feminist organization provided space 'for those committed to political change as well as for those more in support of consciousness raising', further highlighting the view that c-r was not political.

***Chapter summary and further comments***

I have argued that social scientists neglect to engage seriously with consciousness-raising as it was initially understood. The authors I have discussed see c-r either as a precursor to proper political action, or as a way of bringing about (non-political) personal change. Their refusals to acknowledge c-r as a political practice are part of their disciplines' refusals to take up broader understandings of power relations. The political potential of c-r as it was envisioned by early proponents has been lost through its recasting as a therapeutic process (see Rosenthal 1984) and a recruitment device (Reger 2002). Original c-r groups' intentions have been written out of subsequent representations of the process due to being in conflict with dominant liberal feminist versions of women's movement history. Social and political science tends to be more suited to theorising social change as it was envisioned by liberal, rather than radical, feminism. By writing in ways that betray the very ethos of c-r (e.g. dis-identifying from feminists who saw the personal as political) the scholars I have discussed enact political identities more aligned with liberal as opposed to radical feminism. Through neglecting 'the historical roots of consciousness raising' (Rosenthal 1984:324), they refuse to recognise the impact of c-r on the everyday realities of participants. Scholars' loyalties to definitions of political practice that entail engaging with the state are a symptom of their conformity to patriarchal disciplinary paradigms. In abiding by these conventions, their work implicitly contributes to the denial of the pervasive effects of gender relations and patriarchal power on daily life and the selfhood of women. As I see it, theorists' refusals to engage with the feminist arguments that power pervades intimate life and personal relationships constitute an attempt to render feminist theory and practice less threatening to taken-for-granted patriarchal understandings of social and political life.

Without suggesting that researchers must agree with those about whom they write (see Luff 1999; Andrews 2002), researchers of consciousness-raising should recognise that there is a conflict between their own perspectives and radical feminist critiques. That such acknowledgements are not made is symptomatic of the hegemony of the disciplinary assumptions (including the personal-political dichotomy) which form the basis of their knowledge claims. Although I have argued that feminist understandings of power relations have yet to be widely taken up

within the social and political sciences, it is important to acknowledge that feminist critiques have had some influence on recent developments in sociology (Roseneil 1995). Furthermore, women's movement scholars are arguably coming to take on a wider definition of social and political transformation (Young 1997). While the hegemonic status of the political, as it is narrowly defined in terms of public forms of power, remains intact in social scientific work on c-r, there are nevertheless some exceptions to the tendencies I have described. For instance, Klatch (2001:792) recognises that feminist consciousness formation is more than simply 'a process of recruitment by already established social movement organizations.'

Having raised the question of how women have historically been prevented from articulating collective grievances (Buechler 1990), it is worth noting Rowbotham's (1989) argument that the personal/political distinction serves to restrict women from articulating grievances. As such, discursive reinforcements of the personal-political dichotomy can be seen to have disciplinary effects on women. Psychologists' accounts of c-r that imply that women became psychologically healthier through c-r (Lieberman and Bond (1976) are particularly problematic in this regard. The disciplinary effects of discourse will be considered further in the next chapter in relation to Foucault's work on the operation of discursive power through categorisation. Of relevance to my critique of the use of mental health terminology with reference to feminist c-r is Foucault's (2006[1961]) examination of how discourses of madness produce sane and insane subjects.

I have argued, with reference to Buechler (1990), that the feminist movement differs from other social movements and requires an approach that is able to account for its peculiar modes of transformation, the significance of which should be seen as *both* personal *and* political. I propose the concept of personal-political change as a way of acknowledging the particular effects of c-r. The analysis I go on to develop throughout this thesis differs from the perspectives discussed above in that I highlight how c-r altered women's relationships with themselves, ideas, and each other. I strive to see c-r in a way that remains faithful to the intentions of participants, whilst also taking account of developments in feminist theory since this time (see Chapter 4). Although c-r has been seen as part of the broader production of cultural and discursive change (Young 1997), social scientists do not go far enough in

theorising the political effects of c-r groups on women's lives. Psychologists have paid too little attention to how participants questioned and resisted the social roles of women through transforming their own responses to social expectations. Social movement theorists have declined to treat the relationships developed in movement contexts as politically significant, reducing friendship to a mere recruitment method (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Greil and Rudy 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984). Changes in women's relationships with themselves and one another are obscured by quantitative measurements of feminist consciousness (e.g. Henderson-King and Stewart 1994; 1999), and by a focus on party politics (Chapman 1987). Feminist theory, which I turn to in the next chapter, is more useful for conceptualising the effects of consciousness-raising on women's relationships with each other, and how they saw themselves as women. Spender (1985:21), for instance, argues that c-r was a practice through which women started 'to experience being a woman in a positive sense when they talked to other women.'

Transformations in participants' lives were not merely personal, but constituted powerful challenges to the subtle and consent-based operation of power over women. However social movement theory has neglected to address how power 'shapes not only the explicit political agendas but also the subjective reality of the dominated subject/actor' (Young 1997:153). Young's (1997) work has been crucial to my sense of the necessity of looking outside of social movement theory for the theoretical tools required to conceptualise c-r. The next chapter looks to feminist theory, following Young's (1997:158) recommendation that, where social movement theory falls short, 'feminist appropriations of postmodern theory, as well as feminist theories of identity, can pick up, expanding our understanding of the collective nature of identity construction and the political nature of identity contestation.' Through attending to feminist perspectives on power relations, I develop a perspective on c-r that is less at odds with the intentions of the women involved than those perspectives discussed in this chapter.

As feminist critics of psychology, Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) have noted the problematically depoliticised nature of the discipline. In contrast, I do not see psychology as inherently apolitical. I am more optimistic about the potential to focus on individual change in a way that also takes account of power relations, and how

these can be altered through practices of the self (Foucault 1984 [1983]; McLaren 2002). Rather than seeing feminism and psychology as fundamentally incompatible, I think there is potential for psychologists to develop useful insights into feminist consciousness-raising. They might, for instance, investigate the inter-subjective processes that occur in women's groups, as practices that take place *between* women. Psychological understandings of c-r could productively take account of poststructuralist feminist perspectives on the politics of self-transformation (see Chapter 4).

## **Chapter Four: Feminist Theory since the Second Wave**

The 1970s feminist practice of consciousness-raising was based on particular understandings of experience, consciousness, identity, power, and truth/knowledge. This chapter considers some of the subsequent shifts in understandings of these concepts and the relationships between them.

Having argued in the previous chapter that the second-wave feminist challenge to the narrow definition of the political is downplayed within academic representations of the women's movement, this chapter considers how Foucauldian understandings of power relations are useful for conceptualising c-r in ways that cohere with original proponents' intentions to focus their feminist practice on power relations as they occurred at the level of ordinary everyday life. I begin by looking at how personal experiences have been seen as a basis for feminist political theory, before going on to explore how, as a way of implementing the idea that the personal is political, c-r can be considered consistent with poststructuralist understandings of power and the self (e.g. Butler 1997). Subjectivity, or how 'we understand ourselves as subjects' (Stacey 1997:55), is crucial to conceptualising consciousness-raising, as a practice through which women changed their relationships with themselves. I shall consider how c-r has been rethought since subjectivity came to be seen as constituted – rather than merely represented – through discourse (Scott 1991).

Consciousness-raising has proved to be somewhat of a conundrum in that it simultaneously relies on the concept of false consciousness, as well as a belief in the capacity of women to move themselves out of this state of being. Unless women are to be seen as destined to remain in a state of false consciousness, a theory of agency is required to account for women coming together to question the ideas they had been trained to believe. Tong (1998), summarising Elshtain (1981), points to the absence, within theories of oppression, of a way of explaining how/why women act collectively to change their consciousness:

**Patriarchy...is simply not powerful enough to make mush out of millions of women's minds. If it were, feminists would be unable to provide a cogent explanation for the emergence of**

feminist 'true consciousness' out of pervasive patriarchal socialization (Tong 1998:36).

Feminist theorists after the second wave have looked for ways of conceptualising women's agency (e.g. McNay 1992; 2000). The idea of c-r as a momentary escape from patriarchal indoctrination, in order to see what is *really* going on, has been subject to critique since feminist theorists ceased believing there was a true reality outside of our social relations (Flax 1987). However rejecting the idea of c-r as a way of stepping outside of ordinary social life does not preclude it from being seen as a practice through which women distanced themselves from patriarchal ideology in order to produce new understandings of their situations.

Drawing on Foucault's work, recent feminist theorists – including McLaren (2002) and Valverde (2004) – have formulated positions from which to defend consciousness-raising, thereby showing it to be compatible with contemporary poststructuralist-inspired understandings of feminist practice. By engaging with Foucault to theorise consciousness-raising, my perspective diverges from the positions of commentators on the uneasy relationship between radical feminism and postmodernism/post-structuralism (Waters 1996; Thompson 1996; Mikhailovich 1996), in order to redeem c-r from being consigned to the past, to which it has been consigned along with what are seen as naive second-wave aspirations (Hemmings 2005).

Through engaging with post-structuralist theory as 'a more complex model of how society operates' (Stacey 1993:66), feminist theory has become somewhat more complicated since early writings on c-r were circulated amongst embryonic women's groups. However, it is important to be wary of implying that feminism has evolved or reached a higher plane of understanding. Hemmings (2005:119) alerts feminist theory to its own somewhat aggravating tendency to make 'unsubstantiated claims about the essentialism of feminist writing in the 1970s.' The dominant story of western feminism, Hemmings (2005:119) argues, is ignorant of 'the rich discussions about the relationships among gender, sexuality and race that took place in that decade.' As such, while I recognise in this chapter that second-wave feminist understandings of concepts such as knowledge and experience have been contested since the seventies, I try to avoid describing these shifts in terms of a progress

narrative (see Stacey 1997; Hemmings 2005). I do this by showing that debates around categories (e.g. “woman”) and their (hierarchising) effects are not entirely new.<sup>27</sup>

### *Women’s experience; feminist knowledge*

C-r constituted a radical method of producing political thought from the perspectives of those individuals who had suffered first-hand as a result of the power relations they exposed. As a new mode of experience-based political theorising, c-r aimed to produce ‘a theory of, by and for women’ (Bryson 1992:181), in contrast to theories of oppression that emanated from the armchairs of socially privileged philosophers. A group of British radical feminists who met at the National Women’s Liberation conference in Birmingham in 1978 declared that, as members of an oppressed group, only women could talk about their experiences in such a way as to ‘produce analyses which do not pull their punches’ (York et al 1979, reprinted in Gunew 1991:310). These analyses challenged existing systems of thought, which ‘treated women’s everyday experiences and understandings of social reality as peripheral or unimportant’ (Stanley and Wise 1983:134). As a method of knowledge-production, c-r used women’s experiences to develop alternatives to political theory produced by, and in the interests of, men. Its analyses were preferable to the already packaged theories produced by ‘outsiders who were not experiencing the suffering’ (Stoecker 1989). Several key second-wave feminist texts came out of early c-r groups in the USA (e.g. Koedt 1968; Firestone 1970; Mainardi 1970; Hanisch 1970; Millett 1971).

Developing, during the 1980s, into what became known as standpoint epistemology, feminist theorists continued making direct connections between women’s experience and feminist knowledge (Hartsock 1983; Harding 1986). For standpoint theorists such as Smith (1987), women’s experiences constituted the starting point for feminist knowledge claims:

It is this essential return to the experience we ourselves have directly in our everyday worlds that has been the distinctive mode of working in the women’s movement – the repudiation

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<sup>27</sup>I am aware that I have not entirely evaded replicating problematically unquestioned narratives about developments in feminist thinking since the second wave. With limited space to describe a number of feminist debates, I have had to re-present oft-told stories, before I may proceed to consider how interview data might be used to highlight alternative ways of narrating the recent history of feminism.



of the professional, the expert, the already authoritative tones of the discipline; the science, the formal tradition, and the return to the seriously engaged and very different enterprise of discovering how to begin from ourselves (Smith 1987:58).

Following in the same vein as c-r, standpoint theory was critical of the tendency for what are actually male-biased perspectives to be viewed as objective truth (Hartsock 1983). Standpoint theorists saw women's uniquely valuable perspective on social reality as submerged due to the higher value placed on the knowledge of the dominant group (i.e. men). Based on a belief that women's experiences result in forms of knowledge that are fundamentally different from those produced by men, standpoint theorists argued that the truth about women's lives could be used to challenge 'the masculinist definition of truth and method embodied in modern Western science and epistemology' (Hekman 2004:233). Following principles put forward by early proponents of c-r, standpoint theory proposed that women's particular truths, resulting from their particular shared experiences, could be used to create a common *political* position for women via their shared *epistemological* position, or relationship to knowledge/the world/reality.

Responding to suggestions that feminist consciousness came from reflecting on women's experiences, Collins (1986; 1989) proposed that Black women have their own distinctive ways of producing and validating knowledge, a Black women's standpoint, which formed the basis for Black feminist thought. Collins' (1989) work modifies earlier standpoint theorists' arguments about women as a group sharing a unique perspective. Taking account of the distinctive experiences of Black women, Collins' (1989) theory contributed to growing understandings of the diversity of experiences amongst women.

As all knowledge came to be seen as locally situated (Haraway 1988), connections between the perspectives of different women could only ever be partial.<sup>28</sup> As such, the connections between women's experience and feminist knowledge came to appear more complicated. Proposing variations in the unique perspectives of

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to recognise that, although postmodernists/poststructuralists tend to be held responsible for rejecting the transcendent view from nowhere (Haraway 1988; Shildrick 1997), women challenged the notion of a single objective truth (in the form of the tendency for men's truths to be seen as the truth) long before second-wave feminist consciousness-raising and its poststructuralist critics (Spender 1982).

different groups of women (e.g. a Black women's standpoint) was based on an assumption that experience and consciousness/knowledge are linked in a straightforwardly causal way. Acknowledging the different experiences of diverse "other" women problematically left intact the notion of the unmarked default feminist subject, as white, heterosexual, and so on. Postmodern feminist epistemology developed as a critique of the idea of adding in unique perspectives of different groups of women. For instance, Shildrick (1997) pointed to modernity's very basis in the principle of exclusion, arguing that the feminist struggle for the valorisation of women is more than a matter of reform or inclusion; rather, it involves radically deconstructing the paradigms of modernity. Shildrick (1997) provoked a troubling of the idea that feminist perspectives could be based on women's experiences. As such, the experiential basis of feminist political theory was opened up for interrogation by critics of the modern episteme.

Poststructuralist feminist theorists also troubled the relationship between experience and knowledge. Taking up Foucault's notion of knowledge as discursive, Scott (1991) proposed that discourse *produces* experience rather than simply providing the means of articulating it: 'It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott 1991:779). Questioning the existence of any such experience that is not already shaped by a subject's prior understandings as Scott (1991) does, has implications for conceptualising consciousness-raising. Whereas consciousness-raising was premised on the notion of giving voice to women's previously unarticulated experiences, this relied on there being a separation between experience, and the language used to articulate and interpret it. Refuting the existence of pre-discursive reality meant that real honesty between women in c-r groups was to be called into question, for women's accounts could not be seen to represent the truth about their lives, as there was no reality that was not already influenced by discourses that were already out there, which a speaker/teller (unconsciously?) interacts with in the course of constructing their own truth.

The political implications of post-structuralism tend to be cast as irredeemably negative for feminism (Hemmings 2005). It became difficult to see women as sharing a unified perspective, from which they could act together in their collective interests. By the mid-1990s, feminist postmodernism had become 'the new

orthodoxy' (Roseneil, 1995:199) within feminist theory.<sup>29</sup> Subjects being differently situated in relation to knowledge (Haraway 1988) introduced the possibility of a potentially infinite number of unique truths to be recognised within feminist theory. Although postmodern acknowledgement of multiple truths could lead to the political futility of relativism, Harding (1991:187) argued against this, proposing that feminists might still strive 'to tell less false stories.'

It is clear then that feminist theory has become more complicated over the last three decades. Understandings of truth-telling as a feminist practice are fundamentally altered by postmodernist theory, and the role of experience in feminist knowledge production was problematised by feminists' engagements with poststructuralist challenges to 'the authenticity, transparency and "truth claims" of much experientially-based feminist theory' (Stacey, 1997:55). After Scott (1991), it is necessary to rethink whether experience and knowledge can be seen as separable in the way c-r assumed them to be.

### *The discursive construction of women's experience*

The idea that there are multiple experiences and truths among women also prompted the question of whose experiences, then, form the basis of feminist theory? After Scott (1991), feminist discourses came to be seen as constructing rather than reflecting women's experiences. It is important to consider how, of all the possible experiences of women, some of those experiences have been chosen by feminist theorists, and deemed to be *the* women's experience upon which feminist theory should be based. As such, feminist writings have constructed hierarchies between ways of being a woman, privileging some experiences over others by inscribing them with the quality of being recognisable as the authentic, feminist-theory-approved women's experience.

Through its discursive constructions of women's experience, some feminist theory inadvertently serves to reify gender difference and inequality. Following poststructuralist critiques of the possibility of accessing and giving voice to pre-discursive experience (Scott 1991), we might see differences between men and

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<sup>29</sup>It is important to note the distinction between postmodernist theory and postmodernity, which is a name for the contemporary era, in which, according to Roseneil's (1999:164) definition, 'people have lost faith in the possibility of all-encompassing political and theoretical projects.'

women as brought into being and maintained through the language that supposedly only *describes* these differences.

Feminist discourses (including those of standpoint theory) construct differences between women and men, by invoking the idea that particular experiences are what define or unite women. For instance, Smith (1987:153) proposed a feminist sociology based on the bifurcated consciousness of distinctly female subjects, which arises from the experience of 'our work as mothers.' As such, her work invokes the idea that childrearing is women's work<sup>30</sup> and problematically excludes some women (including non-mothers) from the "women" and "women's experience" she theorises. In her work on 'Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology', Smith (2004 [1974]) proposes a unique perspective for women sociologists:

The relation between ourselves as practicing sociologists and ourselves as working women is continually visible to us, a central feature of experience of the world, so that the bifurcation of consciousness becomes for us a daily chasm which is to be crossed, on the one side of which is this special conceptual activity of thought, research, teaching, administration, and on the other the world of concrete practical activities in keeping things clean, managing somehow the house and household and the children, a world in which the particularities of persons in their full organic immediacy (cleaning up the vomit, changing the diapers, as well as feeding) are inescapable (Smith 2004:27).

According to Smith's conceptualisation, cleaning up vomit and changing diapers are integral to what it means to be a woman. As an instance of feminist discourse, her work problematically constructs women's experience in ways that reinforce, rather than challenge, women's roles as they are traditionally prescribed. Power relations between women and men are reiterated through this feminist discourse.

If, according to feminist discourse, oppression constitutes women's experience, and being oppressed is the defining experience of womanhood, these discourses preclude women from escaping thinking about and defining themselves in terms of patriarchally-defined roles, and thus from finding new, liberated ways of being. Discourses equating womanhood with motherhood are silent on the possibility of

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<sup>30</sup> For a contrasting perspective, see Firestone's (1970) argument for the liberation of women from motherhood.

women forging meaningful identities for themselves beyond or outside of the roles assigned to them by patriarchal ideology.

Poststructuralist attentiveness to discourse and the relationships between knowledge and power (Foucault 1980) highlights how standpoint feminist epistemology celebrates particular versions of women's experience. Positing the wife/mother role as the source of women's unique perspective results in feminist theory that reifies the taken-for-grantedness of the wife/mother role. In addition, feminist discourse formulated around generalisations about life experiences shared by all women contributes to the oppression of women who do not fit the dominant construction of women's experience (e.g. women who are not heterosexual, white, middle-class, mothers, etc.). The next section further explores the problems inherent in feminist theorists' attribution of credibility and recognition to some women's experiences over others.

### *The category "woman"*

In noticing patterns in their experiences, women in c-r groups cultivated a more general impression of what it was like to be a woman. Consciousness-raising played a key role in the production of feminist knowledge about women, whereas previously women constituted, as de Lauretis (1990:115) explains, 'eccentric subjects': 'In the early 1970s, in its first attempt at self-definition, feminism posed the question, Who or what is a woman? Who or what am I?' Prior to this, de Lauretis (1990:115) continues, 'woman' had been 'at once captive and absent in discourse'. However, in elucidating the collective condition of being a woman in patriarchal society, c-r contributed to the creation of problematic discourses about who women are. The exclusion of some women from feminists' proclamations about who women are perpetuates inequalities between women.

In addition to its role in knowledge production, consciousness-raising also served to create collective identity amongst women, as women made connections between their lives and came to see themselves as belonging to 'a group called women' (Cassell 1977). Implicit in group membership organised around shared gender identity was the suppression of other differences between women, as all women had to be deemed to be similar in order for womanhood to be the basis of feminist

collective identity. Whereas original proponents of consciousness-raising had conceived of the practice on the basis of the assumption that 'most women were like ourselves – not different' (Sarachild 1973), the idea of all women being the same in some crucial way has come to be seen as problematically resulting in the production of feminist discourses that exacerbate the extent to which *some* women's experiences are privileged through being made more visible within both dominant and oppositional culture.

The myth of all women sharing a common predicament serves to disguise inequalities between women. Through consciousness-raising, King (1986) argues, the experiences of a few white middle-class women came to be encoded as women's experience. Feminist theory which refers to women, but is based on white middle-class women's experiences, obscures 'the very different problems faced by working-class, black and third world women' (Bryson 1992:186).

The idea that all women share experiences 'as women' (Allen 1970; Philpott 1982) suggests their lives *as women* are unaffected by race, class, or sexuality, whereas such a state of being unaffected by these other forms of oppression is a state of being restricted to a few white, middle-class women (Spelman 1988). Spelman (1988) discusses feminist theory's exclusions, critiquing the idea that gender and race can be seen as different facets of identity, added onto one another. Deploying the analogy of a pop-bead necklace,<sup>31</sup> Spelman (1988) refers to understandings of identity as made up of neatly distinguishable parts, each of which is unaffected by – and detachable from – the others:

...in much feminist thought we may get the impression that a woman's identity consists of a sum of parts neatly divisible from one another, parts defined in terms of her race, gender, class, and so on. We may infer that the oppressions she is subject to are (depending on who she is) neatly divisible into racism, sexism, classism, or homophobia, and that in her various political activities she works clearly now out of one part of herself, now out of another (Spelman 1988:136).

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<sup>31</sup> Pop-beads are plastic beads with a knob and a hole which link together, such that each bead's knob fits into the hole of the next bead and so on, to form a chain of separable parts.

For Spelman (1988), such a way of conceptualising identity – as broken into separate and unrelated components – results in understandings of oppression in which the default meaning of “women” is “*white women*”:

...dominant feminist theory locates a woman’s true identity in a metaphysical space where gender is supposed to be able to roam free from race and class... What is in fact a function of the privilege of white middle-class women is being passed off as a metaphysical truth: that is, that we can talk about a woman “as a woman” without explicitly or implicitly alluding to her race or class (Spelman 1988:186).

As such, the assumption that c-r group members were all oppressed ‘as women’ (Allen 1970; Philpott 1982) relied on a simplistic understanding of identity. This observation, as part of wider debates around the category “woman”, has impacted upon retrospective conceptualisations of consciousness-raising as based on the idea of there being some essential truth about women, which is suppressed by patriarchy but ultimately discoverable under conditions conducive to honesty between women (i.e. in a c-r group). Later in the chapter, I discuss Foucault’s rejection of the goal of searching ‘for a true identity as a basis for universal emancipation’ (Sawicki 1991:7).

Attempts to base feminist theory and politics on women and their experiences became increasingly complicated as feminism recognised differences among women, and as post-structuralist and postmodernist analyses offered critiques of (oppositional) identity categories. Feminist discourse constructs men and women as distinct categories with conflicting interests. However Foucault’s influence has encouraged a rejection of oppositional subjects (such as “woman”/“the oppressed”) which, according to Alcoff (1988:417-8), construct ‘mirror images that merely recreate and sustain the discourse of power.’ Postmodern critiques of identity are deployed by queer theorists in ways that have been seen as a threat to gender-based collective identities (Richardson 2006), as well as a danger to radical feminism (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996). Calling into question the possibility of feminist politics in a postmodern era (Roseneil 1999), postmodernist thinkers see organising around the dream of political community as problematically suppressing and excluding difference and otherness (Young 1990). Recognising each woman’s own particular truth is in tension with feminist claims about women, and might be seen to preclude feminists from acting together as women. The idea that there could be no

group, “women”, but rather only unique individuals, each a composite of her own experiences, has resulted in representations of feminism as facing the problem of ‘apolitical individualism’ (Hemmings 2005:126). However, attempts have been made to reconcile feminism and postmodernism, stating, for instance, that deconstructionist scepticism might be seen as an opportunity rather than a dead end for feminism (Shildrick 1997), as well as considering how feminist political practice might entail deconstructing the meaning of “woman” (Roseneil 1999). I concur with these authors’ refusals to be pessimistic; radical feminist practices are not rendered politically ineffectual by the idea that women are a social construction, an illusory category or a ‘temporary positioning’ (Gergen 1993:64).

A shift in understandings of consciousness-raising occurred as feminists including King (1988:57) realised that, ‘while contending that feminist consciousness and theory emerge from the personal, everyday reality of being female, the reality of millions of women was ignored.’ While recognising the limitations of c-r, it is important to avoid implying that earlier feminists lacked an awareness of differences among women. To see poststructuralists as the first to challenge and deconstruct the category woman would be an oversimplification of the history of feminism (Hemmings 2005). From the 1970s, feminists wrote critically about group consciousness-raising as a heterosexual women’s practice (see Johnston 1973), as well as drawing attention to the dangers of treating women as if they were homogenous. Refuting the idea that second-wave feminist practices and theory relied upon women being unified by their experiences, Frye (1996) argues against the idea that c-r groups were agreed upon a way of addressing “women”. Rather, there were always differences and disagreements between group members. Frye (1996) argues against the idea that experiences discussed in c-r groups were generalised to all women:

Even in the most culturally homogeneous local consciousness raising group, women’s lives were not revealed to be as alike as two copies of the morning paper; we agreed neither in the details of our experience nor in opinions and judgments. We perceived similarities in our experiences, but we did not determine the relative statistical frequencies of the events and circumstances we found to be “common.” And the question of what a woman is, far from being answered, was becoming unanswerable and perhaps unaskable (Frye 1996:34).



As such, Frye's work might be seen to refute the idea that later (poststructuralist) theorists were responsible for rectifying the naivety of seventies feminism (Hemmings 2005).

It is not only differences *between* women, but the existence of contradictory desires and interests *within individual women* that pose challenges for feminism. Recognition (e.g. from psychoanalytic perspectives) that individuals have complex motivations, hold multiple subject positions, and are internally conflicted, make it difficult to imagine women acting collectively as a unitary and cohesive feminist movement.<sup>32</sup> The following section raises further complications in the form of postmodernist and poststructuralist analyses of the self; not only are "women" too diverse and contradictory to be understood in terms of a coherent category, but "woman" (in the singular) is to be understood as subjugated by the very same practices and discourses through which she creates herself as an agentic subject.

### ***Power, truth, self***

Foucault (1982:209) saw it as 'necessary to expand the dimensions of a definition of power' in order to theorise the subject. His conceptualisation of the relationship between power and the self has proved useful for feminism in that he sees the subject as 'neither entirely autonomous nor enslaved' (Sawicki 1991:104). Applying Foucault to consciousness-raising, as a practice through which women become critical and better able to recognise oppression as well as ambiguity, Sawicki (1991) argues:

On the one hand, consciousness-raising assumes that our relationships to ourselves and to reality contain elements of domination that can lead to collaboration in our own oppression. On the other hand, it presupposes that the meaning of these experiences is not fixed, but rather subject to reinterpretation and collective critical analysis... Foucault's account of subjectivity does not introduce any obstacles to feminist praxis that were not already there. Feminist praxis is continually caught between appeals to a free subject and an awareness of victimization. Foucault suggests that this tension may be permanent, that both views are partially correct, and that living

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<sup>32</sup> As such, women's movements now tend to be talked about in the plural.

in this uncomfortable tension is an important catalyst for resistance and wariness (Sawicki 1991:104).

As I see it, Foucault offers an analysis of power that gives weight to feminist claims that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970). His focus on micro-level power relations has been noted in relation to feminists' attempts to theorise the politics of personal transformation (Allen 1996). In particular, his political theory of the self influentially signified what McLaren (2002:65) describes as a 'move away from the traditional liberal understanding of a centralized political power emanating from the state.' Feminists' broader conceptualisation of the political is described by Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) as follows:

A feminist understanding of "politics" meant challenging the male definition of the political as something external (to do with governments, laws, banner-waving, and protest marches) and moving towards an understanding of politics as central to our very beings, affecting our thoughts, emotions, and the apparently trivial everyday choices we make about how we live (Kitzinger and Perkins 1993:186).

Although Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) occupy different political and theoretical position from Foucault, their understanding of the women's movement's extension of the political to the subtler workings of power resembles Foucault's ideas about the political being omnipresent. His work closely resonates with feminists' attempts to develop understandings of how power relations pervade daily life (Allen 1996).

Foucault's work on how power operates on/through the self departs from women's movement writings in that it constitutes what Butler (1997:17) has described as a 'postliberatory insight'. Whereas earlier lesbian feminist writings invoked the (modernist) conception of freedom as an empty/outside space (Zimmerman 1983), for Foucault (1978 [1976]), there is no position exterior to power relations, calling into question the goal of women's *liberation*, or an 'exit from patriarchy' (Zimmerman 1983).

Further, Foucault's poststructuralist philosophy rejects the notion of a discoverable truth about the self, and is therefore in tension with the idea of consciousness-raising as a practice through which women could 'get closer to the truth' (Sarachild 1973).

In his work on 'the ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom', Foucault (1988 [1984]) explains his rejection of the repressive hypothesis:

I've always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation...there is a danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or human foundation which as a result of a certain number of historical, social, or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism. In that hypothesis it would suffice to unloosen these repressive locks so that man can be reconciled with himself (Foucault 1988:2).

Foucault's suspicion of liberation is part of his general scepticism towards the idea of a true, yet hidden, human nature. His work can be taken to challenge the idea that the true nature of women's lives is concealed by patriarchal culture but potentially accessible through consciousness-raising.

The assumption that knowing the truth about women's oppression would be the key to ending it was opened up for questioning by Foucault's influence on feminist theory. C-r was based on an assumption that a situation could be changed through gaining insight into it. However, with Foucault's notion of discursive power came the idea that no discourse could provide true insight into, or a route out of, power relations. Scott (1991) applied the idea of reality being discursively constituted to the feminist appeal to experience, proposing that experience is not epistemically available prior to interpretation; it cannot pre-exist a theoretical or interpretive framework. In response to the poststructuralist influence of Foucault (1988) and Scott (1991), we might reappraise c-r, seeing it in terms of women talking about and making sense of their experiences through the discourses available to them, rather than finding absolutely truthful ways of expressing the realities of their lives.

The idea that there is no escape from power relations blurred the lines between what it meant to be a subject or an agent. Avoiding becoming resigned to the notion of being inescapably bound up in a web of discursive power, it is useful to turn to McNay's (1991; 2000) work, to ask whether it is possible to find ways to be ourselves: How can subjects – positioned (though poststructuralist discourse) within a web of discursive power – have agency in bringing about transformations in their relations to power? In her early work, McNay (1991:125) is critical of Foucault's

lack of explanation as to 'how individuals may act in an autonomous fashion', thus limiting his usefulness for feminists striving 'to rediscover and re-evaluate the experiences of women.' Elaborating on this critique in her later work, McNay (2000:17) explores the poststructuralist conception of the self as 'an illusory effect emerging from the uneasy suturing of incommensurable discursive positions.' McNay's work opposes the silence around, or negation of, agency within poststructuralist theory. She emphasises the productive character of power for feminist subjects, conceiving of agency as 'a creative or imaginative substrate to action' (McNay 2000:5), which occurs through subjects' reflections over time.

Taken up to critique the idea that women's real selves would be revealed through liberatory practice, Foucault's work suggests that it is through resistance rather than liberation that subjects form productive relations to power. Parallel shifts occurred in relation to theorising sexuality, as queer theorists rejected the 'idea of the liberation of the true self' (Sullivan 2003:41). Understandings of gendered power relations shifted as the notion of looking at social relations from the perspective of an outsider – the assumption on which standpoint epistemology was based – was up for reconsideration by feminist theorists who no longer believed that taking a position outside of social relations could 'rescue us from partiality and differences' (Flax 1987:642).

With his double-edged conception of power, Foucault sees power as productive as well as constraining of the subject. Beyond seeing power as having a monolithic hold over the subject, Foucault is concerned with how power operates to bring that very subject into being. He is concerned, as Simons (1995:30) summarises, with the distinction 'between power in its negative sense as constrictive and power in its positive sense as enabling, constituting subjects.'

As well as questioning some of the assumptions of second-wave feminism, postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives can be seen to have made productive contributions to understandings of the personal as political. For instance, Foucault's work has been taken up by feminist theorists attempting to elucidate how gender politics are manifested in everyday life, with particular reference to self-policing as a particularly insidious form of social control, through which the dominated

internalise the mechanisms of domination (Allen 1996). Resonating with c-r groups' challenge to women seeing their problems as personal problems, O'Grady (2005:4) has used Foucault's work to develop an analysis of how, through their inner battles with the self, women take 'responsibility for problems and struggles regardless of the social context in which these are occurring.'

That c-r can be seen as a practice through which women challenged their own self-policing tendencies is one way in which second-wave feminism might be reconciled with understandings of power as not outside of the self, but as fundamental to the self. Following Foucault, Butler (1997) further develops the critique of perspectives that locate power outside the self. As a critique of the notion of the originally apolitical self, subsequently acted upon by power, Butler (1997:13) argues that power is involved in the very coming into being of the self: 'Power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being.' Butler opposes the discursive construction of the self as somehow untainted by the very power relations that actually bring the subject into being. Her analysis of social norms critiques the distinction constructed between the exteriority of power and the interiority of the self:

Is the norm first "outside," and does it then enter into a pre-given psychic space, understood as an interior theater of some kind? Or does the internalisation of the norm contribute to the production of internality? ...I argue that this process of internalisation *fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life*, offering us a distinction between the psychic and the social that differs significantly from an account of the psychic internalisation of norms (Butler 1997:19 – italics in original).

Butler's analysis can be applied to c-r group members' discussions about the effects of gender norms (e.g. relating to appearance and behaviour) on women's lives. If, as Butler argues, the distinction between internal psychic space and the exterior life is a fabrication, we might infer that gender norms do not impact upon originally unaffected beings from the outside space of society, but are vital to the very formation of their subjectivity.

In opposing understandings of power as outside of individuals, acting *upon* them, Butler's perspective on the self can be seen as a poststructuralist challenge to the distinction between the personal and the political. If power is fundamental to the very processes by which individuals become subjects, the dichotomous understanding of the internal personal self and the political realm outside breaks down. Butler's (1997) work prompts a rethinking of the relationship between politics and the self as it played out in discursive constructions of feminist contexts of the past. The distinction between the personal (as processes relating to individual selves) and the political (as power relations positioned outside of individuals), constructed for instance by Reger's (2002) account of personally-focused 'empowerment feminism', as distinct from 'political feminism' (see Chapter 3), is undermined by Butler's analysis of the centrality of power relations to the very constitution of subjectivity. While surface-level recognition of the personal as political might still imply that the political is *more political than* the personal, Butler's work goes further in demonstrating that there is no personal that is not always already political.

### ***Truth-telling***

Since the 1970s, scholars have provoked a questioning of the notion that women spoke the truth in c-r groups (Scott 1991; Brown 1995). However, I wish to show that it is still possible to acknowledge the productive potential of women putting themselves in contexts in which the practice of truth-telling was approached differently. Regardless of whether or not there is any objective truth about women, women collectively aspiring to talk truthfully about themselves can still be seen to have had political effects within the lives of those involved.

Applying Foucault's work on truth-telling practices to c-r, Valverde (2004) creates an understanding of the role of truth-telling in the cultivation of a feminist way of life. Valverde (2004) invokes the concept of *askesis* (aesthetics of the self), to argue for the continuing value of truth-telling practices in a postmodern age. She likens the activities of women's groups to 'the sort of peer-counseling relations that one could trace back to Greek truth telling among friends' (Valverde 2004:85). Valverde's (2004) suggestion that engaging in truth-telling does not necessitate a belief in absolute truth might be seen to echo standpoint feminists' belief in the value of

continuing to try ‘to tell less false stories’ (Harding 1991:187). However, unlike standpoint theorists, Valverde’s (2004) emphasis is not on epistemological practices, but on feminists’ ways of developing and using technologies of the self. The c-r group, Valverde (2004:82) argues, provides a venue in which to develop and practice ‘the feminist art of living’. According to this perspective, the significance of c-r lies not in the heightened validity of knowledge produced through it, but in its transformative effects on the lives of the women who engaged in the practice. The personal-political significance of changes effected in participants’ lives is independent of the ontological status of what was said within the groups.

In postliberatory times, the practice of *trying* to liberate oneself might still be seen to be personally and politically productive. In his work on ethics, Foucault (1984 [1983]:354-5) discusses the relationship with the self, specifically, ‘the means by which we can change ourselves...the self-forming activity.’ It is through his notion of politics as ethics that connections are made between power relations, subjectivity and the practice of working on oneself (see Taylor and Vintges 2004). As a practice of the self and a practice of freedom, consciousness-raising is not incompatible with Foucauldian understandings of resistance. This is demonstrated by McLaren (2002:155), who deploys Foucault’s work to develop an analysis of c-r as ‘a practice of the self that involves not only self-transformation, but also social and political transformation.’ She presents the relationship between practices of the self and practices of freedom as follows:

Practices of the self draw upon the rules, methods, and customs of one’s culture, but are also practices of freedom, that is, they create new nonnormalizing modes of existence and relationships (McLaren 2002:159).

McLaren’s (2002) analysis of c-r as a practice of the self extends to some forms of therapy. Whereas original proponents of c-r defended c-r as a political practice by differentiating it from therapy (Sarachild 1973), for McLaren (2002), therapy is not apolitical; like c-r, it can also bring about political transformations. As a contemporary therapeutic practice influenced by Foucault’s work, narrative therapy is mentioned by McLaren (2002:161) as an example of how story-telling can be used ‘to deconstruct oppressive dominant discourses.’ Through her analysis,

McLaren defends the socially and politically transformative potential of story-telling, whether practised in therapy or through c-r.

Further, Sawicki (1991:107) points to the usefulness of Foucault's work for encouraging an uncomfortableness 'with oneself, one's community, one's sense of reality, one's "truths,"' and even the very 'ground on which one's feminist consciousness emerges.' The idea of c-r as a practice through which feminists promoted self-reflection and self-transformation resonates with Butler's (1997:22) work on conscience, as 'the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive.' Cultivating feminist ways of living (Valverde 2004), c-r group participants engaged in truth-telling as a way of coming to reflectively and reflexively work on themselves. Feminist discourses cannot liberate women, but they can provide tools for the development of practices of resistance.

***Feminism, reflexivity and the discursive construction of feminist consciousness***

Feminist discourse is reflexive to the extent that it is able to reflect upon its effects. Feminist theory has developed its own conscience, and is able to consider how its internal dynamics affect power relations (e.g. through racism implicit in talking about women as unracial – Spelman, 1988). The recent meta-theoretical turn in feminist theory (Stanley and Wise 2000) means that feminist theorists tend increasingly to write *about* feminist theory.

Foucault's attentiveness to the double-edged effects of discursive power has exacerbated feminists' sensitivity to the idea that even emancipatory theories and oppositional discourses have oppressive tendencies (Grimshaw 1993:56), and 'often unwittingly extend the very relations of domination that they are resisting' (Sawicki 1991:102). Feminist theory's desire to reflect upon itself and the power it wields<sup>33</sup> has intensified through feminists' interest in Foucault. His work emphasises the importance of considering how feminist discourse potentially contributes to the maintenance of inequalities between women and men, serving to recreate and sustain existing power relations (Alcoff 1988).

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<sup>33</sup> The effects on movement practices of particular feminist discourses being seen to wield their own power will be discussed in Chapter 9 in terms of the younger generation of "third wave" feminists' challenge to so-called second wave feminist dogma.



To illustrate how feminist theorists discursively construct the reality of women's lives in ways that reaffirm existing understandings of women and men's different social roles, I wish to refer back to my discussion of Smith's (1987) work. Smith (1987) constructs women's perspective in such a way as to preclude women who do not spend their time changing diapers, cleaning up vomit, etc. from laying claim to a women's perspective or a feminist consciousness. According to Smith's (1987) formulation, a woman who is not oppressed in the wife-mother role might question whether or not she has experienced being a woman at all. Through Smith's (1987) construction of womanhood, (feminist?) theory reiterates rather than challenges women's social positioning; it is not only patriarchal discourse that constructs the role of women in terms of serving men and children. As such, it is necessary, poststructuralists argue, to interrogate *all* explanatory systems (Shildrick 1997), not just patriarchal ones.

The idea that feminism exercises power over subjects highlights the double effect of subjectification, whereby particular discourses and practices both enhance an individual's power, while at the same time subjugating her (Bartky 1997; Sawicki 1991). Poststructuralist perspectives on power/the self are useful for considering how women are simultaneously subjected by, and oppose domination through, the very same discourses. In her analysis of the ambivalent dynamics of *subjectivation*, Butler (1997) notes the paradox whereby resistance and subjection are parts of the same process. In particular, she draws attention to the 'notion shared by both psychoanalysis and Foucauldian accounts', that, 'in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection' (Butler 1997:11).

Feminist discourses both produce feminist subjects and subject them to disciplinary effects, as they categorise women according to dichotomies such as feminist/non-feminist and lesbian/heterosexual. Following Foucault (1982:208), we might see subjection as operating through 'dividing practices'. The construction of hierarchical binaries between women is an effect of what Shildrick (1997:109) refers to as the modernist 'appeal to dualism (either A or B), with its intrinsic exclusion of the middle.' Rather than liberating women, feminist discourses might be seen to hierarchise women according to alternative systems of classifications.

New disciplinary regimes emerged from the women's movement, including the oppositional categories of heterosexual feminist and political lesbian. These two very different types of woman were seen by Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979) to occupy contradictory positions within the movement. Such dichotomous understandings of sexuality and its relationship to feminist political identity have been challenged by the work of bisexual feminist writers (e.g. Hemmings 1995), who have drawn attention to the awkward position of feminists who were situated on neither (or both) sides of this binary. Another example of a discursive divide between women is the distinction constructed between feminists and ordinarily-feminine women, which for Hollows (2000) forms a basis for the discursive production of an oppositional feminist identity.<sup>34</sup>

Although poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault have made important methodological contributions to the practice of critiquing even supposedly emancipatory discourses, women's movement scholars' considerations of the disciplinary and hierarchising effects of feminist discourse were already underway by the mid-1970s. For instance, Jill Johnston (1973) alluded to the creation of injurious divisions between women through consciousness-raising, which she opposed in favour of other methods of women's liberation (based on 'having fun'/enjoying sexual pleasure with other women):

I've decided to refuse myself the dubious political pleasure of causing someone and then myself hurt by walking into a living space of another person and acting as if they're in another century, or have a culture that we don't have (Johnston 1973:234).

Noting how feminists were required to separate themselves culturally from other women, through a pretended lack of empathy, I see Johnston's (1973) work as having identified dividing practices within the women's movement before feminism's engagement with poststructuralism. Ten years on, Stanley and Wise (1983) similarly objected to consciousness-raising, which, they argued, ordered women into categories through the presumption that feminists occupied a higher

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<sup>34</sup> See also Morris (1988:43), who invokes Le Doeuff (1977) in order to argue that discourses produce identity 'by projecting an image of an Other who lacks the same identity (thus *creating* that Other in the process).'

plane of understanding than women. Stanley and Wise (1983:119) saw the notion of false consciousness as ‘offensively patronizing’, and suggested that c-r produced hierarchies between women that resembled ‘rungs on a ladder.’ They see c-r as a practice through which feminists try to differentiate themselves from women. Through c-r, they strive to move themselves from the undesirable category of unknowing women to the desirable category of knowing feminists:

The idea of a pre-revolutionary or pre-feminist consciousness, and a sequential and developmental change, is explicit in the term “raising” used in feminist discussions of consciousness. It implies a movement from something less desirable to something more desirable, from something lower to something higher, from something which doesn’t see and understand truly to something which does (Stanley and Wise 1983:121).

Without explicitly engaging with Foucault, Stanley and Wise (1983) illustrate feminism’s disciplinary tendencies.<sup>35</sup> Their analysis of how feminism divides women into sub-categories according to their level of consciousness resonates with critiques emerging within the movement around the same time in response to the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group’s (1979) political lesbianism paper. Critics objected on the grounds of its ‘elitist’ insinuation that heterosexual feminists have an inferior level of consciousness compared to political lesbians (Heron 1981[1980]).

While his work may have been of assistance to this end, Foucault certainly did not provoke feminism’s recognition of the problematic power wielded by its own discourses. According to Hemmings (2005), poststructuralism tends to be assigned an exaggerated impact within accounts of recent developments in feminist thinking, a technique that is used to secure narratives in which feminism of the 1970s is portrayed as having been essentialist. The frequent repetition of the accusation of essentialism with reference to feminist theory from this time has the effect of rendering feminist texts from the seventies irrelevant, not worth reading (Hemmings 2005). In relation to the notion of the “essentialist” feminist seventies, Foucault’s work has been invoked both as an alternative to the essentialism of 1970s radical feminism (Munro 2003), and as a way of refuting the idea that seventies feminism

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting that Stanley and Wise actively distance themselves from poststructuralist approaches, which they perceive to be dominant within contemporary feminist theory (Stanley and Wise 2000).

was plagued by essentialism (O'Grady 2004). Invoking Foucault, O'Grady (2004:100) suggests that, in its creation of transformative moments, c-r demonstrates 'the illusory nature of taken-for-granted, seemingly fixed notions of identity.' Seen as a practice of self-transformation (rather than as a way of producing general truths about all women), consciousness-raising was not inherently essentialist, despite the impression created by dominant representations of feminist practices from this period.

### *Chapter summary and further comments*

I have considered how developments in feminist thinking since the 1970s have impacted upon understandings of consciousness-raising, arguing that c-r is not incompatible with feminist conceptions of the subject, following Foucault (Sawicki 1991; Valverde 2004; McLaren 2002). As a political project which faces the challenge of how to deal with its own discursive power and the complexities of gendered subjectivities, feminism draws on Foucault's work in order to rethink agency, truth-telling, and practices of the self. Rather than a passage from false consciousness to liberation, consciousness-raising, as understood through a poststructuralist lens, is a practice through which women have cultivated ways of recognising the complexity of power relations, subjectification and resistance.

Foucault's work (e.g. his critique of "liberation") can be seen to challenge the assumptions behind consciousness-raising as it was depicted in the original texts discussed in Chapter 2. However, acknowledging poststructuralist challenges to certain radical feminist assumptions does not necessarily lead to an either/or choice between radical vs. poststructuralist feminism.<sup>36</sup> It is possible to deconstruct the category woman, whilst also preserving some notion of the value of consciousness-raising as a feminist practice. As well, it is possible to recognise that no social context allows absolute freedom from role-playing/power relations while still holding onto a belief in the political effects of *trying* to create such spaces. In postliberatory times, we must concede that there can be no hope of women (or anyone) being entirely free of power relations (Foucault 1980). However, there is nevertheless still some value in the practice of *attempting* to break free. The belief in

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to recognise that not all forms of post-structuralism are productive for feminism (see Weedon 1987).

the capacity of c-r to have productive effects in individual participants' lives is not dependent upon believing that there is (i) a space outside of power relations, or (ii) a truth about women's lives, which, upon discovery, will end oppression. Consciousness-raising, although initially conceived of as a radical feminist practice, does not rely on the existence of a fundamental womanhood in order to be effective. On the contrary, its transformatory potential lies in its anti-essentialism (O'Grady 2004).

I have suggested that, through her critique of the way in which boundaries are drawn around subjects in order to create the impression that power operates *upon* them from a place outside, Butler (1997) furthers understandings of the relationship between the personal and the political. Without dispensing with the analytical distinction between the personal and the political,<sup>37</sup> it is useful to consider that there is no purely personal realm, internal to individuals. Butler's (1997) work shows that the very coming into being of subjects is a political process.

Foucault's attentiveness to 'power relations at the level of the everyday' (Allen 1996: 271) has meant his work has usefully supported feminist recognition of the political significance of the routine personal experiences of women. His work resonates with second-wave feminists' suggestions that women transforming their own lives could constitute a political process. Through consciousness-raising, women encouraged each other to develop transformative relationships with themselves. However, feminist discourses problematically contribute to the taken-for-grantedness of particular ways of being a woman (e.g. being a wife/mother – Smith, 2004[1974]), as well as declaring some categories to be more desirably occupied than others (e.g. the knowing feminist as opposed to the unknowing woman – Stanley and Wise, 1983). As such, it is important for feminists to resist definitions of who or what women are or should be, including those on offer from feminist theory. Through discussing feminist theorists who have used Foucault's work (Sawicki 1991; McNay 2000; Valverde 2004; McLaren 2002), I have drawn attention to the usefulness of c-r as a practice through which women developed a reflective and reflexive relationship with themselves and with the discourses available to them for making

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<sup>37</sup> McLaren (2002) argues that it was not the intention of the women's movement to collapse the distinction between the personal and the political.

sense of their experiences. This is taken further in Chapter 7 which considers how women developed critical relationships with ideas in women's groups.

Having used Foucault's work to prepare the ground for demonstrating, through the next four analytical chapters, that the significance of women's activities in consciousness-raising groups was not confined to their impact on politics in the narrower sense of the term, I also wish to register the problematic tendency for men's theoretical perspectives to be taken more seriously:<sup>38</sup> As shown in Chapter 2, women's movement writings argued for an expanded conception of power/the political. However, key shifts in feminist understandings of the relationship between power and the self have tended to be attributed to poststructuralism (see Hemmings 2005). I have shown that what are generally held to be Foucauldian influences on feminism – such as the critique of oppositional categories (Alcoff 1988) – were actually foreshadowed by internal movement critiques of second-wave feminist ideas/practices, as can be seen in the example of Stanley and Wise (1983), who critique the effects of feminist discourses in terms of the production of hierarchies between women.

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<sup>38</sup> The androcentrism of Foucault's work has been noted, for instance, by Bartky (1988:65), who points out that 'he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.' Foucault ignores the gendered dimension of disciplinary practices in his theory of docile bodies.

## **Chapter Five: Methods**

Primary data was generated through two-stage, in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty women who had been in West Yorkshire c-r groups during the 1970s and 1980s. The following discussion of the research process considers problems and limitations affecting the research, including issues pertaining to sampling, feminist generations and the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

### **Underpinnings and objectives**

The objectives of the research were:

- To explore the personal-political impact of West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s on participants' lives.
- To consider how interviewees' accounts of participating in women's groups relate to theoretical perspectives on women's groups.

The study focuses on small c-r-type women's groups, to deliberately redress sociologists' avoidance of 'locations of private, supportive, informal, local social structures in which women participate more frequently' (Millman and Kanter 1987:32). My focus on informally organised women's movement contexts is a refusal to bow to dominant notions of what were the most significant feminist practices, which are biased towards liberal feminism (Young 1997).

Noting the distinction between academic feminism/feminist theory and ordinary feminists or 'feminists in general' (Stanley and Wise 2000:266), I set out to find out how ordinary women (as opposed to feminist theorists, as professional feminist thinkers) came to develop a worldview, and what role women's groups played in this process. To this end, I was inspired to respond to the idea raised by Freire (1972:124), that 'the professionals are the ones with a "world view".' I wanted to discover more about what Freire (1972:124) refers to as 'the "view of the world" held by the people.'

In considering how ordinary women's accounts of the movement related to academic representations, I was not trying to test the relationship between representations and reality, but rather, was exploring how women's stories might

challenge narratives that have come to hold unquestioned status within feminist theory (Hemmings 2005). My critical exploration of ways of understanding the feminist past is informed by Hemmings' (2005) rejection of the goal of trying to find out 'what really happened'.<sup>39</sup> However, the idea of *aspiring* to find out what really happened (see Torr 2007) proved useful in the data gathering phase; I believed individuals' particular truths, i.e. what the movement was like *for them*. Listening receptively to each individual woman tell of her own subjective experiences of the movement, each of the accounts I heard was convincing and compelling in its own way. In the analysis phase, it was important to hold onto the notion that a clear distinction cannot be assumed between interviewees' stories and the literature, due to the likelihood of women's stories having been influenced by their direct or indirect engagements with (academic) writings on the women's movement.

My perspective is inspired by Young's (1997:19) suggestion of the bad fit between the received methods and assumptions of social science (particularly social movements research) and movements whose primary opponents are 'ideological constructs and institutions (such as those of the family, heterosexuality, marriage, and so on)'. Alerted by Young's (1997) work to the need for research on c-r to look outside of conventional social science methodologies, I looked to feminist methodology and theory to inspire ways of looking at the data that might be revealing of how women's lives changed through their involvement in women's groups. An awareness of the limitations of conventional social science for conceptualising changes brought about by informal c-r-style women's groups has been a key concern throughout the research process, beginning from a consideration of feminist sociologists' challenges to women being treated as objects within traditional sociology (e.g. Smith 1987). As an alternative to the mainstream epistemologies of sexist research models, feminist approaches to conducting social research have been proposed which encourage an emphasis on women speaking for themselves, about *their* experience of reality (Stanley and Wise 1983; Smith 1987). The two-way flow between politics and academic research has also been a defining

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<sup>39</sup> In my experience of meeting with other women's movement researchers at academic conferences, there seems to be a division between those (mainly historians) holding onto a belief in the existence of the truth, as what really happened, and those – like me – who have completely dispensed with the notion of there being a true story behind the currently available accounts.



feature of the research process, taking account, as Harding (1987:8) does, of the origins of feminist research ‘in women’s experiences in political struggles.’

As well as embracing critical feminist perspectives on traditional sociological assumptions, I have aimed to cultivate an interdisciplinary approach, critically straddling sociology and history, which anyway are ‘methodologically indistinguishable’, according to Giddens (1979:8). My epistemological approach resembles that described as sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 1952[1928]). By comparing how feminist contexts of the past are portrayed firstly in the literature, and secondly by women who were involved, I analyse the contexts and conditions in which feminist consciousness emerged. My approach is also informed by historiography, as I raise questions about how feminist writers represent the ideas and practices of past generations of feminists. My work is influenced by White’s (1987) suggestion that there are always political implications to telling stories about the past:

...Narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications (White 1987: ix).

As I suggested in Chapter 3, authors carve out their own political positions through what they choose to say about feminism (King 1986). One of the ways in which the present interests of individual and collective narrators<sup>40</sup> have been shown to shape how they make sense of the past relates to the construction of third-wave feminist identities through caricatured representations of second-wave feminism (Orr 1997; Snyder 2008). Partly an effect of the focus on discussing younger women’s relationships with feminism (e.g. Denfeld 1995; Chesler 1997; Baumgardner and Richards 2000), the question of how women who participated in second-wave feminist contexts relate their memories of those contexts in the present has been underexplored. My interest in how feminists reflect on their relationships with feminism was one influential factor in the development of a strand of my analysis

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<sup>40</sup> When women’s movement scholars tell stories about the past, they do so collectively in that they invoke one another’s accounts through referencing conventions.

that considers the theorising practices of ordinary/non-academic feminists (see Chapter 7).

Interviews have proven to be a productive way of generating research data on women's movements (e.g. Taylor 1996, 1999; Staggenborg 1998; Hercus 2005; Hines 2005; Maätita 2005). Following Riessman (1993), I see interviews as social interactions in which stories are co-produced. Being aware of my role in the construction of the data introduced the necessity of constant reflection upon the dynamics between the researcher and the researched. My ontological assumption that the truth emerges in a way that is specific to the interview setting led me to want to understand the particular form taken by the research relationship as it occurred between myself (the interviewer) and the interviewees. Other researchers' reflections on their relationships with the researched influenced my own approach to this process (e.g. Oakley 1981; Woodward and Chisholm 1981; Bowles and Duelli Klein 1983; Wise 1987; Standing 1998; Borland 1991; Millen 1997; Luff 1999; Andrews 2002; Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2002; Riley et al 2003).

Striving to see the effects of the women's movement differently from how they have been characterised by scholars discussed in Chapter 3, I agreed with Young's (1997) suggestion that researchers of the women's movement need to be aware of how social change occurs at the level of ideology and daily practices. As such, I invoked the epistemological/ontological assumption that knowledge about women's lives can be gained through accounts of their everyday experiences. I invited interviewees to talk about their most mundane activities, which are necessarily at the forefront of feminist analyses of women's lives (Smith 1987; Millman and Kanter 1987). My questions picked up on and responded to interviewees' references to routine aspects of their lives (e.g. decisions about what to wear, or conversations about who should clean the toilet and how often).

There were two strands to my methodological approach: the life history strand of my methodology consisted in my efforts to encourage interviewees to talk about their lives; the sometimes "factual" histories of the movement offered in response comprise what I have called the oral history strand. I shall go on to explain these differing ways of approaching interviewing in social movements research with

reference to Blee and Taylor (2002). While feminist oral histories are useful for revising received knowledge (Gluck and Patai 1991:2), the idea of revising received knowledge about the women's movement implies that it is to produce an account that more closely resembles "the truth". This aspiration problematically ignores the way in which the truth (about West Yorkshire women's groups) varies from one individual to another. I was fortunate to have opportunities at various stages in the research process to engage in informal conversations with a renowned Leeds feminist, Professor Jalna Hanmer. During a meeting at the Feminist Archive North in June 2007, Jalna shared with me her opinion on the oral history approach: *'Every woman you speak to was in a different movement.'* As such, I set out with the intention of avoiding looking for a history upon which everyone can agree. Commencing from the understanding that experience is discursively constituted (Scott 1991), I saw that, within any given context, accounts of experience are bound by the limited discourses available. I became interested in how, through comparing accounts of women's groups, I might gain a sense of how particular discursive systems (such as those of academic feminism) limit the possibilities for constructing reality. Interviews were not seen as routes into the objective truth about women's experiences of women's groups and beyond, but rather as opportunities for women to discursively reconstruct their own subjective realities, perhaps talking about their experiences in ways that slightly differed from how they had done so before. Some aspects of interviewees' stories were well-rehearsed, which became apparent as many suggested they were in the habit of talking about women's groups with friends, other (former) group members, and so on. The stories they told to me are likely to have differed from their accounts of the same experiences in other contexts (e.g. conversations with friends), but neither should be deemed more valid or authentic than the other.

The object of my research (c-r) and my methods (interviewing) are interconnected. Consciousness-raising entails interviewing oneself and similar others (DeVault and Gross 2007) and as such can be seen to have constituted a type of research method. The principles on which c-r groups were based have informed subsequent developments in feminist theory/methodology, in particular, critiques of objectivity, which I have taken up through putting into practice the feminist principle, relevant to c-r, that women themselves are the most reliable informants about their

experiences; interviewees know their own subjective experiences of women's groups. Feminist methodologies have fed into mainstream social research methods such that qualitative interviews are now held to be, as Kvale (1996) notes, a highly appropriate way of studying individuals' own understandings of, and perspectives on, their lived world.

My perspective emerged through a critical reading of academic work on feminist consciousness-raising (see Chapter 3). I was struck by how, in order to produce knowledge about feminist consciousness-raising which fitted in with traditional disciplinary paradigms (e.g. psychology), the practice was represented in ways that flouted the original intentions of writers who were themselves part of such groups (see Chapter 2). Through reading these (non-feminist/liberal feminist) social scientific accounts of c-r groups, I developed a belief in the necessity for research on women's movement activities to deploy feminist methodology (steering clear of quantitative representations of women's experiences) and to refer to original movement texts (including instructional pamphlets intended for new c-r groups), which I do throughout my analysis.

#### **Myself as researcher: reflecting on my own experience of the research process**

As a self-reflexive feminist researcher, I must avoid objectifying the researched by striving to locate myself in the same critical plane as the researched (Harding 1987; Roseneil 1993). Doing so will allow the reader to know something about the personal-political position from which the knowledge presented in this thesis is constructed. Harding (1987:9) argues that the researcher must appear to us 'not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests.' Within this epistemology, it is therefore essential that I try to put together some statements about my identity as the researcher: I am a 29 year old woman, who has identified as a feminist for roughly 12 years. I grew up in rural West Yorkshire, as the eldest of four children. My mother is from a working-class Irish Catholic background and my father is English and lower middle-class. I acknowledge that the position from which I write must take into account my white, middle-class, state grammar school and Oxbridge educated background. I am therefore at an intersection of a complex set of identity

dynamics, which shapes my experience of the research, my participants' responses to me, and my analysis.

Throughout the course of the research, I have been sensitive to my shifting orientation in relation to academic feminism and feminist activism, the relationship between which has been discussed (e.g. Stacey 1993; Wiegman 2002; Messer-Davidow 2002). When I set out to study the feminist movement, I had identified as a feminist and had been avidly reading feminist theory for a number of years. However, I did not actively see myself as part of a feminist movement. However, in the final stages of thesis-writing, I am involved in a feminist movement in Leeds. I have witnessed and been part of an exciting resurgence of feminist activism in the city over the past couple of years. For example, the University of Leeds now has an active Feminist Society, and I am part of a group of women who are setting up a new Rape Crisis Centre in the city. Campaigning around sexual violence continues to be important to feminists in Leeds, as demonstrated by the 300-strong women-only Reclaim the Night march on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

Sexual identity was/is central to discussions both within and about feminist contexts of the seventies and eighties. As such, I must locate myself in relation to heterosexual feminism and lesbian feminism as conflicting positions within the movement during the period about which I write: as a bisexual woman, my position is occluded within these debates. As a queer woman, my identity is anachronistic to the texts and contexts I write about, and marks me as part of a different political/feminist generation. By this I mean that, whereas I have participated in feminist contexts in which the term queer is actively reclaimed as a way of intentionally identifying against dominant gender and sexual norms, this practice did not occur within the historically and culturally specific contexts in which interviewees participated.

In order to encourage reflexivity in my role as the researcher, I kept a reflective diary throughout the research process. My notebook allowed valuable space for making sense of my interactions with interviewees and exploring the relationships that were beginning to take shape between my data and the literature. At several points in the research process, I reflected on my reflections, reading through

notebooks as a way of making sense of present interests and future directions as my analysis took shape. There were several personally-politically significant dimensions to my reflections, the most noteworthy of which perhaps relates to my sensitivity to the issue of interviewing feminists of a different generation; I wondered how I would come across as a (younger) woman, a researcher, and a feminist.

Writers on sociological research methods have noted the significance of researchers' self-presentation, including how their appearance gives off clues about who they are (e.g. Coffey 1999; de Laine 2000). I recorded in my reflective journal worries about how I might be read through particular modes of dress. Aware of the significance of conflicts around sexual identity within the women's movement, the question of whether or how I might come out in interviews was always on my mind. This concern was heightened by the suggestion that the perceived sexual identity of the interviewer can shape the data through affecting interviewees' 'willingness to tell their stories' (Heaphy et al 1998). I pondered what my presumed sexuality would be, and was unclear as to whether or not I needed to come out as "not heterosexual". In some instances, I found ways of "coming out" to interviewees (e.g. by making reference to a recent holiday with "my girlfriend").

My journal was useful for noting feelings which could not be expressed in the research encounter without coming out of my researcher role. For instance, I noted feeling annoyed when (a number of) interviewees talked about lesbians wanting to "look like men". The fact that several interviewees were forthcoming with contempt for (butch) lesbians in front of me was telling, I felt, of their assumptions about my own gendered and sexual identity positioning. It is frustratingly difficult – particularly for novice researchers – to feel up to challenging such anti-lesbian remarks (Roseneil 1993).

I began making sense of interviewees' stories while they were talking, and continued by making several pages of expanded field notes immediately after each interview (e.g. on the train home). These initial responses formed a preliminary phase in the data analysis, as I documented ideas that would be returned to later, once memories of the research encounters had begun to fade. The process of doing the research was a very important consciousness-raising experience for me, as I

listened to women's stories about their lives and compared them with my own. I sometimes felt intense emotions during and after interviews; my written reflections allowed me to keep track of how I was being affected by my interactions with interviewees (particularly, changes in my own relationship with feminism).

The notes I made in my journal documented my feelings about how the interview had gone. As an example, here is an extract from my reflections on a second interview:

[Interviewee's name] was much more talkative this time and the interview went on longer than I expected. She said afterwards that I asked lots of interesting questions. There was still however some awkwardness to her – I don't think she felt comfortable talking about sexuality or feelings and I often jumped in nervously when I became aware of her tendency to give one-word answers (5<sup>th</sup> June 2007).

Initial emotional impressions of someone are important and difficult to hold onto if not documented. My notes were useful to return to as part of my analysis as they helped set the scene for the interview in my head, as I recorded details about the interviewees' home: 'She had a piano in her house and was playing it when I arrived... We sat very close, on the same sofa (too close for me to focus properly on her face!)' (19th June 2007).

### **The research relationship: feminist generations**

The thesis is one instance among many of a feminist of one generation writing about feminists of another generation (Chesler 1997; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Morgan 2003; Kelly 2005). I grapple with the issue of feminist generations in more detail in Chapter 9. For now, I wish to raise some of the implications of being seen by interviewees as part of a younger generation of women/feminists, which they articulated in various ways, for instance: 'I don't know whether it would be the same for your generation, but for our generation, there were so many rules were being broken, you know, like women living on their own for instance' (Joanna). This is one example of a number of comments which alerted me to the conspicuousness of my youth as a feature of the research relationship. Other interviewees remarked that they rarely spent time around younger women.

Sociological researchers are encouraged to reflect upon the relationship between themselves and their research subjects or participants (e.g. Riley et al 2003; Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2002). Data was elicited fairly easily, with interviewees being generally forthcoming with their life stories, sometimes telling me about experiences which they had previously talked about with only a handful of people. Pre-existing rapport might in part be explained by our common identities as women (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993). In addition, our shared feminist identities were crucial to the relationship between researcher and researched in this instance, in that my interest in, and in many instances agreement with, their political positions allowed us to develop a bond, even though we had only just met.

However, there were also some differences between us, which it was necessary to consider to the extent that these may have impacted upon the data. Besides having gender and feminist identity in common, there were other potential areas of difference between interviewees and myself (including sexual identity, level of education/academic training, and age) that were important in shaping how interview narratives were co-produced. Riessman (1993:31) sees interviewees' stories as 'produced in conversation...the product of a particular teller and listener in a relation of power, at a particular historical moment.' Concerned with trying to understand how data might be shaped by the (historical) context in which women told me, as a younger woman, about their experiences of women's groups of the past, I began to reflect upon the inter-generational dynamic as it occurred between us.

Although much has been written on how various forms of difference shape the relationship between the researcher and the researched (e.g. Woodward and Chisholm 1981; Bowles and Duelli Klein 1983; Wise 1987; Standing 1998; Millen 1997; Luff 1999; Andrews 2002; Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2002), being of different political generations has not been recognised as a significant form of difference within these discussions. With the exception of Borland's (1991) discussion of the role of historical context in creating conflicting interpretations of her grandmother's life story, literature on the sociological research relationship has not addressed the issue of political generations. As such, I turned to Mannheim's (1952[1928]) work on political generations, as well as feminist theory, to help develop my understanding of these interview encounters in terms of the



relationships between feminist generations. I found that discussions of face-to-face encounters between feminists of different generations have taken a backseat to considerations of the relationships between generations of *academic* feminists, which focus exclusively on how writers interact with one another on the pages of books and journals (e.g. Hemmings 2005).

One effect of the intergenerational dynamic as it occurred in the relationship between researcher and researched concerns my nervousness about what I felt was my relative ignorance compared to their vast first-hand knowledge of the women's movement. I was alerted by my supervisors to the possibility that interviewees may wish to "educate" me on the women's movement. As a sociologist rather than a historian by training, I was worried that I might make some faux pas due to not having enough of an understanding of the historical conditions in which interviewees' lives and narratives were situated. In some ways, this enhanced my playing of the role of 'good listener' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000:31), as I enthusiastically soaked up every detail of their stories about what things were like "back then". Only a small minority of interviewees saw the interview as a chance to deliver a lecture on the history of the movement; most took onboard my request that they speak personally, telling me about their own experiences. Interviewees assumed the role of experts (on their own lives).

I came to conceptualise my interactions with interviewees as intergenerational feminist encounters. They were significant not only in producing academic research data, but also as *political* encounters. In response to interviewees' questions about whether I was a feminist, I found myself having to say something about whether younger women like myself were interested/involved in feminism. I ended up informing two interviewees (Tess and Freda) about a feminist event in Leeds (Feminist Health Gathering, January 2007). Both eager to take me up on the invitation, they were two of only a handful of "older" feminists in attendance at the event.<sup>41</sup> The personal-political result was that they met each other at the event and became friends/comrades! In this way, my research brought about not just intergenerational feminist *research* encounters, but also intergenerational feminist

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<sup>41</sup> One of the topics discussed at this event was the lack of communication between feminists of different generations.

*political* encounters. The importance of communication between different generations of feminists has been noted by Spender (1983b).

Representations of feminist generations within the literature tend to be based on caricatured portrayals of clashing generations (Orr 1997; Snyder 2008). As such, I expected meetings between feminists of different generations to be somewhat fraught. However, my experience differed. Interviewing older feminists challenged what I had read and led me to see that empathy was possible across the theoretically constructed generational divide. I generally found there to be a rapport between myself and interviewees that went against characterisations within the literature of relationships between feminist generations as conflict-ridden. This surprising discovery led to *feminist generations* becoming a theme for my last analytical chapter, Chapter 9, which explores intergenerational dynamics in feminism, considering interview data in relation to theoretical representations.

In trying to conceptualise the generational difference between myself and interviewees, there seemed to be two key dimensions of our distinctive relationships with feminism. Firstly, whereas I had been engaging with feminist ideas for only twelve years, interviewees had been engaging with feminist ideas for up to forty years. Secondly, interviewees began to engage with feminist ideas at a time when second-wave feminism was relatively new, whereas I first encountered feminism when it was old news/presumed dead (Harnois 2008; Pozner 2003). The different social context in which I came to know feminism is evident from the fact that I initially encountered it during my A Level studies. Feminism had definitely entered the academy by this point. Studying feminist critiques in a formal educational institution is likely to have produced in me a very different way of relating to feminist ideas compared with the generation of women who came to feminism through informal groups.

An issue arising in relation to generational differences in our relationships with feminism was that of transgender. Several interviewees expressed opinions that I felt were offensively transphobic. Again, my notebook was a good place to explore this, rather than challenge interviewees overtly. Their opposition to the inclusion of transgender women in feminist contexts conflicted with my own stance on this issue;

this difference can be attributed to generation in that the feminist movement is seen to have become more inclusive of trans people (Hines 2005).

### **Sampling**

I advertised for participants by sending (as email attachments or by post) posters to all the libraries and sports/leisure centres run by the metropolitan district councils of Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, and Wakefield (see Appendix IV). A self-selecting sampling method was deemed most appropriate, due to the subjective nature of women's group membership; as Freeman (1975b:104) notes, 'the participants are those who consider themselves participants.' However, I did impose some criteria in that all participants had to have done something they considered to be *consciousness-raising* within groups of women who saw themselves *as feminists*. My definition of feminist identity was based on the principle that 'feminists are those who call themselves feminists' (Delphy 1994:18). Women who made contact tended to be immediately clear about whether they did or did not self-define as feminists. As such, a decision was made, on the basis of my emergent theoretical interest in feminist c-r groups, to find out during initial communications with potential participants whether the groups they had been involved in had practised feminist consciousness-raising or not.

Throughout the thesis there is some slippage between use of the term "consciousness-raising groups" and less specific reference to "women's groups". Corresponding with the observation that consciousness-raising groups did not always call themselves consciousness-raising groups (Philpott 1982), not all of the women's groups I write about called themselves consciousness-raising groups; however, all interviewees identified their practices within their women's groups as feminist consciousness-raising. Some were unsure as to whether their experiences/groups fit with my research, and indeed asked me during the interviews what my definition of consciousness-raising was for the purpose of the research. I tended to be vague in order to allow for their own definitions to come forward, and to avoid imposing "The Researcher's Authoritative Definition" upon their experiences. A typical answer would have been that I saw consciousness-raising as involving groups of women talking about their lives and using their experiences as a basis for starting to see themselves as feminists. I excluded from my sample two

women who had been in much later women's groups (towards the end of the eighties); during the interviews, these women distanced themselves and their group practice from consciousness-raising. Perhaps it would have been interesting to explore their data in more detail. However, I was aware that my research already had a broad enough focus (spanning two decades and the whole of the West Yorkshire region) to justify limiting my sample in this way.

Women generally responded to the call for participants by phone or email, and interviews were arranged with those who said that they had been in a *feminist* women's group that had focused on talking about members' experiences, in West Yorkshire between 1970 and 1989. It is worth noting that several women responded to the posters whose experiences did not fit with these criteria. For instance, one would-be participant saw her women's group as part of the women's movement, but did not identify with the word *feminist*; as such, I thanked her for getting in touch and explained that I had to be strict about only interviewing people who fit within the parameters of the project.

It was particularly important to be thorough and to access a cross-section of women. Whereas it might have been easier to recruit through existing groups and organisations (such as the Feminist Archive North, for instance) this may have led to a sample biased towards women who are still involved in the women's movement, and would therefore be likely to report more positive experiences of women's groups.

Without setting out to find a representative sample, I did look for maximum variation, consistent with my desire to find out about a range of experiences. However, stories of negative experiences of women's groups are likely to be less prevalent in my research than they are in reality, as research participants are more likely to come forward if they have positive stories to tell (being less likely to volunteer to share difficult or upsetting experiences).<sup>42</sup> As such, I was worried that I might not be able to access stories about conflicts occurring in c-r groups, or women who left women's groups because of some bad experience. On reflection, my

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<sup>42</sup> Within discussions of social research methodology, this is known as self-selected sample bias (Mies 1991:96).

concern that my data on women's experiences of women's groups would be positively biased was justified. Interviewees had less to say about groups coming to an end than they did about joining/forming their groups. Memories of beginnings rather than endings seemed to be more readily available. The dearth of accounts of breakups seemed inconsistent with the idea that c-r groups had a high mortality rate (Cassell 1977). I attempted to address this issue by reiterating questions about how groups stopped meeting in the second round of interviews. I also considered whether women who were in short-lived c-r groups may have been less likely to have got in touch, feeling perhaps that they had too little experience. As such, my research may be based less on groups that floundered than on groups that worked relatively well, often continuing to meet for substantial periods of time. The prevalence of positive stories relates to the effect of seeing the past through rose-tinted spectacles. It is widely noted that memories of the past tend to be positively biased (see Walker et al 2003). In an attempt to hold onto variety and minimise positive bias, I decided to include two interviewees who were only interviewed once. Their reluctance to be interviewed a second time was, I think, symptomatic of their distinctively less positive stories.

My sampling strategy allowed the sample to gradually expand through snowballing, as I asked each woman who made contact to recommend other potential interviewees. However I was concerned that the women who came forward for interviewing might have been homogenous in terms of all having a particular kind of story to tell.

Snowballing techniques were employed to broaden my sample, with interviewees suggesting other possible participants, often women who had been in the same women's groups, or from their wider networks of feminist friends. I received more responses from women in Leeds than anywhere else and chose to limit the number of participants from Leeds, due to my wish to look at women's groups across the whole of the West Yorkshire region. The extent to which I followed up links from particular participants was also limited by my concern to avoid interviewing lots of women from the same network. This was based on the idea that women in the same network would be more homogeneous in terms of their relationships to particular feminist perspectives, perhaps all identifying more strongly with a particular strand

of feminism, for instance. It was important that my sample incorporated a variety of feminist identities. Although, as I said, I was not aiming for a representative sample, I did endeavour, as I accumulated participants, to gain a diverse mix of women along the lines of geographical locality, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and class (see Appendix II). It was particularly important to cover various parts of West Yorkshire (although there were more than enough suitable participants in Leeds), as this would allow for some comparison between the experiences of being in women's groups in different locations, including big cities, small towns, and more rural areas. I was particularly concerned to avoid interviewing "big names", especially in Leeds. This was partly to avoid replicating recent research on the movement in Leeds (Rees 2007; 2009). As well, I wanted to make visible the experiences of those women who might have less prominence in collective memories of the women's movement, but who nevertheless have valuable stories to share in relation to their involvement with c-r groups.

## **Data collection**

### *Interviews*

In-depth qualitative interviews lasting usually just over an hour were conducted with 20 women over a period of 12 months, between November 2006 and October 2007. 18 of the 20 were interviewed a second time. My approach to semi-structured interviewing resembled a combination of the oral history and life history approaches, as described by Blee and Taylor (2002) in their discussion of how various types of semi-structured interviews are differently utilised within social movement research. Oral history interviewing is 'particularly valuable for social movements...that operate out of public view or through informal networks' (Blee and Taylor 2002:102). This technique was therefore appropriate for obtaining data on c-r groups, which were small and informally organised, meeting in women's homes, out of public view, and were not documented in writing.

While the oral history approach described by Blee and Taylor (2002) was a useful method for finding out about the groups, what they describe in contrast as the life history approach was more useful for exploring the influence of the groups on women's lives. Life history interviewing provided a suitable method for finding out about how significant decisions in women's lives (about for instance, careers,

relationships, whether or not to have children, and so on) were related to their participation in feminist contexts. Rapport is crucial to life history interviewing. Some interviewees insisted on telling me about the history of the movement – focusing on key historical figures, events and so on – in a way that resembled conventional historical accounts. They might have found the oral history strand less emotionally demanding than talking to me about their lives. However, having been in consciousness-raising groups, interviewees tended to seem used to sharing intimate details of their own lives with other women and were generally open to doing so with me.

The oral history approach is about finding out what happened, which formed one strand of questioning as I tried to procure details relating to when the group began meeting, how groups were organised, and how they operated. However, I also – and perhaps more importantly – wanted to find out about individual women's experiences of the groups, including their memories of how they felt at the time. For finding out about women's subjective experiences of the groups (e.g. How did you feel during that first meeting?), life history interviewing was useful in what Blee and Taylor (2002:103) describe as its orientation 'toward understanding the activist experience of individual respondents over time' (in contrast to focusing on historical events and processes). The life history approach productively enabled explorations of the interactions between movement contexts (such as women's groups) and individuals' actions and identities. I encouraged interviewees to narrate their evolving relationships with feminism over the course of their lives. Many responded to my open invite to tell me about how they came to be in women's groups by beginning their stories much further back in time, perhaps describing something about the family into which they were born, their values and so on, as a way of situating their involvement in feminism in its social, cultural, historical and biographical context.

In order to build rapport with interviewees prior to the interviews, I tended to have spoken to interviewees a couple of times by phone, or had email correspondence and a phone call, by the time I met them face-to-face for the first time. I felt it was important in the development of rapport that we had spoken and become familiar with each other's voices at least once before the interview took place. I thought this

would make us more at ease with one another during the interviews. As well, these preliminary encounters allowed interviewees a chance to consider their participation in the research, and to raise any questions with me about what the research and what their role as participants would entail.

Although I wanted to interview all participants twice, unfortunately, not all interviewees were willing to be interviewed a second time. Two out of the twenty women I interviewed did not return my calls/emails after the first interview. I speculated as to why these two individuals may not have wanted to be involved further in my research. In different ways, these interviewees seemed to struggle with telling their stories during the first interview: one offered an angry and in some ways incoherent analysis of the current state of the world and her situation within it, while the other responded uncomfortably and defensively to my questions about difficulties or disagreements within the group, describing to me her 'pathological' tendency to switch off to conflict, as a way of declining to answer such questions. Interestingly, both of these women were counsellors with a working-class background who told stories of themselves as "wounded healers". They explained that they were more comfortable listening to others talk about themselves than they were in talking about their own experiences; they were more used to being listeners and found the interview a challenging role reversal. I also felt class differences might have come into play in my interactions with one of these women, as she offered an analysis of class oppression that was based on hostility towards academics and people who own their own houses (the interview was the only one to have taken place in my home). I felt disappointed that they did not continue to the second phase of the interviews (or feel that they could get in touch to tell me that they did not wish to be interviewed again). This issue highlights the challenge of trying to access working-class research participants, when middle-class people – who are more likely to identify with academic research and wish (or see themselves as entitled) to be involved in the process of knowledge production – are more likely to have put themselves forward to be involved. Attrition from my sample of feminists from a working-class background is especially unfortunate given the way in which knowledge produced by and about feminism is already unrepresentative of working-class women. Although some women from working-class backgrounds remained in my sample for both rounds of interviews, I nevertheless feel that some



future project might usefully aim to seek out working-class women who were politically involved in West Yorkshire during the 1970s and 1980s in order to make some comparison of their activities with those of middle-class women.

During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions, trying not to intervene until interviewees had stopped talking, as well as some more specific questions, asking interviewees to elaborate on or clarify particular details. Although sometimes straightforward questions were phrased in a way that suggested I was just asking for facts, they elicited lengthy narratives in response, about women's subjective experiences of the groups. Qualitatively rich responses were often given to seemingly simple questions (such as a detailed and lengthy explanation of group dynamics and the comings and goings of various group members over the years in response to a question like, How many women were in the group?).

Although Appendix I gives some examples of lines of questioning that were pursued in the interviews, there was no interview schedule as such. Although I originally intended to follow a schedule, I abandoned the idea once I realised that interviewees knew better than me what they needed to tell me; I wanted them to be free to talk about whatever they saw as important. I allowed interviewees to determine which periods of their lives they talked about, and tended not to ask about particular life events unless interviewees referred to them. The schedule was useful for the first few interviews (particularly a pilot interview I did with a personal contact), but once I grew more confident, it seemed better to respond intuitively to interviewees rather than being concerned with checking the next item on my schedule.

A two-stage interview strategy was used to encourage the development of complexities in interviewees' accounts. While this was not my intention from the outset, it soon became clear that one interview with each woman would not be enough. Particularly as interviews tended to last only around an hour before interviewees and I started flagging under the intensity. As such, second interviews were valuable opportunities for interviewees to follow up on issues that had come to mind following first interviews.

The gap between first and second interviews ranged from eight weeks to nearly ten months, with second-round interviews commencing before the first round of interviews was complete. Although the overlap between the first and second phases was not ideal, it was necessary, due to some interviewees' schedules (e.g. plans to move away), to complete their second interviews earlier rather than putting them off until the full first round of data collection had been completed. Interviewees' circumstances dictated when it was convenient to interview them again, and I was flexible in my approach to accommodating their wishes. As such, an interviewee who was moving away wanted to do the second interview before she left West Yorkshire, only eight weeks after the first interview, and an interviewee whose mother died shortly after the first interview wanted to put off the second interview until things had settled down a bit for her.

Second interviews tended to commence with an invite for interviewees to reflect on the stories they told during the first interview, for example:

Anna: So firstly, I just wondered how it felt last time, sort of going back to this time and talking about it all again?

Linda: It was good. It was good, yes. And I did kind of think, as I said to you, oh, I thought, you know, I'll have loads to say then when you've walked out the door, and actually I don't know what happened really, I mean, I didn't, but I thought about it a lot and it was really good, it was good.

Anna: So, I just wondered how you felt about talking about all this stuff last time I came?

Sandra: Well after we finished, I went down the crags with the dog and walked for absolutely ages, walked for about three hours, because it was just like *[makes a whooshing sound]* going through my head, you know, so it did sort of stir things up a lot for me, made me think about, you know, what I'd been talking about and life and feminism and what's been going on and whatever. So it was interesting yeah, yeah. But I didn't feel distressed by it.

As such, the time between interviews was useful reflection time, allowing interviewees a chance to mull over what they had said, meaning their accounts of particular experiences were often more developed in second interviews. Also, second interviews provided a chance for me to try out some of my analysis and to check that my interpretation of interviewees' stories was consistent with the meanings they had intended to convey. I often asked interviewees to elaborate on

things they had said during first interviews. Although I noted down potential further questions as interviewees spoke, it was sometimes not until afterwards that I had particular thoughts in relation to things they had said. For example, one interviewee said during her first interview that there had been 'no open lesbians' in her group. It was only upon reflection that I realised I could have probed further as to whether there were therefore any "closeted" lesbians in her group. This was a question for the second interview.

For second-round interviews, interview schedules were devised on an individual basis for each interviewee. As I listened to recordings of first interviews and made notes, I identified themes to be followed up in second interviews. While first interviews were generally inconsistent in that they varied from one interviewee to another, second interviews were a chance to increase the consistency of the data collection process. Although it would have been unreasonable to have expected every interviewee to engage as closely with the same set of topics, I wanted to ensure that I gave them the same opportunities to speak on particular topics. Before I interviewed a woman for the second time, I transcribed, and conducted a preliminary analysis of, the first interview. This was a way of identifying the topics covered by each interviewee, which were noted down and then used for cross-referencing between interviewees. There were inevitably topics on which some interviewees had spoken at length, but that were only touched upon briefly by other interviewees. I noted where there seemed to be gaps and these notes provided a rough schedule for the second interview, along with other questions that arose from the preliminary analysis. Doing two interviews with each woman meant that all interviewees were given the chance to speak on particular core topics (such as how family members and friends reacted to changes they underwent as a result of being in the women's group). The data collection process was therefore more rigorous as a result of doing two rounds of interviews.

Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and transcribed by myself, in line with the idea that transcription constitutes a valuable part of the research process (Tilley 2003) and a preliminary form of analysis (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999). Interviews were mostly conducted in interviewees' own homes, which gave them what Finch (1993:169) describes as 'the character of an intimate conversation.'

There were a few exceptions, with some interviewees being interviewed at the University of Leeds, at their workplace, or – in one case – at my home. In all but one instance, there was nobody else present in the room. In one case, a second interview was conducted while the interviewee's husband kept coming in and out of the room, and pottering in an adjacent room with no door dividing it from the room we were in. I felt sure that this was going to negatively impact upon the quality of the data which emerged from this interaction. However, due to the fact that this interviewee's life was complicated at the time (having recently lost her mother), I did not feel comfortable bringing up this issue and allowed the interview to proceed under these compromised conditions. On reflection, this caused problems in that the interviewee quite explicitly involved her husband in her narrative, making reference to him several times and tailoring her account to make it seem favourable to him (including making reference to her 'very good relationship with Graham', and saying, 'We've always had a good conversation going, haven't we, Graham?'). Should a similar situation arise in future research, I would hope to be able to deal with it differently.

At the end of their first interview, interviewees were asked to complete a participant information sheet, recording key biographical details such as date of birth, ethnicity, occupation, whether they had any children, whether they wished their name to be changed (and could suggest their own pseudonym), as well as some basic questions about the groups, such as dates of participation. Interviewees were not always clear about when they first joined a group or when their period of involvement in women's groups came to an end. That interviewees did not tend to be able to say when their group stopped meeting was interesting in relation to the general vagueness in interviewees' memories around groups' endings. I used spreadsheets to record interviewees' characteristics (see Appendix II) as well as to keep track of my progress with data collection, in addition to my journal, which was useful for documenting my approach to issues and dilemmas as they arose.

I interviewed a further five women who were not included in the final sample due to the groups they had been in not having seen themselves as doing consciousness-raising. For various reasons, this had not been apparent until after the interviewees had told me their stories. Although these transcripts were not analysed in detail and do not appear in the thesis, they did however give me a richer understanding of what

was happening around the women's movement in the region, and I may go back to this data as part of some future research.

Linde (1993:3) states that 'life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way.' While interviewees were informed of my focus on women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s and were not explicitly requested to tell their life story, they did not restrict their narratives to this specific period in time. Asking someone to reflect on the role of women's groups in her life was tantamount to asking for her life story. Participation in women's groups was contextualised in relation to the whole of their lives, beginning at birth (or before) and ending at the moment of interview, or maybe even after, as many spoke about the future, including their own, the future of the feminist movement/gender relations, or of society more generally. Talking about women's groups entailed talking about the whole of their lives, particularly due to the way in which women's groups mined their previous experiences, going back to early childhood memories (and even further back, as they analysed their parents' lives and relationships). Interviewees seemed to value the experience of telling their stories, and usually expressed an interest in reading the thesis. One interviewee even requested CDs of the interviews as a documentary record of her life, which she suggested might be valuable to her daughter some day.

Repeated visits are useful for developing rapport, allowing for more difficult questions to be explored (Ritchie 2003). With some interviewees, informal chats followed on from the interviews, as we drank tea after the voice recorder had been switched off. I certainly found heightened rapport in most second-round interviews, which meant that interviewees tended to be more willing to talk about difficult matters than they had been the first time.

It was important that I transcribed the interviews myself rather than delegate, particularly considering the potential for the person transcribing to influence the research data (Tilley 2003). As well, the transcription process encourages the close attention to detail that is necessary as researchers begin to make sense of their data (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999). My transcription work constituted a preliminary stage in the analysis, as I made notes relating to my initial responses to the data that were

useful to go back to later in the analysis phase of the research. When transcribing, I tended to listen to interviews the whole way through, filling in gaps each time I went through from beginning to end, rather than focusing on completing particular sections before moving on. This helped me to gain a sense of the interviews as narratives. Transcribing was a long and sometimes arduous process. There were endless decisions to make about how to present interviewees' speech as text, 'which, although apparently mundane, have serious implications for how we might understand the discourse' (Mishler 1991:261). I took up an offer of help with transcription from a friend, who produced rough transcripts of two second-round interviews, which I then completed myself to ensure they were consistent with the other transcripts.

### *Archives*

In addition to interviews, I also spent some time in the Feminist Archive North looking through documents produced in West Yorkshire during the 1970s and 1980s, in order to build up a general sense of what was happening in the region and in the women's movement at that time. These documents were important in the design stage prior to doing the interviews, and in the early stages of my analysis, as I began thinking about some of the issues which might arise in the data. While newsletters and pamphlets provided some valuable initial insights into some of the organising practices of the women's movement in Leeds and alerted me to certain key events and activities, particularly in the city of Leeds, it was clear to me that the informally organised small groups on which I intended to focus did not document their activities. There were also fewer archival materials relating to activities going on outside of Leeds, in other parts of West Yorkshire. Documents do not feature heavily in the thesis, as I was less concerned with how debates were framed back then (or with trying to uncover the truth about what really happened) than I was with understanding interviewees' subjective interpretations of the past and its relationship to their present lives.

### *Focus groups*

As well as discussing the methods I used, it seems important to mention which methods I did *not* use in order to ensure that the choices made in designing this research are transparent. I might potentially have used the focus groups approach,

which is recognised as useful for researching social movements (Melucci 1988). My initial intention to collect further data from focus groups was dropped due to time limitations, as I decided that I would need to interview each woman twice in order to get in-depth data. Although conducting group interviews might have led to the emergence of interesting variations on individuals' accounts, in the end I opted instead to go for a more in-depth exploration with individual women. However, I maintain the belief that focus groups would be a productive method for researching women's groups (perhaps as part of my future research endeavours). Focus groups might also enable the collective reconstruction of aspects of the women's movement in West Yorkshire that remain unclear after analysis of interviews and documents. Designing group interviews with women who had been in women's groups together would require a methodological framework which would allow for exploration of how some of the dynamics of the original group meetings might manifest themselves in the research encounter.

#### *Personal documents*

Sometimes interviewees brought books, articles, or photographs to show me, as props for their stories. Others dug out old diaries and used them to jog their memories about details such as dates of significant events and meetings. Some generously allowed me to take their diaries, journals and notebooks away with me to read as data. Interviewees' writings provided contexts for, and elaboration on, their stories. I did not ask interviewees to share such materials with me unless they offered. Although I do quote from interviewees' writings in my analysis chapters, these sources were secondary to, and intended to complement, the interviews.

#### *Data analysis*

The analysis phase commenced as I began reading through transcripts, identifying themes that were initially explored through handwritten notes in my research journal. As the same theme came up in several transcripts, I embarked on a more detailed coding phase, which involved going through interviews individually with highlighter pens. I proceeded to gather together all material relating to a particular theme, going on to develop thorough comparisons across particular cases, as well as considering how data related to the theory I was reading and making notes on in parallel to my immersion in the data. I regularly moved from data to literature and back again,

finding this to be a stimulating way to make connections between interviewees' accounts and related theory.

Crucial to the development of my analysis were my own reflections on the relationships between feminist social science methodologies and the practice of consciousness-raising. I interrogated interview narratives in relation to (i) recent debates within feminist theory and (ii) dominant narratives of the history of the feminist movement. I spent over a year reading and re-reading interview transcripts, coding and note-taking, interspersed with immersing myself in the literature (focusing on feminist theory and studies of the women's movement). This allowed for thorough and rigorous cross-referencing between data and texts, which resulted eventually in the development of analytical themes which provided links between the data and the literature.

The rich life history data that emerged from the interviews required an analytical approach which, as recommended by Blee and Taylor (2002:103), paid 'close attention to how individuals tell stories about their past and to how their accounts of social movement participation fit with other events in their lives.' My analysis sought to be particularly sensitive to the relationship between social change and individual life course change, and how these are talked about together in interviewees' narratives. As I considered each interviewee's personal-political trajectory, I looked for overlaps between how she talked about her own individual development and the development of the movement: How did interviewees connect their own and the movement's life course trajectories? My analytical approach was informed by Benwell and Stokoe's (2006:143) suggestion of interpreting data by examining 'people's lives holistically through the stories they tell.' Focusing on the intersections of biography and society, I considered how individuals construct stories about their lives as members of a particular generation (Andrews 2002:80). While Chapter 9 is in some ways a development on the theme of feminist generations (mentioned above), it also arose from a desire to consider change that occurred in individuals' lives, society, and the feminist movement, between the seventies/eighties period (when interviewees were involved in women's groups), and the present day. The other themes to emerge from the analysis turned into Chapter 7 (which focuses on how interviewees described their changing



relationships with ideas and theory), and Chapter 8 (which focuses on their changing relationships with other women). Chapter 6 is a more general discussion of West Yorkshire women's groups.

I began by considering how interview accounts related to representations of c-r groups in the literature. Initial reflections directed me to read specific bodies of literature, which then in turn shaped how I conceptualised emergent themes within the data. I became particularly focused on whether/how the stories interviewees told were consistent with the dominant academic representations of the recent feminist past (see Hemmings 2005).

By seeing sets of transcripts as whole texts, reading through them from the beginning of the first interview to the end of the second interview, I sought to develop a sense of each individual interviewee's unique experience of women's groups. Not only did I work closely with whole transcripts, I also looked across the data, comparing individual cases. Reading sets of transcripts from beginning to end helped me to gain an impression of subjective experiences of women's groups as part of the whole of a person's life, whereas looking across transcripts was useful for ascertaining how 'interviewees construct the meaning of the "same" life events...in radically different ways' (Riessman 1989:743). In the early stages of the analysis, I found it useful to present case studies of particular individuals in meetings with supervisors, looking in detail at their cases in order to explore potential themes, which I would then explore across the data.

Line-by-line coding was used,<sup>43</sup> which is helpful to researchers who hope to refrain from imputing their own 'motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues' to their respondents (Charmaz 2003:94). Line-by-line coding helped to ensure that I did not 'go native', a process described by Charmaz (2003:95) as 'becoming so immersed in your respondents' world-view that you accept it without question.' In the analysis stage, I tried to be sensitive to how my questions might have subtly shaped interviewees' responses. As such, it sometimes seemed necessary to include my questions as part of sections of interviews quoted as part of the thesis.

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<sup>43</sup> Line-by-line coding entails coding the data 'in every way possible' (Holton 2007:275).

***Ethical considerations/anonymity/confidentiality***

Interviews were often emotionally demanding for both interviewer and interviewee. My sensitivity to potential ethical issues was influenced by reading Finch's (1993) reflections on the moral dilemmas raised by women interviewing other women. I tried to make interviewees aware that they should not feel they had to talk about anything they did not want to, and two interviewees deselected from the second round of interviews by not getting back in touch with me (however they were still included in the sample). The issue of confidentiality was dealt with on an individual basis with interviewees, whose wishes were varied, with some being happy for their own name to be used, others suggesting an appropriate pseudonym, and others asking me to choose a name for them. At the beginning of each interview, I explained to interviewees my intention to record and transcribe the interviews to use in my thesis, and asked whether they would mind data from their interviews being published or stored in an archive. All interviewees consented to the interviews being recorded, and to transcripts being deposited in the Feminist Archive North. Interviewees were then asked to sign a consent form. My ethical code of conduct meant that I did not tell interviewees who else I had interviewed. However, it is likely that they will be able to identify one another from reading this thesis, despite some names having been changed. For instance, I interviewed three women who had been in the same group. Each might not have been aware that the other two were interviewed, but in making connections between their stories, I may well have "outed" them to one another.

***The Interviewees***

For a table of interviewees' characteristics, see Appendix II. For pen portraits, see Appendix III.

The interviewees were between the ages of 51 and 66 at the time of interview (2006-7). All were residing in West Yorkshire, with the exception of one who lived just over the Yorkshire/Lancashire border. A high proportion of interviewees moved to West Yorkshire during the 1970s or 1980s. They were incomers to the region, rather than locals. Seventeen out of 20 were incomers; of the three local women, Karen and Julie had always lived in the region, while Tess was born and brought up in West Yorkshire, before moving away and returning as an adult. The sample is roughly

split in half in terms of those currently residing in urban areas of West Yorkshire, and those living in more rural locations.

While there was a mix of occupations among the women I interviewed, a clustering around teaching, counselling and social work-related professions suggests a higher representation of middle-class participants than working-class. It is problematical that, despite efforts to find a diverse sample, 19 out of 20 women in the sample are white. There was one other non-white woman who came forward to be interviewed, but she was excluded from the sample on the basis that she did not become involved in women's groups until the end of 1989 and seemed also to portray her group's activities as quite different from consciousness-raising. This limitation to the scope of my research relates to the difficulty of finding working-class participants (discussed above). Perhaps some future project could focus specifically on the political activities of working-class and Black and Asian women in West Yorkshire during the 1970s and 1980s, which might have focused not on c-r, but on other issues/activities.

## **Chapter Six: Feminist Consciousness-Raising in West Yorkshire Women's Groups**

This chapter discusses how consciousness-raising was practised by West Yorkshire women's groups. I begin by describing West Yorkshire as a specific setting for c-r, proceeding to describe how the groups were organised and the processes that occurred within them. I also present portraits characterising six of the groups. It is pertinent to reiterate here that most interviewees' groups referred to themselves as women's groups rather than as consciousness-raising groups.

### *West Yorkshire*

I found evidence of feminist activities in Hebden Bridge, Wakefield, Leeds, Halifax and Bradford, but not in Huddersfield.<sup>44</sup> Nearly half the sample (nine women) had been in groups in Leeds, five in the Bradford area, three in Wakefield, three in Hebden Bridge, and two in Halifax/Sowerby Bridge (note: several interviewees had been involved in groups in more than one place). West Yorkshire is sufficiently small that interviewees tended to have some knowledge of most of the region. Interviewees made comparisons between different parts of the region. Leeds, for example, was generally regarded as the centre of the West Yorkshire women's movement, being portrayed as more political (e.g. Sara) than other towns and cities in the region.

The cultural context of West Yorkshire presented a particular barrier to asserting the political significance of personal experiences for the women I interviewed. The notion that talking about one's life constituted a form of political practice was in tension with local attitudes. Hazel offered the following perspective on the cultural flavour of Leeds during the 1970s:

It had a grittiness, which at the time, along with the politics, felt right. There was a real grittiness, there was a real kind of survival stuff, there was a real stop poncing about, this is what it is. (Hazel)

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<sup>44</sup> Nobody came forward to be interviewed from Huddersfield, although I did advertise for participants there.

The double meaning of ponce is rather telling: as a noun, it means an effeminate man; as a verb, it means to act stupidly or waste time. Freda commented upon her impression of local attitudes, suggesting the women she knew in Halifax perceived c-r as 'contemplating your naval...a waste of time, but underlying that, probably it was seen as a bit threatening and too personal...they weren't people who wanted to sit round talking about their personal lives' (Freda). Although Hazel saw the grittiness of Leeds as an apt setting for political activity, the region's cultural climate also gave rise to an impatient attitude towards consciousness-raising from some quarters of the women's movement. The 'Yorkshire no-nonsense manner' (Rowbotham 2001:25) can be seen to have simultaneously nurtured and presented challenges for women's groups. West Yorkshire women talking about their lives, as a contravention of masculine notions of political practice, was deemed too poncey or effeminate to constitute real survival-related political action; this can be seen as a region-specific form of opposition to c-r.

Areas to the North and North-West of Leeds – including Hyde Park (near the University) and Chapeltown – were hives of left-wing political activity. Communities in South Leeds continue to this day to be more traditionally working-class. One interviewee, Helen, bought a house in South Leeds, where property prices were low and there was little sign of feminist activity. Providing a sense of the local attitude, Helen told a story about her neighbours, an older couple who lived five miles out of Leeds, but never ventured into the city:

They said to me, 'Where did I move from?', and I said, 'Shrewsbury', and they said, 'Oh, Dewsbury? That's a long way!', so I didn't bother to correct them that I'd come a great deal further! And then the woman says, 'Well, I moved here when I married forty years ago, but I haven't been back to Leeds since.' And I was trotting into Leeds once or twice a day!  
(Helen)

Other interviewees described similar attitudes elsewhere in West Yorkshire, including Wakefield (Joanna). They portrayed feelings of incongruousness as they lived amongst people who were reluctant to venture far away – physically or ideologically – from their roots. Interviewees' comments convey a sense that traditional local communities on the outskirts of West Yorkshire's cities insulated

themselves against the city and the perceived risks posed by exposure to different sets of possibilities.

Most interviewees had lived outside West Yorkshire, with many having participated in women's groups elsewhere. Of twenty interviewees, six had their first experience of women's groups outside of West Yorkshire.

With most interviewees having moved into West Yorkshire from outside, women's groups were often pivotal to their narratives of coming to feel at home in the region (where most continue to live). Feelings about West Yorkshire and its inhabitants changed through involvement in feminist collective contexts, particularly when, as in Joanna's case, preconceptions of local women were challenged:

There was a lot of breaking down of stereotypes, like the local woman, Sheila... I'd been here six years, my feeling was that you couldn't break into this society and that the women were quite tough, you know, almost quite hard, and often if you said something, you got a blank reaction, you know, didn't smile at you or...so, you know, Sheila showed me that underneath, there was a lot of insecurity and a lot of anxiety about not being good enough and all the rest of it – about being, you know, Yorkshire twits and the stuff that gets said about Northerners... And I'm not a Southerner, but what Sheila showed me was that if she met someone like me with a different accent who she – that she assumed was posh, she would then, you know, put her guard up.  
(Joanna)

This account conveys the way in which social relations were interrogated in women's groups, extending beyond analyses of gender difference, to analyses of interactions between Northerners and Southerners, and power relations relating to the hegemony of the Southern accent as the standard British accent. Corroborating Joanna's suggestion that Yorkshire folk tend to be caricatured as fools or idiots, Sheila Rowbotham's (2001:44) autobiographical account of the sixties recalls the 'complicit smirks' evoked by her Yorkshire vowel sounds in Oxford; having a Northern accent meant 'you were presumed thick'.

Some women offered intertwined narratives of moving to West Yorkshire for the first time and finding the women's movement. For instance, Hazel told of simultaneously arriving in Leeds (following a period spent in Canada) and 'hitting

women's liberation'. Helen and Alison moved to Leeds with the explicit intention of becoming involved in the feminist movement.<sup>45</sup> The idea of the women's movement in Leeds being seen to present opportunities to meet like-minded women is one of the ways in which feminist contexts enabled women to try out new ways of relating to other women. The simultaneity, within some women's narratives, of joining women's groups and arriving in a new place is suggestive of the intertwined processes of moving to a new place and seeking opportunities for self-reinvention.

***The group process: rules, leadership, location, expectations, membership***

According to interviewees' sometimes rough estimations of how many women were at their meetings, groups ranged in size from three to over twenty members. Around eight or fewer members was deemed the optimal size, but groups were often smaller, with six out of twenty interviewees reporting groups of five or fewer members. Although a small number of groups retained fixed membership from their first meeting to their last, most groups changed shape as women came and went over time. During phases in which particular groups were open to new members, existing members would spread the word (e.g. to workplace and playgroup acquaintances), and there were a few instances of groups advertising for new members, e.g., in the women's liberation journal, *Spare Rib*. When groups grew beyond their optimum size, they declared themselves closed or divided into smaller groups.

Women in West Yorkshire women's groups took turns to tell one another about their experiences, before going on to discuss women's lives more generally. Individuals' narratives were generally not to be challenged (no interruptions), with analysis being saved until all participants had been given a chance to talk about their lives, unimpeded by requirements to tell their stories from a feminist perspective.

Groups varied in terms of whether or not they aspired to abide by specific, formally-stated rules. While the no-men rule was adhered to by all the groups I found, other norms around how to do c-r (such as those laid out in Chapter 2) were approached somewhat creatively. Linda told a story of how her group intentionally flouted their

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<sup>45</sup> Although Helen, Alison and Hazel moved to West Yorkshire independently to find the women's movement, other interviewees gave more hetero-relationally (Raymond 1986a; Roseneil 2006) oriented explanations of moving to West Yorkshire, citing husbands' careers for instance (Carol and Freda, who relocated to West Yorkshire in 1969 and 1981 respectively).

own rules as a source of amusement. Occasionally and deliberately, members of Linda's group would perform an exaggerated disobedience of the stipulation that they avoid giving one another advice. This provided humorous relief from what were otherwise emotionally gruelling discussions. 'Advice Shop', as Linda described it, constituted a mockery of what were seen as typically masculine ways of responding to women's problems. As such, Linda's story demonstrates her group's playful approach to ideas about how to do c-r; through deliberately breaking their own rules, they practised an ironic mode of defiance.

While none of the women I interviewed reported overt hostility from men about their exclusion from women's group meetings, there did seem to be some occasional awkwardness in response to requests that male partners leave home for the evening. Linda noted that 'occasionally they would kind of come in at the end, you know, and have to be banished.'

Besides the no-men rule, the other most abiding stipulation concerned mandatory attendance at group meetings (Dreifus 1973). Sandra and Joanna conveyed the utmost importance of group meetings in members' calendars:

The time when you had your women's group day was sacrosanct – you didn't do something else on that day or get out of it, or anything else – you went, wherever you were, regardless, you know. (Sandra)

Nobody missed meetings. It was really very unusual indeed for anyone to miss. It became sort of essential. (Joanna)

Other interviewees concurred that there was a strong expectation that all women would attend every meeting; non-attendance was frowned upon. However, the frequency and regularity of meetings tended to decrease for groups continuing over a long number of years.

A high value was placed on making meetings convenient, in order to encourage full attendance. As such, a flexible approach was taken towards the idea of rotating meetings around members' homes, meaning groups sometimes congregated in one member's home more often. Exceptions were made in response to issues relating to ill health or childcare, or when one member had a house with space that was



especially suitable for group meetings (e.g. Linda and Sandra told of a woman who lived in a former public house in Hebden Bridge, where she could comfortably hold group meetings). Although larger living spaces were useful as groups increased in size, c-r worked better within groups that were small enough to be accommodated in an ordinary sized living room (Koedt et al 1973).

Groups generally preferred to avoid meeting in the same member's home each time. This was partly an attempt to avoid reproducing oppressive or hierarchical group dynamics (such as the hostess/guest relationship). However, there were suggestions that women's groups created pressure to play the *opposite* of the hostess role, as members tried to demonstrate their complete and successful rejection of conventionally-defined women's roles. One interviewee noted competition between group members over whose house was the *dirtiest*, implying that the hostess role had been replaced by oppositional (but still burdensome) standards. Willis (1975:170) alluded to the new pressures on women regarding whether their home/appearance/behaviour resembled that of a good women's liberationist: 'Instead of the sexy chick or the perfect homemaker, we now have a new image to live up to: the liberated woman.' Linda recalled feeling self-conscious in meetings, and being unsure as to whether it was appropriate to wear mascara or a skirt when it was her women's group night (however, she attributed this to her insecurity, which, she explained, subsided as the years went by). Linda's story reflects other women's accounts of feeling the need to conform to a tacit women's movement code of conduct. Despite rejecting mainstream values, women in women's groups still put themselves and each other under pressure to perform appropriate behaviour, although notions of appropriate behaviour were being re-defined within these contexts.

Interviewees tended to describe the group process in ways that constructed their groups as ostensibly leaderless. However, data highlighted that, in reality, the emergence of leadership of some kind was difficult to avoid, as particular individuals came to take on informal leadership roles. Interviewees suggested that more confident individuals came to have more control over, and responsibility for, the group process. There was evidence of tensions within groups between striving for equality, whilst also acknowledging the unavoidable tendency for some

individuals in a group to be more dominant than others. Freeman's (1972) argument that structurelessness was an unobtainable and destructive ideal for women's liberation groups was referred to by one interviewee, Tess. She related her experience of groups needing formal structure in order to avoid being corrupted by informal exclusions:

I already knew from my experience in Oxford that having no structure doesn't work and certainly isn't what I want. I don't want things to be over-organised, but it's that 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' – I just knew, to not have any organisation, you know, creates its own things that don't work out for people, so we felt excluded. (Tess)

In addition to the tension between striving for equality and recognising power dynamics within the group, conflict arose between the desire to expand the group, and the need to remain small enough for the process to be effective. Tess stated her belief that groups needed to have an explicit stance on whether their status was open or closed. Having joined a group that was ostensibly open, Tess was disappointed to find that communication processes within the group were not actually conducive to welcoming new members. Along with another newcomer, Tess documented this experience in a written piece, noting: 'It seems to us that there is in the Bradford group an implicit assumption that no-one who doesn't already come will come!' Tess noted her annoyance at the lack of systems in place within this group to convey information to potential new members, or to existing members who might miss a meeting. As such, it was deemed better to disallow new members than to admit them without ensuring there were processes in place to orientate them. Liz agreed that closing groups was necessary due to the difficult adjustments that would be required in order to let new members join, who would be at a different stage in the c-r process.

**Example 1**

**Lee, 1969-1974: Leeds Women's Liberation (Town) Group**

Leeds Women's Liberation Group, formed in 1969, was one of the first of its kind in the UK. Formed by women who knew one another through other political/countercultural networks, the group met in one another's homes at first. As the group grew, they held all their meetings at Lee's house, as she had the largest living room. Lee suggested that visits from the women's movement scholar, Sheila Rowbotham, provided a catalyst for the group's early meetings by connecting the

Leeds group with one of the first groups in London. Communication between women's groups was crucial at this time, when there were only a handful of groups meeting in the UK. The first Leeds group came to be known as the "Town" group (soon there was also a university group, a Woodhouse group and a Chapeltown group). Most of the women involved were in their late twenties and were – or were about to become – mothers (Lee remembers many of the women breastfeeding during meetings). When the first Leeds women's liberation groups divided into special-interest groups, Lee formed part of a more intellectually focused group.

### *Timeframe*

As the earliest group I found to be meeting in West Yorkshire, Lee's group represents an exception amongst the data, which relates mainly to women's groups meeting at a later phase in the movement's history than those portrayed in Chapter 2. Apart from Lee, Sandra and Gillian were the only other interviewees to have become involved in women's groups around 1970. The other seventeen women I interviewed came to feminism after 1970, by which time the movement was to some extent already out there, having an influence on society, even if it was not yet apparent within their local communities. Whereas Lee published writings based on the fruits of discussions in consciousness-raising sessions (Comer 1971, 1974; Allen et al 1974), most interviewees had not been part of the first phase of c-r, from which early second-wave feminist writings emerged; they were part of women's groups that excitedly consumed, but did not produce, feminist theory. Twelve interviewees came to women's groups during the 1970s, while five (Rachel, Doreen, Sara, Karen and Linda) joined groups in the 1980s, meaning their activities did not fit neatly into either second- or third-wave feminism (they are an intermediary feminist generation). By this point in the movement's development, women began reflecting on the question of how patriarchal society shapes not only women's intimate relationships with men, but also their intimate relationships with one another. Feminist practice involved being critical not only of patriarchal definitions of women's roles, but also of the feminist alternatives. By the mid-1980s, the oppositional practices that had developed in radical contexts of the 1970s were seen as potentially restrictive as the heterosexual norms and values they sought to challenge.

***Example 2******1983-1986: Long-term Lesbian Relationships Group***

During the mid-eighties, three of the women I interviewed<sup>46</sup> (and a fourth woman I didn't interview) met to discuss long-term lesbian relationships, with a view to using their personal experiences to formulate political analyses. Looking for patterns in how relationships between women tended to develop, they set out to subject lesbianism to the same critical analysis as heterosexual relationships had been subjected to since much earlier in the women's movement. Although this group challenged ideas that had become dominant within lesbian feminist communities (including, for instance, the idea of non-monogamy), their aim of tackling the dogma of lesbian feminism was realised to only a limited extent. One interviewee told of having to leave this group when she had a brief relationship with a man. As such, members of this group had to behave according to the group's tacit code of conduct despite their critique of norm-enforcement and policing within lesbian feminist communities in Leeds. Although one member left (or was forced to leave) after a couple of years, the other three women continued to meet as a group until the end of the 1990s (and still see each other regularly as friends).

***Multiple Groups***

It was not unusual for women to have been in more than one group. Transitions from one group to another were narrated in ways that were revealing of interviewees' evolving relationships with feminism, and shifting expectations of feminist collective contexts. Women's groups that occurred later in individuals' trajectories from one group to another, and historically later in the movement's development and proliferation, tended to be more specifically focused. This is explained by Ryan's (1992:57) suggestion that, during earlier phases in the movement, c-r groups organised on the basis of what women had in common, whereas later groups organised around special qualities. Alison, for example, went on to form a lesbian group after being in a group with heterosexual women. Several other interviewees told of having been in more than one women's group, including Freda, who had been in several women's groups, not because she was looking for a different experience each time, but due to moving around the country (from Lancaster to London, and then to Sowerby Bridge).

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<sup>46</sup> I have deliberately avoided naming the women in connection with one other, in order to protect their anonymity.

***Example 3******Freda, 1982-1985: Sowerby Bridge Women's Health Group***

This group held their first meeting in a pub in 1982. Freda had an instrumental role in setting up the group. As the only member who had been in women's groups before, she took it upon herself to lead the new group for the first year, during which time they met in an adult education centre. After this, the group continued to meet in one another's homes. They talked about women's health, focusing on their own experiences, and produced a booklet of writings, including a poem about menstruation, which was Freda's response to girls not being taught anything about their bodies in school. There was a mix of disabled and nondisabled women in the group, as well as working-class and middle-class women, many of whom had had no formal education following school. The group went on to form part of a larger campaign that resulted in Calderdale Well Woman Centre being set up in Halifax in 1985.

***Entering women's groups***

Freda's initial entry to women's groups was prior to arriving in West Yorkshire. Her story, like that of Kathleen and Sandra, resonates with the theory that women-only groups emerged out of frustration with male-dominated left-wing political organisations (Evans 1979). Freda and Kathleen had both been involved in the International Marxist Group (IMG), in Bradford and Lancaster respectively, before joining women's groups, whereas Sandra had lived with anarchists in London before moving to West Yorkshire where she joined women's groups in Hebden Bridge.

Highlighting the male left's (in this case, IMG) resistance to women organising around their own interests, Freda gave the following account of the women's group she joined during her late twenties whilst studying English at Lancaster University:

They used to brief the women who were organising it, tell them what we were going to do next, and we found ourselves organising a cleaners' strike, things like that – tackling women's issues... They were a Marxist political group and ostensibly this was a group of women coming together to talk about women's issues, but it was actually a front – we used to call it in those days – a front: you set up something and got people to join and you got them basically working for your issues, you know, and your motivations, sort of like, it was women's issues that Marxists were worried about, and so we

didn't discover that for a year... Just towards the end of the year, one of the other women in the group got "politicised" and joined IMG, and she went along to a meeting and halfway through the meeting they said, 'Right, what's the women's group going to do? Now let's see...we need them to do this and do this!' [laughter] And so she came back and told us, you see, so that split that group up, but it lasted for one academic year really... People were hugely, hugely angry about it, obviously, and felt totally taken in. (Freda)

By this point, Freda was already familiar with the women's movement, which, as she put it, had been happening in America 'in the sixties, and then came over here'. After initially exploring feminism through reading books, including *SCUM Manifesto* (Solanas 1983[1968]) and *The Female Eunuch* (Greer 1970), Freda joined a women's group, only to discover that it was secretly being run by the IMG. Once the group had been exposed as a 'front' for IMG, a handful of women, including Freda, broke away and began to determine the content of their own meetings, discussing issues to do with women's health. As such, Freda's experience constitutes part of feminists' radical departure from mixed socialist and Marxist groups during the early 1970s.

There was evidence in the data that women came to c-r both as beginners, and with prior experience of political contexts (Sarachild 1973). Particular political events and contexts were mentioned by interviewees as being significant for bringing them together with other women with whom they would go on to form groups:

- Women's Liberation Conference in Oxford (Sandra)
- Women's Liberation Day event in Leeds (Helen)
- University left-wing political groups in Oxford (Tess)
- Well Woman campaign meeting in Halifax (Janet)
- Women and sexuality conference in Leeds (Gillian)
- Campaign for a women's centre in Leeds (Doreen)
- Feminist collective household in Leeds (Hazel)
- Safe crossing protest in Leeds (Julie)

In addition to the eight women listed above, a further eight interviewees came to women's groups through prior involvement in a mixture of social and political networks and contexts, including through existing friendship groups, family

members and work-related acquaintances. Over half of the women cited specific personal contacts as crucial to their coming to be in women's groups, including family members (Joanna's sister introduced her to women's groups) and an old school friend (Alison). Interestingly, for three women (Judith, Lee, and Sandra), male partners played a prominent role in their introduction to women's groups, suggesting the sometimes hetero-relational (Raymond 1986a) origins of women's entries into feminist space. Sandra recalled attending the first UK women's liberation conference in Oxford in 1970 with women she had met through her boyfriend, and for the first time being treated as an individual in her own right:

...I was just sat there sort of being a bit gob-smacked, and then there was a little sort of tea break, and for the first time the women took me to have a cup of tea with them. Before that, I'd always just been the girlfriend, and they'd speak to me and be alright, but they never communicated with me because I was just little nobody, you know, so they actually took me for a cup of tea with them and asked me about who I was for the first time and, you know, spoke to me as a person. And that was kind of strange. (Sandra)

Similar comments – about women meeting one another through male partners rather than forming direct friendships – were made by other women, including Lee (see Chapter 8, on women's friendships).

Only one interviewee, Linda, did not come to c-r through informal networks or political contexts, but rather told of having responded to an advert for c-r group members placed in her local bookshop window in Hebden Bridge. Although Linda was the only interviewee who came to c-r in this way, I do not wish to imply that there was anything unusual about responding to an advert as a way of making contact. This was a common method through which feminists made contact with one another at this time. Adverts in *Spare Rib* journal helped Hazel to find the collective house she moved into in Leeds, as well as putting Freda in touch with a c-r group in London (which she joined after her Lancaster group and before her Sowerby Bridge group).

Although Freda's entry into the movement was fairly conventional, she went on to form a group with women who were at first resistant to the idea of consciousness-

raising. Having already been in groups in Lancaster and London, Freda moved to Sowerby Bridge with the expectation of continuing her feminist activities. She tried to initiate a women's group amongst mothers she met through her son's playgroup, but was faced with reluctant responses, until she suggested the pub as a location for the meeting. On reflection, Freda thought the pub seemed non-threatening to women who otherwise felt intimidated by the idea of joining a group. With its sociable connotations and less serious atmosphere, going to the pub was a less daunting prospect for women from working-class backgrounds, with little experience of education beyond school. Freda's group then moved to an adult education centre, before eventually meeting in one another's homes.

The three remaining interviewees (who did not come to c-r through personal/political contacts or by responding to an advert) formed groups with women whom they met through adult education courses. Although the adult education route into c-r is not prevalent in the literature, Rachel, Sara, and Liz told of having found it useful to access women's groups through participating in more formal adult education-style courses first. For Rachel, participating in Workers' Education Association (WEA) courses at Swarthmore Centre in Leeds led her to become involved in women's groups which met to discuss their health and their spirituality. For Liz and Sara, informal c-r-style groups formed out of adult education women's groups.

The early meetings of Sara's group took place in an adult education centre in 1984, with a smaller subgroup continuing to meet in one another's homes after the course had ended. Sara explained that, as the women came to know one another better, trust developed and it became possible to dispense with the structure and leadership provided by the more formal educational context. Sara's narrative emphasised that the group shrank to include only a few like-minded women in order to transfer to the more intimate space of members' homes. She noted a shared feeling amongst members of this smaller domestic subgroup that they did not wish to mix with everybody, particularly those members who had seemed to create awkwardness within the initial group:



I suppose because it was an adult education class with a facilitator, it was controlled... she would kind of, you know, remind you of ground rules. And I think they were just fearful that if we then invited this person into our homes, we would get stuck with it really and wouldn't be able to control it. (Sara)

Sara identified the risk that, in a less formal, leaderless setting, group relations might prove difficult to manage, making it crucial that group members shared enough common ground to work well together. The transition to a more intimate setting was desired with only some members of the original group. The group relocating and diminishing in size went together in Sara's narrative of not wishing to invite women they did not like into their private spaces. Invoking the idea of women 'mixing' well, Sara highlights the importance of group members being to some extent like-minded from the outset in order for the process to work.

While stories about entering women's groups via mixed political groups are represented within theoretical accounts (Evans 1979), the literature says little about women taking the adult education route into women's groups. By the mid-1980s, processes akin to c-r were occurring in more formal educational contexts. Consciousness-raising had become a more acceptable and common activity for women and was therefore no longer limited to special meetings (Spender 1983b). Interviewees who went on to take women's studies courses after their initial foray into consciousness-raising suggested that these courses operated very similarly to their earlier c-r groups.

Later in the history of consciousness-raising, as women's issues gained more public recognition, it became increasingly possible for women to enter women's groups through adult education (e.g. evening courses). Women who took this route were perhaps less typical c-r group members, as they were not university-educated women coming to feminism via left-wing political contexts.

Public settings such as adult education centres or pubs were beneficial settings for women to meet who were hesitant about the idea of discussing their personal experiences. This route provided a means for unlikely candidates – not yet ready to

meet in a domestic environment – to enter the movement.<sup>47</sup> Liz described starting out in a group with an appointed leader, who encouraged participation, being good at ‘bringing group members out’. Without familiarity and trust, formally structured contexts with leaders helped some women feel more comfortable in the initial stages of learning to talk about their personal experiences, before it became feasible for group members to meet together informally. The adult education route enabled women to go on to participate in consciousness-raising who otherwise lacked (a) the network to form a group spontaneously, or (b) the confidence to meet informally with unfamiliar people. Although c-r groups ideally met in members’ homes (Dreifus 1973), some women, including the Sowerby Bridge women Freda talked about, found it useful to begin meeting in more public settings before progressing to domestic contexts. To gather in domestic spaces and collectively engage in critiquing the roles they were expected to play within these spaces was indeed a radical and taboo-breaking act, which occurred more gradually for women with less confidence/education/class status, or no prior involvement in feminist networks.

#### *A note on activism*

Although activism wasn’t the main focus of the groups, some of the women I interviewed did participate in activism. This related to their paid work in education (Carol and Linda), as well as organising groups for parents of Deaf children (Judith), and setting up and joining women’s centres (Kathleen, Freda, Janet). Several interviewees had been involved in mixed left politics (including CND and Socialist groups) prior to joining women’s groups, where their focus shifted to women’s issues. For some (Tess in particular), mixed-gender political campaigning continued alongside participation in women’s groups. Pressure to be seen to be doing activism was noted by Linda, who felt her group had not been a ‘proper’ women’s group, due to the fact that, ‘we didn’t do stuff really’. The assumption that political action takes place in the public sphere shaped women’s experiences of groups, such that Linda and others experienced insecurities about the validity of c-r as a political practice.

For Lee, activism predated women’s groups as there had been no women’s movement to speak of when she first became involved in politics: ‘I was very much

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<sup>47</sup> Julie portrayed herself as an unlikely candidate for c-r when she explained that she had seen herself as a non-political working-class housewife, but was persuaded to attend a c-r group meeting by middle-class, university educated feminist contacts she made at a safe-crossing protest.

like an activist, 'cause I was involved in CND and things like that, but feminism – or what was then called women's liberation – just really wasn't an issue.' Activism predated women's groups for Liz too. She explained that, although she had already campaigned around abortion/reproductive rights, she felt clear that she wanted her women's group to talk about themselves rather than doing 'big-style action'. Liz's account turns on its head the notion of c-r developing into action in that she constructs a trajectory from activism to c-r, seeing the latter as a more difficult and advanced phase in one's feminist career (one group member's wish to do activism was perceived by Liz as signifying this woman's uncomfortable feelings about applying feminism to her own life).

Finally, activism also took the form of helping other women to benefit from c-r, by facilitating the formation of new groups (e.g. Liz, Freda). In line with Dreifus' (1973) recommendation that groups utilise more experienced members, Freda led the group she formed in Sowerby Bridge for its first year, as the only member with prior experience of c-r.

**Example 4**                      **Kathleen, 1975-1977: Bradford Women's Liberation Group**

Kathleen joined this group in 1975. Meetings took place in women's houses, and were attended by around 6-10 women. They talked about women's health, bodies, balancing work life and family life, and psychiatry (criticising doctors' readiness to prescribe anti-depressants to women who were tired and/or dissatisfied). Compared with the mixed left groups Kathleen had previously been in, discussions in the women's group were very much focused around issues relevant to women's everyday experiences: 'Some of the things that the women's groups were saying were more important for sort of day-to-day life really; that was the difference.' Some members of this group, including Kathleen, spoke about abortion on a local radio station. There were links between the Bradford and Leeds Women's Liberation groups, with special events (e.g. including speakers) bringing women from both cities together. Kathleen suggested that divisions within the movement prompted Black women, and then lesbians, to break away and form separate groups. As the movement re-arranged itself, Bradford Women's Liberation Group stopped meeting. At this point, Kathleen became part of Women Against Racism and Fascism, which campaigned against the National Front, who were gaining popularity in Bradford.

***Homogeneity within women's groups***

Groups (particularly those formed by women from the same social circle) tended to be homogenous along the following axes:

- Age
- Sexual identity
- Class
- "Strand" of feminism
- Being/not being a mother
- Living in a particular locality
- Whether local or newcomers to an area
- Jobs/professional status/whether or not in paid work
- Relationship/marital status

Shared characteristics were widely held to be conducive to the making of connections between group members' experiences. Although trust and empathy could feasibly develop over time between women who were very different from one another, having common characteristics from the start could catalyse the development of immediate identifications, and aid the formation of deeper bonds.<sup>48</sup>

Sexual identity was a potential source of recognition between group members. Referring to one of several groups organised around shared sexual identity, Alison formed a lesbian feminist group in Leeds after becoming frustrated with being one of only a small number of lesbians in a mainly heterosexual group. Alison told of her experience of participating in discussions about issues that were of little relevance to her:

For the heterosexual women, there would be a lot of talk about contraception and men, and of course, I got pretty bored and impatient really with all that, coz I felt that I'd dismissed all that as a waste of time. I was obviously interested to hear their stories and I really liked these women, but I got a bit restless with it all and wanted a lesbian group... (Alison)

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<sup>48</sup> Brewer and Campbell (1976) note that trust occurs more easily between people who perceive mutual similarities.

Differences between women in this group limited Alison's sense of what she could gain from it. Helen told a similar story about being uninterested in helping heterosexual group members to work out ways of persuading their men to do the washing up. Although in some ways it appears there were few overlaps between the concerns of lesbians and heterosexual women at this time, both Alison and Helen and other lesbian interviewees talked about having meaningful friendships with heterosexual women. In order for the women's group process to be productive for them at the time, however, they needed to be among other lesbians.

The lesbian feminist group Alison went on to form was explicitly set up for discussing lesbians' experiences. Other groups however were homogenous without there being any overt statement about who could participate. These groups operated with an unspoken assumption that members all shared the same sexual identity, as Doreen illustrates: 'There wasn't a discussion about it. It wasn't, "This is going to be a lesbian-only group", it wasn't explicit in that kind of way, but it absolutely was a lesbian group.'

In addition to members' present identities, commonalities in their historical experiences could also be a source of shared knowledge. This is evidenced in Hazel's suggestion that members of her lesbian group had all experienced heterosexual relationships:

Everybody in that group had been out with men. There wasn't anyone in that group who'd never had sex with men, and, to my knowledge, none of them went back to men. But they all had reached the age of at least twenty five, or – no, thirty – before they had a lesbian experience. So we all understood that. (Hazel)

In this way, common past experiences provided a source of mutual understanding from which groups could launch their discussions.

Besides sexuality, educational background was another source of commonality highlighted by interviewees, including, for instance, having been to university, a grammar school (as opposed to a "secondary modern"), a religious school, or a girls' school (Judith, Linda, Freda, Hazel and Sara). Sara explained how discovering a

fellow group member's educational background triggered an initial interest in getting to know this woman better:

I identified right at the very first session that Bette was somebody I wanted to get to know better because we did the kind of round of introductions and she said she'd done a Literature degree at Leeds. Somebody talking about books, I immediately kind of want to go to! (Sara)

Sara's recollection of finding out Bette shared her interest in books is suggestive of how such commonalities could act as a catalyst for the group process.

However, there were also potentially problematic aspects of groups being comprised of women from similar backgrounds. Gillian alludes to the feminist community she was part of in Leeds resembling 'a sort of little ghettoised group' of 'nice, well-educated, middle-class, young women.' She described the intense and highly-charged interactions between these women who were all very similar. In contrast, Gillian recalled more positively a c-r group she was part of in Germany, which was more mixed in terms of age and class. As such, Gillian's comparison of her experiences in Germany and in Leeds suggests that too much homogeneity could be detrimental to group dynamics.

There were instances of groups being described as mixed, comprising, for instance, students, graduates and women who had not been to university (Julie, Joanna), and a mix of disabled and able-bodied women (Freda). Karen valued the diversity in her earlier women's group; she had more recently been part of a group made up of counsellors. The earlier group had included women from different walks of life ('There were lots of different people from different places – one a teacher, one a social worker, a chiropodist...'), which, Karen suggests, made the group process more stimulating. The valuing of diversity amongst group members resonates with Dreifus' (1973) suggestion that differences between group members could enrich the process of coming to appreciate what women's lives were like. Within women's groups, women from different backgrounds – including, as discussed above, both previously non-political women and women moving away from the chauvinistic male left – could each begin to 'see the other as a sister' (Sunshine and Gerard (1970:21).

The relative similarity of group members is apparent in how women made comparisons between women in their groups and other women they knew outside the groups. Liz's emergent feminist values made her very different from other women she knew, particularly women at work, who would encourage Liz to try to look pretty by wearing makeup. Sara's narrative also contributed to the portrayal of women's group members as very different from women encountered through other contexts. Sara told of how a woman in her group felt that mothers at the school gate would have been very surprised by her involvement in a women's group:

This woman said to her, 'It's really quite daring of us to join that group,' as if it would not be acceptable to the other mothers at the school gate... For at least one of those women in the group, it was a kind of scary, radical thing to do. (Sara)

As such, participating in a women's group was in tension with women's other social connections. That some women saw women's groups as out-of-the-ordinary at this time is suggestive of their positioning on the edge of, and in conflict with, mainstream society.

**Example 5**                    *Carol, 1974-1982-ongoing: Bradford-based women's group*

There were 6 women in this group including Carol, who joined the group around 1974/5. Numbers rose to eight (but not everyone attended every meeting). The group met once a month. Members were all heterosexual, but varied (and to some extent, divided) in terms of class. There were struggles within the group over what its purpose should be, with one member particularly wanting the group's discussions to focus more on books. The group continued for many years, and Carol specifically remembers still being in the group when she went through the menopause at the age of forty (in 1981). Rather than coming to an end, the group evolved into another group, involving Carol and two members of the original group, as well as a friend of Carol's who had not been in the original group. This group continues to meet, to chat, go walking together, and do other activities. They are all grandmothers now. Although they have this in common, members are differentiated from one another through experiences such as health problems and widowhood; these differences impact upon current group dynamics.

***Taking turns, followed by “picking up common threads”***

Interviewees described engaging in processes akin to ‘going around the room and rapping’ (Brownmiller 1999:21). Each group member would have a turn (lasting anywhere from five minutes to a whole evening) to speak without interruption. Although strategies were sometimes used to ensure each woman had an equal chance to speak, on the whole, the practice was organised informally. In Liz’s group, each woman was allocated one evening to tell her story. As the group evolved, it became less necessary to structure group time in this way because women present became able to intuitively recognise who needed to talk. Indeed several interviewees reported groups’ increasing ability over time to sense who had spoken and who needed more time; group members grew more aware of, and sensitive towards, one another’s needs.

One interviewee, Linda, told of a group in which each participant’s turn was precisely measured in order to give each woman the same amount of time (five minutes) in which to speak. This measure was intended to prevent some women from dominating meetings by claiming more time to tell their stories or to share their opinions. Linda emphasised that there were opportunities to bid for extra time beyond the allotted five minutes, also explaining that, in the early days, five minutes seemed like a long time to Linda, who was not used to talking about herself in this way:

It was fantastic to have, you know, five minutes undivided time and attention...you know, it was hard sometimes, you know, it was hard. I don’t think I’m making this up, I think it was hard at the beginning for me to sort of, you know, take that time, and I got self-conscious sometimes, but it didn’t take long before I got used to it. (Linda)

Linda’s narrative of finding the early meetings a challenge resonates with other interviewees’ experiences and also with Brownmiller’s (1999:79) account of c-r groups in the USA, in which women had to overcome ‘an inbred reluctance to speak confessionally, thinking it somewhat narcissistic’ (1999:79). Structuring meetings was a way of managing variations between group members’ attitudes and emotions (from shyness to what Doreen described as her ‘garrulousness’ in early c-r meetings),



such that individuals' enthusiasm or reluctance would not be overly disruptive to the dynamics of the group.

Interviewees agreed that it was important to avoid being too academic or critical of women's stories, in order that they could feel free to speak as openly as possible. However, once women had shared their own experiences, the focus shifted to *analysis*, which entailed wider discussion around the connections between women's lives. Going beyond what Sarachild (1973) referred to as pooling experience and getting stuff off their chests, groups cultivated new understandings of women's lives through their practice. As such, c-r was about transforming women's understandings of their lives, rather than merely serving to make women's lives seem more bearable.

Analysis in the form of the creation of new collective interpretations of how and why women have particular experiences in common followed on from the initial stage of 'going around the room' (Brownmiller 1999:21). Liz summarised the process through which connections would be made between the accounts of various group members: 'When people talked about their lives, we also picked up common threads, about what our life experience had been in, you know, a very male dominated society.' Extrapolating from individuals' stories to the bigger picture was a method of generating ideas that was seen by interviewees as a welcome alternative to the activities of mixed left organisations (such as spending meetings trawling through the long and inaccessible tracts of 'dead white men').

A key way in which groups facilitated the production of new analyses of women's lives was through their removal from the usual social contexts in which women's everyday lives took place. By encouraging distance from the roles women were expected to play, group contexts facilitated critique of these roles. Corresponding with original texts' suggestions that c-r groups presented women with new opportunities to venture out from under their habitual roles (*Ms. magazine* 1972), Hazel conceptualised the usefulness of c-r as a feminist practice in terms of the creation of spaces that were outside of mainstream society:

I think being with women and standing back from heterosexuality was an amazing – is an amazing – thing to do. Standing back from anything is an amazing thing to do, looking

from the outside at anything, you know. And slowly, looking at the outside of most of the building blocks of society – you know, the family, or the couple, or the religion...the further outside you stand, the stranger they seem, the more you see what purpose they serve. (Hazel)

As social institutions (Hazel's 'building blocks of society' – e.g. heterosexuality) came to appear strange, their hegemonic status was destabilized. The claim that there is no such space completely outside of power relations (Foucault 1980) problematises Hazel's analysis, but does not completely undermine it. It was useful for women at this time to *try* to step away from the relations in which they were usually immersed. Poststructuralist analyses of power relations do not invalidate the practice of creating spaces that differed from those in which individuals' everyday realities were ordinarily constructed. For women to step away from (rather than outside of) the social world in which they were habitually engrossed can be seen to constitute what McLaren (2002:162) describes as a 'feminist practice of the self'.

**Example 6**

**Helen, 1979-1981: Leeds-based c-r group**

There were four women in this group, all lesbians, except Helen, who was just beginning to explore lesbian feminism. They met in one another's homes and talked about their lives. Helen explained that, 'It was very much about linking ourselves and the way we were developing to the theory that was out there.' Helen recalled the women in her c-r group writing letters to their mothers as a group exercise (Helen did not actually send her letter, much to her relief some years later). The women in the group were very supportive of one another, but when Helen was going through a court case (as part of her struggle to train to be a joiner), she required extra support, which put a strain on group relations, and unfortunately brought an end to their meetings.

***What experiences were articulated/analysed in West Yorkshire women's groups?***

Meetings tended to be somewhat flexibly organised around topics. Within a particular group, fluctuations would occur in the extent to which they would set and stick to specific topics from one meeting to the next. Judith's account reflects suggestions made by several interviewees that topics provided a useful guide during early meetings:

Topics I think were there in the early stages because we all knew we wanted to come together, but we weren't quite sure what we were talking about, so if you had a topic, that focused you in. As the years went on and we were all used to each other, and people had come and gone and it had become this set number of people, sort of thing, we knew so much about each other, you didn't need a topic, because then you could just talk.  
(Judith)

Judith's group found that while it was useful to organise their early discussions around topics, these were less crucial as women eventually became familiar enough with one another to interact in a more spontaneous manner. This reflected a general tendency within the data for interviewees to report agendas becoming less prescriptive as group members cultivated more comfortable ways of being around one another.

The issue of femininity was commonly discussed in women's groups, focusing on how women were expected to look and behave. Their individual failures to live up to ideals were reinterpreted through analyses of the collective position of women in society. Resonating with early literature on c-r, feminine appearance was central to early experiences of consciousness-raising described by Sarachild of New York Radical Women:

...I just sat there listening to her describe all the false ways women have to act: playing dumb, always being agreeable, always being nice, not to mention what we had to do to our bodies, with the clothes and shoes we wore, the diets we had to go through, going blind not wearing glasses, all because men didn't find our real selves, our human freedom, our basic humanity "attractive." ...The whole group was moved as I was, and we decided on the spot that what we needed...was to 'raise our consciousness some more.' (Sarachild 1968)

Besides feminine appearance and behaviour, other topics varied from group to group, according to the particular characteristics and concerns of group members. In no way a comprehensive summary of all the feminist issues of the time, the topics described below are based on the sense that emerged from the data of which topics stood out as being particularly important in interviewees' memories of women's groups. The overarching theme of sexism was a topic on which there were seemingly infinite stories to be shared between women.

### *Women's health*

Women's health was high amongst topics for discussion in West Yorkshire women's groups. Discussions covered menstruation (which, Freda suggests, they were not taught about in school), contraception, abortion, and mental health. Women tackled issues relating to their (sometimes negative and self-critical) relationships with their bodies, as well as developing critiques of the pathologisation of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Women shared experiences of being prescribed pills by doctors to encourage them to feel more content with their lot, and critiqued psychiatric discourses, which characterised women's suffering in terms of mental health problems rather than attributing it to social factors.<sup>49</sup> Sometimes discussions led to activities such as vaginal/breast self-examination (e.g. Hazel told of women realising that none of their breasts matched media portrayals of women's bodies; Alison told of the liberating act of women taking their tops off, when they are usually encouraged to cover up). However, not all groups or individuals were comfortable with such an intimate and revealing practice. Women's shared experiences of interacting with medical professionals led to the development of feminist analyses of bodily surveillance by male doctors. Mainstream healthcare was critiqued in terms of its inappropriateness for women and its perpetuation of gender inequalities.

### *Motherhood*

Motherhood was a particularly prominent discussion topic within interviewees' memories of women's groups. An important facet of involvement in women's groups was the space within which women could consider whether or not they wanted to be mothers, and if they did, in what ways and under what conditions. Often relating critically to societal ideals about what made a good mother, women talked about their shared experiences in order to come up with new ways of talking about motherhood. As these discourses became normalised within the group, women were better able to challenge ideas about what was socially acceptable with regards to women as mothers, and as not mothers. The radical nature of this practice is clear when considered in relation to the oppressive social context in which women would

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<sup>49</sup> *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971) was a pivotal text in relation to women's health. For the UK edition, see Phillips and Rakusen (1978).

be shirking their responsibility to society or their family if they failed or refused to become mothers at all. Within the wider cultural context, motherhood was (and continues to be) seen as a compulsory component of women's lives and identities.<sup>50</sup> Recognising motherhood to be a potentially profound experience – both rewarding and intensely demanding – women I spoke to recalled being able to voice the positive and negative aspects of their experiences of motherhood in the supportive context of women's groups, which helped women to find ways of navigating dilemmas relating to finding ways of being, or not being, a mother that felt right for them.

Childrearing practices were also discussed, with some women's groups sharing ideas about how to bring children up in a non-sexist way.<sup>51</sup> However, this topic was not encouraged across all groups. Rather, some interviewees told of deliberate attempts made by women's groups to avoid reinforcing the social conditioning that led mothers to see themselves through their children. As such, some groups tried to steer clear of talking about children, in order to make the women themselves the central focus.

### *Mothers*

Issues relating to the intense mother-daughter bond were also tackled by women's groups. There was a strong sense that women wanted their own lives to be very different from those of their mothers. Helen's decision to train to become a joiner was partly a response to the frustration of witnessing her mother being incapable of even closing a window without the help of a man:

She was completely impractical, she couldn't mend anything. If anything went wrong during the day, she'd save it up for my dad to sort out when he came in and I just got very impatient with her and thought, 'I'm not going to be like that', and I sort of went to the opposite extreme. (Helen)

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<sup>50</sup> I recently attended a gender equality conference whose focus was on the challenges of combining work and motherhood, implying that these are two inevitable features of women's lives, without engaging in a critique of the ideologies which encourage women to think of themselves in these terms.

<sup>51</sup> See Statham (1986).

Interviewees told of working on their relationships with their mothers through group practices, as well as through individual therapy (e.g. Linda). Sandra's narrative of her mother's utter emotional dependence was somewhat typical of many interviewees' accounts of what they perceived to be their mothers' loneliness, mental health problems, alienation and general unhappiness. Although distancing themselves from their mothers might have been an inevitable part of growing up, the utilisation and creation of *feminist analyses* of their mothers' suffering was central to these women's approach to working out how they themselves might lead more fulfilling lives.<sup>52</sup>

### *Sexuality and intimate relationships*

Women's experiences of sex and intimacy commonly arose, although not all groups were able to speak openly or in detail about such matters. Interviewees conveyed a sense in which, within British society at the time, women were supposed to see sex as a duty performed within marriage. To talk about women's desires constituted a radical and taboo-breaking departure from the dominant cultural values of the time (see Friday 1973). By considering how the attitudes of those around them (in the form of families, sex education lessons at school, books, TV, etc.) had influenced their early sexual development, women developed understandings of the social construction of sexuality.

### *Being a wife*<sup>53</sup>

Most women's groups included some discussion of intimate relationships with men as part of the activities, and sixteen of the interviewees had been married at least once. Women who were involved with men would tell one another about problems within these relationships, including inequalities in the domestic sphere and the emotional struggles of relating across the gender divide. Some women who were not in relationships grappled with their conflicting desires for security/stability and independence, as well as social sanctions on unmarried women. Although feminists were generally suspicious of the idea of marriage as the most fulfilling experience of

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of issues relating to the mother-daughter relationship, see Friday (1977).

<sup>53</sup> The YBA Wife (Why be a Wife?) campaign in Bradford was one example of the explicit questioning of the institution of marriage.

a woman's life, some women looked to alternative definitions of marriage, including Tess who entered into an open marriage. Women discussed whether and why they wished to get married, how they imagined doing so would change their lives/relationships, what kind of marriages they hoped to avoid, how they might hold onto themselves within marriage (e.g. by keeping their own name), and how they might strive for equality with their husbands. Some women found husbands who they deemed to share their politics and values (e.g. Gillian), while others told of facing difficulties within their marriages due to their husbands' differing beliefs and expectations. Freda found she was able to share feminism with her husband to a limited extent (see Chapter 7).

### *Coming out of relationships with men*

Several women chose to leave male partners, or to leave behind heterosexuality altogether, with the support of their c-r groups. Feminism facilitated women's independence from men in the context of a society in which it was often made difficult for women to escape from dissatisfying relationships. Group support helped women deal with relationships ending, and to make – and adjust to – changes in their lives.

### *Lesbianism*

As they talked with one another about their sexuality, some women underwent changes in how they saw themselves, for instance, questioning their heterosexuality, and maybe coming to identify as lesbians. Some women were already beginning to see themselves as lesbians when they came to c-r groups (e.g. Helen, Doreen, Alison, Hazel) and wished to be in groups with other women who were similarly identified in order that they might develop new understandings of lesbian relationships and identities (as opposed to focusing on heterosexual women's concerns). Women's groups tended to have some awareness of theories of political lesbianism and lesbian feminism, which proposed that lesbianism could be chosen as a feminist alternative to heterosexuality (see Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1979). However groups varied in terms of the amount of detail and depth they went into with regards to these ideas. For resolutely heterosexual women's groups, there seemed little point in discussing such alternatives.

*Alternatives to the nuclear family*

Feminists of the 1970s 'were almost universally critical not only of marriage itself, but also of monogamy' (Jackson and Scott 2004:151). Within left-wing political communities more widely, attempts were made to create alternative relationships structures, as the nuclear family was seen as restrictive, and as bolstering capitalism/patriarchy.<sup>54</sup> Debates around monogamy and non-monogamy were rife within feminist collective contexts, including West Yorkshire women's groups.

*Their lives as women and girls: recent interactions and the distant past*

Group members' everyday social encounters were central to c-r group discussions, as were their childhood experiences. There was a certain amount of excitement about conveying to the group events which had occurred since the last meeting, and these accounts were seen to provide valuable material for developing new insights into gender relations. Women in c-r groups also looked further back into their lives, sharing stories of what it was like to grow up as a girl. Relationships with parents and siblings, as well as experiences of school, provided ample material for analysing how girl children (and adult women) are expected to be. Groups' analyses often drew on sociological and psychological theories (for instance gender role socialisation theory). Interestingly, interviewees suggested many of the women in their groups had attended girls' schools, which meant they had experiences of their schooldays in common.

*Feminism and feminists across time and space*

Unsurprisingly, feminism and feminists were discussed in women's groups, including women's issues and feminists of the past (e.g. suffragettes). It is important for individuals involved in social movements to find ways of imagining a past for themselves (see Roseneil 2000a:13-14). Through discussing traditions of women's activism and rebellion, women constructed a background for their activities and ideas. Their shared feminist history enabled them to develop a sense of collective identity not only with each other, but also with other feminists across time and space.

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<sup>54</sup> For examples of accounts of such attempts see Red Collective (1973) and Dunn (1977).



Women's groups also discussed other feminists they knew, comparing how they were going about their personal/political lives. They discussed what it meant to be a feminist and the various strands of feminism (e.g. liberal, radical, socialist, lesbian, etc.). Separatism was debated as a feminist strategy, with challenging questions arising for some women about the implications of separatism for their relationships with fathers, brothers, sons, and so on. Those involved in the movement in urban contexts were more likely to have encountered separatism than those involved in groups in smaller towns and rural areas.<sup>55</sup>

### *Work*

Women's experiences in employment were commonly talked about, with stories shared of overt discrimination and implicit sexism within the workplace. Hazel and Liz are examples of interviewees who offered narratives of sexual objectification and harassment in educational and employment contexts (for further discussion, see Cameron 1982[1981]), with several others telling of being in groups that explored ways of dealing with sexist workplace cultures.

### *Literature*

Several groups discussed the feminist books they were reading, with group members recommending particular authors or passing books between each other. Discussion topics included, for instance, the portrayal of female characters within works of fiction. The following seemed to be popular books/authors among West Yorkshire women's groups:

- Erica Jong's (1973) *Fear of Flying*
- Marilyn French's (1977) *The Women's Room*
- Joan Barfoot's (1980) *Gaining Ground*
- Marge Piercy
- Doris Lessing
- Margaret Atwood

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<sup>55</sup> It is worth noting that distinctions between urban and rural life in West Yorkshire are not always clear. Hebden Bridge, for instance, is described by Rachel as being like a city (in terms of the types of people that live there), but in a countryside location. Its somewhat incongruous character has led to Hebden Bridge being described as "rurban" (Smith 1998).

***Therapy, memory, and the politics (and limitations) of truth-telling***

Having stated that women's relationships with themselves were an important focus within women's groups, it is pertinent to consider how, in addition to c-r, counselling and therapy were also expanding at this time. This contributed to the emergence of new discourses for reflecting on the self and for interrogating the meaning of personal experiences. Liz alluded to the way in which discourses for talking publicly about "personal" experiences were very new in the early days of her women's group:

I was thinking as well, yesterday, thinking about you coming. I was thinking, you know, we're talking like early eighties, pre-the world of counselling, you know, and stuff, and probably at a point where people didn't analyse and think about why they were doing what they were doing. I mean it's so commonplace now, isn't it? It's like a way of life and you go, 'oh, she's this because of that', and then, I don't think people just did it as much; they just sort of got on with it. So all the stuff we did and talked about was much more – what's the word – exciting, I suppose, because we'd never done it before. (Liz)

Taking account of social change since the time of her involvement in women's groups, Liz sets her story in its historical context by explaining that, prior to this shift, of which c-r was part, people 'just sort of got on with it'. Liz's characterisation of the pre-counselling cultural milieu resonates with Hazel's depiction of Yorkshire identity as being about survival rather than reflection. For Hazel, avoidance of the contemplative self was particular to Yorkshire.

Therapeutic discourses (which Liz referred to as 'therapy-speak') were relatively new at this time, and were received with a mixture of enthusiasm and criticism in various quarters of the women's movement. The question of the relationship between therapy and feminism was widely debated, including by Hazel, who shared with me a piece she wrote around 1980 addressing the question, 'Is therapy a useful tool for feminists or an apolitical cop out?' Hazel explained that she wrote this when she became involved with Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, who refused to publish the paper because, Hazel suggested, they despised therapy. Hazel expressed feminists' condemnation of therapy with reference to the idea of the therapist as

'The-Rapist'. Responding, in writing, to some feminists' anti-therapy position, Hazel argued:

Therapy has been criticised as not contributing to the real struggle but this contradicts one of the tenets of the W.L.M. namely the personal is political. There seems to be a fear that when women attend therapy groups to change themselves they will automatically make changes in the direction of compromise and passivity... However for many women the changes are in the direction of self-assertion, showing anger, feeling their strength, liking themselves, becoming aware of their oppression and changing their lives. It may be unrealistic to believe that individual women changing their lives will automatically lead to the revolution but it is equally unrealistic to believe that working out a political theory of women's oppression will automatically lead to the revolution. (Hazel)

For Hazel, therapy was no less a political practice than theory-production. Although Hazel argues that feminists who dismiss therapy deny the connectedness of the personal and the political, not all feminist critics of therapy were necessarily against recognising the personal as political; rather, they worried that therapy encouraged adjustment to the norm, as well as obscuring the political dimensions of personal suffering, which required a feminist political response rather than individual solutions. Women's groups were part of a proliferation of discourses for talking about experience. However, this did not necessarily match up with feminists' intentions and there were disagreements between feminists over how best to recognise and articulate the political significance of women's problems.

The increase in discourses for discussing women's lives, including their experiences of sexual violence does not in itself constitute an intended *political* effect of the women's movement. Following Armstrong (1990), it can be argued that an increase in the prevalence of sexual violence survivors' accounts within public culture does not in itself subvert or undermine patriarchal power relations.

There were some West Yorkshire feminists who refused to see the talking-based activities that took place in consciousness-raising groups as political. However, their voices are absent from this thesis. The women I interviewed gave generally positive appraisals of consciousness-raising, but knew of other feminists (e.g. Halifax Women's Action Group), who refused to see c-r as anything more than a waste of

time. Further research is needed to explore this other side of the story. Some West Yorkshire feminists clung to traditional notions of what constituted properly political activity, despite the argument that the personal is political. This corresponds with the suggestion in the literature that some women's groups did not talk about their own experiences through fear that they weren't being 'political' (Freeman 1998).

While it became increasingly possible for women to talk about their experiences in women's groups, there were still silences around some issues. Discourses that came into being through feminist consciousness-raising opened up new ways of constructing reality, but like all discourses, they also set limits on what could be talked about. One issue that did not seem to be widely talked about in the women's groups I encountered was childhood sexual abuse. Liz and Julie told stories about having first talked about such experiences in other contexts, some years after their involvement in women's groups.

Julie had found her c-r group intimidating due to the presence of women who were better educated and of a higher social class than her. Having not felt comfortable opening up in this context, it was not until later than she began to talk to other women about the abuse. It was in a feminist collective context – but not a c-r group – that Julie began to tell other women about her experience:

And then I went to work at the refuge and they were talking about it, it did my head in, and I says to her, 'I can't stand it, they keep talking about it!', and then once I couldn't stand it anymore so as they were talking, I shot out, I thought, 'I can't listen!', and I was in the kitchen with my fingers in my ears and one of my co-workers, who was a really nice woman, she used to live round here, came and she says, 'What's up?', I says, 'That happened to me,' I said, 'I can't listen to them anymore.' And we talked about it and my mate, Maureen, she says, if you can't tell them at the refuge, where can you tell them? Coz we're all feminists, we're all fighting the same cause. So I did – not as a group – one at a time. (Julie)

Having begun to talk to other women about her experience, Julie went on to gain support from a therapist. She also formed a group, Leeds Incest Survivors Action (LISA), which spoke out about the sexual abuse of girls.

Another interviewee, Liz, also did not talk about her experience of childhood sexual abuse in her women's group, but spoke instead to a counsellor some years later. Liz told of her experiences of sexual abuse being forgotten, and subsequently remembered (after her parents' deaths). In the account she gave of coming to remember these experiences, Liz conveys the idea that the ability to recall childhood sexual abuse is contingent upon the processes through which these memories come into an individual's consciousness in connection with other life events and experiences:

In the late 1980s it must've been, I was watching this television programme one night, it was over Christmas, and there was a – it was about this woman who – middle-class, Irish woman – who'd been sexually abused as a child and she came from – and it was going back to her home where it had happened and – it must've been vacant or something – and she went into the garden and she started talking about it. And she said how she hadn't remembered any of it until after both her parents had died, and her father had died just a couple of years before. Well my mum died in 1970... I told you; my dad died in 1984, and when I watched this television programme about this woman, I just sat and cried and cried and cried. And I didn't know why I cried, I just thought coz it was so awful, and then I went to bed, like you do. And then I started to remember stuff about my childhood, and that's what had happened to me, and that was the big change in kind of all that coming back.

...

Well I think that the – possibly the significant thing was that – I mean, it wasn't my father who was the abuser at all. I think I couldn't – I think I couldn't – I had to shut it out – I couldn't bear to remember it until there was space in my life when I could do it, and I also think I couldn't have remembered it when my father was still alive, because I just think my father would've just been – well, he was an old man and he would've just been completely devastated. I don't see how you'd – and I don't see...I mean, my father was only seventy when he died, which now I realise isn't that old, but if I told him something like that, what could – he would've just been so upset – he would've been so guilty, he would've felt guilty, he would've felt responsible, he would've felt he'd let me down, I don't see how he could have come to terms with something like that. And so, if I'd have remembered it when he was still alive, it would've been dreadful, wouldn't it? And so I think that's why I didn't. I assume that memories only come back to you when you can cope with them, coz I think the mind – I'm going to shut the window, it's a bit chilly isn't it now – I think the mind is quite clever, I think we – I sort of think we look after ourselves without knowing that we're looking after ourselves. So we don't allow – something in there doesn't allow us to remember stuff that's going to tear our world apart, or maybe it does for some people and that's why some people just fall apart.

But I think for most of us, the memory – you know, our minds are quite clever at looking after us. That's my theory anyway.  
(Liz)

Liz's theory about the mind cleverly protecting us is a way of understanding that traumatic experiences are not always readily accessible for conscious recall, even in the supportive honesty-promoting context of a c-r group.

Neither Julie nor Liz implied that their silence on these particular experiences meant that their groups had disappointed them in any way. It was not that groups failed women by not enabling them to talk about *everything*, rather, in c-r groups, as in any socially-, culturally- and historically-bound context, there were only a limited range of available discourses for constructing experience. Experience is not always available for the conscious mind to access and articulate, particularly traumatic experiences (see Brewin 2007). Discourse limits what can be talked about in any given social situation, through its effects on the structure and content of memory (Skowronski and Walker 2004). Although neither Liz nor Julie talked about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse within their women's groups, that is not to say that the women's groups processes did not contribute to changes women were undergoing in ways that may have led to them speaking about these experiences eventually (even if not at the time). Other interviewees (e.g. Hazel, Linda) noted that the processes they went through in women's groups and in therapy were intertwined to the extent that it was difficult to separate them out in their memories.

The process Liz describes of being looked after by her clever mind is that of repression, conceptualised as 'an active protective mechanism that operates to shield one from awareness of traumatic events' (Joslyn et al 1997:705). While original documents implied that c-r groups would render women able to speak honestly about their lives for the first time, this relied on the idea of experience as ever-present inside the internal space of the mind, lying in wait for the right conditions to allow expression through language. While consciousness-raising was useful for talking about recent, everyday or memorable experiences of oppression, it was of

limited use as a method for talking about experiences buried under layers of trauma.<sup>56</sup>

Going on to say that her life had changed more over the last fifteen years than it had done through participating in the women's group, Liz's narrative highlights the limited potential for c-r groups to enable women to talk about traumatic experiences from the distant past, if other aspects of their life circumstances (e.g. in Liz's case, parents still being alive) prevented these memories from being available for recall.

The issue of childhood sexual abuse was not raised in the women's groups I focused on, although it was raised in other feminist collective contexts, and in therapeutic contexts.<sup>57</sup> Although c-r provoked discussion around experiences that had not previously been talked about, some matters still could not be discussed, even in spaces that were specifically geared towards encouraging women to open up about deeply personal experiences. Despite the emergence of new discourses within women's groups, and despite the breaking of some silences, other silences remained, and some experiences continued to be unspeakable.

### *Conclusion and further comments*

I have summarised some of my findings relating to how c-r was practised within West Yorkshire women's groups. Women entered West Yorkshire women's groups through friends, as well as through involvement in mixed-gender political organisations. At the moment of their initial entry into women's groups, most of the women I interviewed were neither total strangers to politics, nor bored housewives stuck at home all day. Most had at least some experience of political or counter-cultural contexts before women's groups. Women who came to c-r through involvement in mixed left political contexts might be seen to have been involved in a first wave of c-r groups in the UK.

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<sup>56</sup> The notion of memories of childhood sexual abuse being repressed prompted controversial debates around "False Memory Syndrome" (see Freyd 1998). The 1990s backlash against women speaking out about childhood sexual abuse is beyond the scope of this thesis (Armstrong 1994; Enns 1996; Bell-Gadsby and Siegenberg 1996).

<sup>57</sup> For documentary evidence relating to discussions of experiences of childhood sexual abuse within a West Yorkshire women's group, see Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1985).

I have argued that adult education provided an important route into consciousness-raising for some women. Being in a public space allowed women to get to know one another before they progressed to meeting in a domestic context. As radical ways of relating were being developed within c-r groups, it was important for women to have the chance to make a more gradual transition into the practice of connecting with women in the intimate spaces of each other's homes. The need for trust between group members was exacerbated by the fact that, at this time, it was less common for women to invite one another into their homes. Women more usually came into contact with other women when accompanying male partners rather than as friends in their own right (this theme will be taken up again in Chapter 8).

Due to the basis of consciousness-raising in the sharing of experience, having similar backgrounds was considered conducive to group practices on the one hand, but on the other hand, diversity amongst group members served to make the process more interesting. Several interviewees constructed a preference for being in groups with women who shared their sexual identity. Although there was some evidence of groups being strictly lesbian-only, homogeneity was more often implicit than intentional.

Confirming some of the ideas mentioned in the original documents on c-r discussed in Chapter 2, interviewees told of developing analyses of their experiences in women's groups. I have shown that the group practice was more than introspection; it involved women connecting their own lives to the collective position of women in society. Analyses developed in c-r groups led women to reinterpret their experiences. However, there were limits to the taboos that were broken in these women's groups, and to the issues that could be raised about the shared experiences of women in patriarchal society. There were also pressures on women to perform particular versions of themselves in women's groups. Informal hierarchies/covert power relations tended to emerge despite the no-leadership rule generally being taken up on a surface level by the groups.

The radical significance of these women's group practices relates to the historical moment and geographical location in which they occurred – before therapy and counselling were commonly practised, and in a cultural context which discouraged



reflection. The specific setting of West Yorkshire produced particular challenges to women's groups. As a cultural context in which being straightforward was valued above being reflective, to fail to be so was to be a 'ponce' (i.e. not appropriately masculine). As a political practice that was susceptible to being devalued as 'poncing about', implicit in the derision of consciousness-raising was a critique of its failure to conform to conventional/masculine/confrontational modes of political action. Although I highlighted that the women I interviewed did sometimes engage in activism in addition to doing c-r, the world beyond the group was not the locus of the most significant changes effected by their group practices. The next two chapters focus on the personal-political transformations effected in women's groups in terms of their impact on women's relationships with ideas (Chapter 7) and each other (Chapter 8).

## **Chapter Seven: Women and Ideas: Theorising as a Feminist Practice**

Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of 'ideas', and the construction of Weltanschauungen.

(Berger and Luckmann 1966:27)

Women's groups provided opportunities traditionally denied to women. As noted by Allen (1970), women had generally been precluded from engaging in theorising:

As women we exist predominantly in the realm of subjectivity; we perform functions but seldom get on top of a situation to understand how something works and why (Allen 1970:276).

Original proponents of c-r noted that women had generally been discouraged from seeing themselves as smart. Sarachild (1968) summarises discussions around the subject of women's intelligence within early c-r sessions in New York:

We know from our own experience that women play dumb for men because, if we're too smart, men won't like us. I know, because I've done it. We've all done it. Therefore, we can simply deduce that women are smarter than men are aware of, and that there are a lot of women around who are a lot smarter than they look and smarter than anybody but themselves and maybe a few of their friends know (Sarachild 1968).

It was suggested that a women's group would be a place where, for the first time, a woman would be 'allowed to function intellectually as a thinker rather than as a sex object, servant, wife, or mother' (Allen: 1970:277). Prior to this, ordinary women had been effectively debarred 'from full and equal participation in intellectual life' (Cameron 1982:258).

The processes through which women were not permitted to see themselves as thinkers were observed within the women's movement from the 1970s onwards. Women's lack of confidence at discussing political ideas (e.g. Sunshine and Gerard 1970) and the tendency for them to be treated as sexual objects in educational contexts (Cameron 1982) were addressed through c-r. Sexual harassment was identified as a key way in which women were trained to see themselves as

decorative objects rather than thinkers, and to see their appearance as more important than their intellectual development. Presenting a political analysis of her experience of having had a sexual relationship with her university tutor, Cameron (1982:258) described being referred to as part of a class of 'clever young men and beautiful young ladies.' Subtle restrictions on women's engagements with ideas were, for the first time, being recognised as *a political issue* within the women's movement. As women began to recognise the ways in which their relationships with themselves and ideas were shaped within patriarchal educational contexts, they also began to overturn their sexist conditioning and to develop a sense of their entitlement to participate in intellectual life. However, since this time, as Stanley and Wise (2000:266) have argued, theorising 'has increasingly become the preserve of specialist groupings of academics rather than of "feminists in general".' In this chapter, I look at the theorising practices of 'feminists in general', as they took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

As a movement, feminism is very much concerned with the position of women in relation to the realm of knowledge/ideas. Feminist consciousness, as described by Michèle Le Doeuff (1989:28-9), entails 'the simple knowledge that when one is a woman...the reality of social relations is never what you might think, it is that which we still need to analyse.' From this perspective, analysis (of social relations) is a practice that is inherent in being a feminist. As I see it, the activity of engaging in analysis of the social world occurs as distinct from women being the passive recipients of knowledge *about* them; it is a more *active* relationship with the practice of theorising. Theorising as it is discussed in this chapter is inspired by Le Doeuff's notion of the practices through which women scrutinize beliefs as objects and refuse to 'submit to what social life erects as doctrine' (1989:29).

It is important here to acknowledge the distinction between theory and theorising. For Ahmed (2000), the process of theorising does not necessarily result in an object, 'theory'. Discussions that took place within feminist political contexts involved theorising as a feminist practice, but did not necessitate the production of written theory. The process of theorising is important for looking at how women's groups created spaces for the development of ideas. Widening what counts as feminist theorising opens up for recognition the way in which theory is produced outside of

the academy (Ahmed 2000:99). As I see it, groups of women meeting in one another's domestic spaces to talk about their lives existed outside the spaces in which theory is expected to be present.

Considering social movements in terms of cognitive praxis, Eyerman and Jamison (1991:98) concur that intellectual activity should be conceived of as 'process rather than product.' The concept of cognitive praxis allows for recognition of theorising as it is practised outside of academic institutions, as part of the everyday practices of ordinary (i.e. not specialist intellectual) social movement actors. Eyerman and Jamison (1991:3) emphasise 'the creative role of consciousness and cognition in *all human action*, individual and collective' (my emphasis). Rather than being restricted to formally-sanctioned academic contexts, theorising, in its widest sense, featured among the everyday practices of West Yorkshire feminists. Theorising as it occurred in women's groups took a form akin to what Eyerman and Jamison (1991:49) refer to as 'the broader cognitive praxis that informs all social activity.'

As the end product of feminist theorising, Feminist Theory has come to mean something quite different from the ideas that were being generated and utilised amongst women's groups of the 1970s and '80s. It has been argued that feminist Theory with a capital T has become divorced from practice (Stacey 1997; Stanley and Wise 2000). At various points in the chapter, I refer to Theory with a capital T as a way of distinguishing between the intellectual products of published feminist theorists and the ideas and analyses that were being created and circulated informally amongst feminist groups and networks of the 1970s and '80s.

The role of consciousness-raising in the production of new knowledge in the early phases of the women's liberation movement has been documented (Stoecker 1989; Bryson 1992). However, the women I interviewed did not tend to see themselves as Theory producers; rather, they came into contact with feminist ideas that were already out there. As outlined in Chapter 6, group participants did not just *share* their experiences, they also *analysed* them. Existing Theory was crucial to how they went about this analysis. While West Yorkshire women's group participants encountered ideas that were new to them, they did not tend to see themselves as creating innovative feminist knowledge that would then feed out into the rest of the

movement (with the exception of Lee – see Chapter 6). The distinction between Theory and theorising is therefore useful for exploring their stories. For, whilst these women did not produce Theory, they did recognise that interactions with feminist ideas in their written form had significant effects on their lives. This chapter focuses on feminist theorising rather than the role of groups in the construction of published works of feminist Theory. By exploring the theorising practices of women's groups, I critique the 'linear progress narrative' identified by Stacey (1997:63), in which Theory with a capital T is thought to have 'rescued feminism from its early naivety.' Although the relationship between feminist Theory and practice<sup>58</sup> has been seen as increasingly complicated (Stanley and Wise 2000), interviewees' accounts suggest that the difficult relationship between Theory and women's lives was as much a feature of women's experiences of feminist contexts of the 1970s and 1980s as it is a contemporary concern.

I see interactions with feminist ideas as leading to useful new analyses of experiences, a position which resonates with Ermarth's (2000:115) definition of theory as 'instrumental thought'. Instrumental thought resonates with the concept of praxis, defined by Stanley (1990:12) as useful thought: 'understand the world and then change it.' As such, the terms *theory* and *praxis* are both used to refer to instrumental thought, or thought that influences practice.

In this chapter, I look at how women became theorists within women's groups, learning to engage actively and critically with ideas they encountered, as well as exploring some of the ways in which interviewees construct problematic relationships between Theory and women's lives. The second half of the chapter focuses on three specific cases of feminist theorising, relating to: (i) theorising femininity as a political rather than merely a personal issue (Linda), theorising that there is more to life than being a housewife/mother (Judith), and (iii) theorising lesbianism as a chosen feminist practice (Helen).

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<sup>58</sup> Theory and practice are terms without straightforward meaning, provoking attempts to circumvent the complexities of delineating between them. Ahmed (2000) has suggested discussing "writing" and "action" instead of theory and practice. However, I see this as precluding theorising from being seen as occurring through oral dialogue as well as in written form.

*Ideas and identity*

Of relevance to considering feminism as a particular orientation towards/within the realm of ideas (Le Doeuff 1989) are feminist collective identities, which I see as based on shared relationships to particular sets of ideas. For example, being a socialist feminist involves identifying with other socialist feminists through a collectively defined positive orientation towards the *ideas* of socialist feminism. Consciousness-raising produced feminist collective identities as women came to see themselves as part of an oppressed group. However, rather than one shared feminist identity across the whole of the women's movement, women in particular feminist contexts had their own ideas about who they were, what they shared in common within the group, and how they were similar to/different from other feminists.

Articulating a collective identity entails making a statement about the group. Characteristics shared amongst group members (such as all being the same age, mothers, professionals, etc.) were invoked within these definitions, as was the group's position on feminist ideas and/or practices (e.g. a collective rejection or embracing of lesbian feminism). Helen said of her group, 'certainly, none of us would have called ourselves socialist feminists.' Dis-identification (Dean 2008) is evident in this statement in that, although Helen could not say for sure how the group did define themselves, she was sure that they all saw themselves as different from socialist feminists. It was through positioning themselves at some distance from socialist feminist ideas that members of Helen's group created a sense of solidarity with one another.

One approach to articulating their group's position in relation to other feminists involved interviewees portraying a sense of how radical their ideas were compared with other groups they knew of. The hierarchy of radicalness was bound up with groups' collective sexual identity, as Joanna's account hints towards:

We thought we were fairly – our ideas were fairly radical, and then we'd go to...a women's centre or somewhere, something like that, and we'd find that we weren't really as radical as we thought we were, you know, we weren't sort of the "bra-burning brigade". And so we felt that maybe we seemed a bit pathetic to some of the more hard-line people, and I expect we did. But, yeah, we used to talk about that... How did it make us

feel when we met women who very much more radical lesbian feminist, for instance? Which we – none of us were. (Joanna)

The above quotation illustrates how interviewees constructed the collective identities of their groups through actively dis-identifying from particular strands of feminism. Dean (2008:4) defines dis-identification – or counter-identification – as ‘an *active* non-identification...such that there is an affective investment in an antagonistic relation to a particular subject position or group’. Joanna pointed out that her group was neither the ‘bra-burning brigade’, nor radical lesbian feminists. In another act of dis-identification, Judith emphasised that the women in her group did *not* use the term ‘sisters’ to refer to one another, a term which she associated with lesbian feminists. Defining themselves on the basis of differences between them, feminists “other” one another, so that being a feminist is about being a particular kind of feminist, in contrast to other (sometimes disparaged) types of feminists.

In addition to sexuality and the radicalness of their ideas, groups also differentiated themselves from one another on the basis of their stance on particular theoretical questions (such as whether or not therapy could be a political tool), and also in terms of the extent to which they perceived themselves to be as intellectually-oriented as other groups.

### ***Ambivalence around theorising***

‘Theorising is something that men do – so they say’ (Spender 1983a:1). Within women’s groups of the 1970s and 1980s, theorising became something women could (be said to) do, however not without ambivalence. Although interviewees reported developing more active ways of interacting with theoretical ideas in women’s groups, some also problematised ‘Theory’ and collectively dis-identified from ‘Theorists’.

Ambivalence is present in data on women’s relationships with ideas in that interviewees were simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Theory. In their work on how women’s intellectual development occurs in parallel with the development of a positive self-concept, Belenky et al (1986) note that ambivalence is only possible at advanced stages in the development of women’s relationships with ideas: those who see knowledge as received from authorities are incapable of being

'attracted and repelled by the same object' (Belenky et al 1986:39). As such, ambivalence is suggestive of more developed epistemological positions, and might be seen to reflect an active way of relating to ideas (as opposed to a belief in knowledge as passively received from above).

C-r groups opened up to a broader range of women the possibility of becoming active participants in the project of trying to understand the world. This enabled women to develop different and valuable ways of relating to the world and of thinking about their place within it while also allowing them to talk about ideas that were too radical to mention in other contexts, thus increasing their confidence in their capacity to be intellectual.

As contexts for interacting with ideas and theorising from one another's experiences, women's groups differed from mixed political contexts. In groups such as the IMG, there was an emphasis on group members needing to be familiar with important political writings in order to participate. In women's groups, on the other hand, ideas were discussed that were more relevant to day-to-day life (e.g. see Kathleen, discussed in Chapter 6). For several interviewees (including Kathleen, Freda and Sandra), relationships with ideas as they experienced them in women's groups were very much in contrast to their earlier encounters with the theorising practices of mixed leftist groups.

The intellectual activities that occurred in women's groups were an important source of stimulation for interviewees such as Carol and Sara, who spent most of their time looking after children rather than engaging in thought-provoking conversation with other adults. Sara explained that her women's group provided a context within which women who were not in paid work could 'think intellectually'. For Carol too, intellectual activity stood out as being particularly important in her account of what it meant to her to be a feminist. Carol talked about women's groups as a vital alternative to the workplace for women who were having time out of paid work to care for children: 'Of course having an intellectual activity when you're at home with children was really important, yeah; it kept my brain going.' Carol reiterated this point during the second interview:



I joined the women's group after I'd had – when my children were small, and so I was not working then, so, you know, I had no intellectual stimulus really, and going to the women's group really kept me going. (Carol)

Women told of having encountered ideas through women's groups that they would not otherwise have come across. For instance, Liz recalled first finding out about the idea of lesbianism as a chosen feminist practice and identity, rather than an intrinsic predisposition. The women in her Wakefield group were all heterosexual, but Liz found out about political lesbianism through her links with Leeds feminists:

We talked about sexuality and whether we – why we were heterosexual, you know, like, 'Ooh, hang I've on never thought about that before', the idea of you being socialised into being heterosexual... And, of course, a couple of the radical feminists that I got to know in Leeds had become lesbians, and they said they'd become lesbians in a political way and it was politically driven, it wasn't that they'd particularly felt in the first place that they were attracted to women, it was just like their politics led them to that point, which I thought was quite interesting...because I'd kind of always assumed that women who were lesbians were lesbians because that's how they felt. (Liz)

The radicalism of some of the ideas that were discussed within these group contexts is clear from the way in which interviewees explained difficulties they faced in discussing these ideas with people outside of the groups. For instance, Freda suggested she could discuss feminist ideas to only a limited extent with her husband:

Anna: Did you share ideas with him, that you'd discussed in the group?

Freda: Yeah, quite a lot. We talked a lot about these things anyway. I mean, he's a – he does Sociology and Psychology, that's his subject, so he's always been interested in all those issues, as well. But there's a limit to what you can talk about, I suppose. And he used to get irritated if I said too much about it, if I went on about it. I had strong ideas of my own really.

Anna: Did you find it easier to share your stronger ideas with other women?

Freda: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

The potential for ideas discussed within women's groups to cause irritation in other social contexts, including within families and homes of interviewees, is suggestive of the importance of the group space in providing a unique context for considering radical feminist thought.

Women's groups were intellectually stimulating contexts. Some participants had not been in contexts in which ideas were discussed since they were in compulsory education as children, but several women chose to return to formal education after becoming confident thinkers through participating in women's groups. Half of the women in my sample told of re-entering education, some to enhance their professional/vocational qualifications, some to take women's studies courses (e.g. Rachel and Freda), and others to take courses in academic subjects that were related to topics they had discussed in women's groups. Sandra went to university to study history, and found that her degree added to knowledge she developed through her involvement in earlier political contexts.

In the supportive context of women's groups, women developed new confidence in their relationships with ideas that they could then carry forward into their lives beyond the group. Joanna's story of her transition from comprehensive school 'thicky' to high-achieving university student exemplifies this intellectual confidence-boosting dimension of the c-r group process:

We were a very mixed group; there were women who'd...been to university – I hadn't, I mean, I'd gone to secondary modern, I considered myself to be a 'thicky'. But actually, I realised quite quickly that I was as bright as everybody else and it wasn't like that really – it was just the way that your life had gone that dictated what you did – and just got huge reassurance about myself and my place in the world... That group was...very much about me feeling that I was good enough...I realised, you know, quite quickly, that I was as clever as anybody else, you know, it wasn't like I'd seen it, it wasn't like I'd imagined it – that it was 'them' and 'us' and, you know, we'd be the sort of Bloggs' and they were the intellectuals. It wasn't like that.  
(Joanna)

Joanna suggests that the dichotomy between ordinary women and intellectuals was broken down through women's group practices. However, as I shall go on to consider, other interviewees distinguished between women like themselves and the women who produced Theory. Joanna went on to tell of her surprise when she realised she was doing well in her university course:

I got really good marks. I was staggered...the end of my first year of my degree my tutor said, 'well, if you go on like this you're going to be in danger of getting a first!' I was in shock.  
(Joanna)

In the women's group, Joanna learned that she could think as well as other women whom she had assumed would be cleverer than her. Joanna's narrative suggests that she would not have been able to go on to take a university degree in Counselling had she not had her low opinion of her academic ability challenged within the women's group.

As women-only spaces, these groups represented unique contexts within individuals' intellectual biographies; they differed from school, university, the workplace, the home, and mixed political contexts. The positive relationships between women and ideas that occurred in these contexts provided group members with a different way of being in the world, in contrast to caring for children (Sara and Carol), encouraged dialogue around ideas too radical to contemplate in other collective contexts (Freda), and increased women's confidence in their capacity to be intellectual (Joanna). However, a sense also emerged from the data of the way in which women's groups tried to distance themselves from the activity of Theory-production.

Hazel referred to other feminists she knew of in Leeds as 'the women who pushed the Theory out'. They were women who, as I shall show below, Hazel did not look up to or wish to emulate. Interviewees tended to dis-identify from feminists whom they perceived to be producing Theory at the time, and constructed negative connotations for the term "theoretical". In this way, there was considerable ambivalence in women's relationships with Theory – both strongly positive and strongly negative feelings about and responses to it.

In talking about themselves and the women in their group, interviewees constructed Theorists/women who produced Theory as different from themselves. Individuals or groups were talked about in contrast to the collective identity of interviewees' own women's groups such that creating Theory was considered to be a very different kind of activity from that undertaken within the group itself. Particular individuals were singled out as representing intellectual forms of feminism that were seen as

somewhat separate from the women's group contexts. For instance, Lee and Liz referred to the work of Juliet Mitchell as inaccessible to the ordinary women that comprised their groups. Liz recalled seeing 'Juliet Mitchell...and people like that' at the first women's conference she attended in Leeds during the early 1970s. Liz described feeling somewhat intimidated during her first encounter with Theory/Theorists at this event:

That was really scary because I hadn't heard of any of the stuff that they were talking about...I knew that they were bigwigs and they were coming out with all this Theory and I was like, oh, I haven't heard of that, so I felt a bit stupid. (Liz)

It is clear that Liz found the feminist ideas she heard about in this context difficult to relate to at first. Lee too spoke of the women in her group having interests that conflicted with those of the women who were writing about feminism at the time:

We were really hungry for home-grown literature; there was only American stuff, or the Juliet Mitchells and the Sheila Rowbothams, which was all a little bit academic and historical. (Lee)

Liz and Lee provide examples from amongst the many interviewees who disidentified from 'people like...[Juliet Mitchell]', who were seen as more academic/theoretical than they. That interviewees distanced themselves and the groups they were in from feminist Theorists of the time is symptomatic of the way in which feminist collective identities were organised around and articulated in terms of women's differing relationships with feminist ideas.

Hazel explained that she appreciated 'the women who pushed the Theory out', due to her belief in the value of their vanguard position.<sup>59</sup> However, she also saw a contradiction between their ostensible beliefs as articulated through their writings, and the circumstances of their lives:

I appreciated the women who pushed the Theory out...but I also saw that they were not happy, that their lives were often a mess – and so 'the personal is political' didn't work, wasn't true, it was like, 'don't do as I do, do as I say'... But I like them for

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<sup>59</sup> For further discussion of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists' vanguard position in relation to the rest of the movement see Rees (2007).

pushing the thinking out there because, you know, it's like any other political movement, the extremists allow you to creep up behind them and make your place further out than you would if everyone was moderate like yourself. (Hazel)

Hazel constructs a tension between 'pushing Theory out' and living 'a good life', a theme which ran through her narrative.

Interviewees also constructed tension between Theory and the realities of women's lives. Helen, whose relationship with lesbian feminism I discuss further later in this chapter, criticised the Theory of political lesbianism. The writings of the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979) expounded the argument that all feminists should be lesbians in a way that Helen found to be 'over the top' and 'very theoretical'. Being theoretical is thus considered by Helen to be a negative attribute within feminist writings. Helen went on to explain this criticism by saying that these writings did not 'relate to the reality of women's lives', by which she meant that the Theory of political lesbianism was not feasible for many women. It did not take account of women's intertwined relationships with men and children, financial pressures, and also the range of different heterosexual relationships that were possible. Helen's suggestion that some Theory was too abstract reflects a wider tendency within the data to see theorising in women's groups as valuable to the extent that it was relevant to women's everyday lives.

As further evidence that being theoretical was not always something to be aspired towards in women's groups, I turn to Carol's use of the word 'theoretical' in a derogatory sense. She suggests that some of the women in her group saw themselves as feminists, but their assumption of this identity, Carol thought, was only hypothetical, in that their feminist identity was not reflected in their behaviour. Carol used the term 'theoretical' to distinguish between herself and group members whom she did not perceive to be living their lives in ways that were informed by feminist principles. Carol was critical of women in the group who did not work, relying instead on their husbands' financial support. Following her remark about a division between group members who worked and those that didn't, I probed Carol about how she saw these other women in the group in relation to her own sense of herself as a feminist:

Anna: Did they still identify as feminists, or not?

Carol: Yes, they did.

Anna: What do you think feminism meant to them?

Carol: I don't know. I don't know. I would question it really. I would question it and I would say, 'Was it almost theoretical?'

In the above passage, Carol deploys the term "theoretical" to connote an unreal quality; she felt that some women in her group were not *real* feminists. As a 'theoretical' feminist, the authenticity of their identities was in question. Carol suggested that although these women saw themselves as feminists and exhibited some surface-level identification with feminism, they did not appear to *practise* feminism. Invoking a distinction between the theoretical/hypothetical and the real, Carol, like Helen, constructs a tension between the theoretical realm and the reality of women's lives.

The quality of being theoretical had some negative connotations in interviewees' discussions of women's groups, despite there also being a sense to emerge from the data that women were excited to be engaging intellectually. Helen and Carol used the term 'theoretical' as a criticism of particular writings or individuals. Although there were other instances of negative reactions to being overly theoretical, this was not universally viewed as negative. In fact, interviewees tended to hold intellectuals and their ideas in high regard. For instance, Tess reflected the general attitude of respect for those that devised and articulated Theory as she talked about people having 'gone to a lot of trouble to really work out their Theories and put it well.' As such, the relationships with Theory that were being cultivated within women's groups were highly ambivalent.

### ***Theorising as a feminist practice: three case studies***

Through three case studies, I portray a sense of some of the interactions between theory – in a broad sense, including ideas represented through fiction – and women's lived experience and feminist practice.

Linda's case is used to explore how the women in one group developed analyses of their own experiences with regards to feminine appearance. The second example considers how reading a novel, *The Women's Room* (French 1977), contributed to the development of Judith's feminist consciousness. In the third example, I discuss

women's relationships with the Theories of political lesbianism and lesbian feminism, focusing mainly on Helen's story. These three case studies correspond to three (of many) broad areas or topics of concern to feminists: embodiment, the housewife/mother role, and sexuality. They are suggestive of the range of theorising practices in the data. While Linda's account illustrates the typical format of c-r, as collective reinterpretation based on detecting patterns in women's experiences, Judith and Helen on the other hand tell stories about making connections between their own experience and Theories that were already out there in the movement (in the form of fictional works or theoretical writings).

*(i) Feminine appearance: from personal horror to political issue*

Feminist theorising occurs when women identify patterns in their experiences to develop modes of contesting gender norms as they operate within their everyday lives. Ahmed (2000:99) suggests that feminist theorising occurs 'precisely where social norms are being contested: whether that contestation takes place in educational settings, in political mobilization or in everyday life and social interaction'.

Linda told of discovering similarities between her experiences and those of other women in her women's group, in relation to how their bodies were seen to not correspond to expectations of what feminine bodies ought to look like. Linda told the group about a time when she was mistaken for a man, leading other group members to speak up about their similar experiences. Through this process, Linda began to see that what she had previously seen as an isolated incident, marking her out as strange in some way, was actually the result of societal pressure on women to present themselves in particular ways (e.g. dressing in appropriately feminine styles).

Linda told of her long-term worry that she looked 'mannish' – an issue which had been very personal to her. She defined this issue in terms of dress and behaviour, in addition to being large/tall. However, through participating in the women's group, what was once Linda's own individual worry became part of the collective reality of women in the group, as other members shared similar concerns and experiences:

One of the most exciting things was talking about things that were very private and personal – I'd forgotten – and finding other people had had similar experiences, or worse experiences, or knew what you were talking about. I think that was really thrilling, really thrilling. (Linda)

On one occasion as a young woman, Linda was believed to be a 'lad' by a bus driver. Linda describes this scenario by saying that she had just had her hair cut and was waiting for a bus with her husband-to-be. Having found this experience very humiliating, Linda brought it up in her women's group. She found that her feelings about the situation changed as she began to hear other women recount similar tales. Another member of the group shared that she had once heard someone call her back as she entered the toilets, saying, 'That's the Ladies!', to which the woman had responded, 'Yeah, I'm a lady'. Linda found it very reassuring to know that other women had also had their gender misrecognised:

And it was like, oh my God, that's fantastic – other people struggled with those things! That was really exciting, really exciting. That it was okay, you know...I was absolutely mortified that he'd said 'lads'. And then this woman was telling me about the toilet incident and then it was kind of – well, that's because women are supposed to look a certain way and if you don't look a certain way, men don't perceive you as womanly or feminine. And that's a whole political issue. Well that was news to me, really, I just thought it was because I was – I mean I wasn't fat then – but I was tall and gangly and I looked very boyish. (Linda)

Linda's story is an example of how an experience shared amongst several group members was analysed in order to develop a theoretical account of women's lives more generally (the common predicament of women). Connections were made as women in the group shared their various experiences of being refused recognition as women. Group members developed a collective understanding of the way in which they were being pressurised into performing appropriately feminine standards of appearance. Failure to do so was punished in the form of public humiliation. Thus, group members' experiences built up into a pattern which gave the group some insight into gender norms and how they operated. From Linda's group's analysis of their shared experiences emerged the following theory: 'Women are supposed to look a certain way and if you don't look a certain way, men don't perceive you as womanly or feminine.'



It is clear that Linda's women's group engaged in feminist theorising as part of their activities within the group, as they identified and critically reflected upon their experiences. The knowledge produced through their discussions was potentially useful to group members who might go on to act differently in future situations, in ways possibly informed by their feminist re-interpretations of their experiences.

For Linda, the process of coming to realise that her experiences were part of a wider, politically significant pattern was 'the big, big, exciting thing' about being in the women's group. Realising in this way that the personal was political was a fundamental process of transformation for several other interviewees too; the concept/topic of femininity also tended to be central to women's groups' discussions and to the development of feminist consciousness. Linda made the following statement about coming to realise that the personal was political: 'I mean, that was complete news, you know, that I was struggling with this private, personal horror and actually it was a larger issue – it wasn't just about me. It was news.' (Linda)

Within Linda's new understanding of her experience, being seen as unfeminine does not reflect individual failing, but implies that the ideals of femininity are themselves problematic, as is the societal pressure on women to conform to these ideals. Having a feminist consciousness means attributing problems to 'unfair treatment because of one's group membership rather than a lack of personal effort or ability' (Klein 1987:23).

In order to consider the 'instrumental thought' (Ermarth 2000:115) resulting from Linda's women's group theorising around the issue of having their gender misrecognised, we might hypothesise what the outcomes of these discussions may have been. Linda frames the effects of these discussions on her own life largely in emotional terms; she found it exciting and thrilling to discover that the personal was political. However, she says little about how group members went about contesting dominant notions of gendered behaviour and appearance in their social interactions. A political analysis of femininity might have led to various practices including refusing to try to look more feminine in future situations where misrecognition might occur, refusing to fear misrecognition or refusing to be personally offended or

embarrassed should it occur. Within Linda's group, patterns in group members' experiences were used to develop an analysis which would then enable them to respond differently to instances of oppression as they occurred. They interpreted their own experiences in order to come up with a theory (about how standards of feminine appearance affect how women are perceived in public), which they could then use to contest gender norms governing how women ought to present themselves.

Discussions within Linda's women's group constitute feminist theorising. The group developed 'instrumental thought' (Ermarth 2000:115) in the form of personally/politically useful analyses of their experiences. Their analyses allowed them to reinterpret their sense of themselves (from unusually unfeminine women, to a collective sense of themselves as women who do not fit the patriarchal stereotype of what women ought to look like) and alter their action in future situations (by contesting the notion that they ought to look more conventionally feminine).

(ii) Reading "The Women's Room": *What am I doing here? This isn't right!*

In addition to reflecting upon their lives in groups, women also interrogated their own experiences through reading Theory (Pearce 1997), as well as engaging with feminist fiction as a way of raising their consciousness (Hogeland 1998). Books provided 'vehicles for discussion' (as Carol put it), raising issues for the group to think about together, as well as instigating explorations of new perspectives on women's lives. Judith's case is an example of how interviewees told of relating to feminist ideas through fiction.

Several interviewees described having read *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French (1977). This semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of Mira's journey from dissatisfied housewife to Harvard student, charting her struggles as she breaks away from the given identities of daughter/wife/mother in order to form a more independent relationship to the world.

Interviewees were generally divided on whether or not they found this book insightful in relation to their own development at the time of reading. Responses to feminist novels such as *The Women's Room* within the informal networks in which they were discussed were, as Coward (1980:53) suggests, 'rarely unambiguous'.

While some interviewees found the novel to have an influence on the development of their feminist consciousness, others said that they did not appreciate the importance with which *The Women's Room* was treated by many feminists.

Judith was one interviewee for whom the book seemed to have a profound impact. She joined a women's group while she was off work caring for children; she told of feeling that she had very little to say about herself at this time. In fact, she felt that doing household chores to the best of her ability was the most valuable contribution she made to the world. Judith recalled being intimidated by the women she met when she first joined the women's group (which she was introduced to through her husband's social worker colleagues). In her account of joining the group, Judith said that she had little of value to share with the other women in the group, going on to explain how reading *The Women's Room* made her reinterpret how she experienced herself and her life. In the following extract, Judith explains that a member of the group recently reminded her about the content of the group's early meetings:

Something one of them reminded me of quite recently, 'cause we're still very close friends now – as an opener in that group when we met together, we each had to say what we thought we were good at, and we went round in the group. [laughs] I can't believe what I said! I said, 'I'm good at washing up, making things clean'. I now look back on it – and they didn't show shock then, but they were shocked that that was all I could summon up that I was good at. So anyway, as the time went on, people had read *The Women's Room*...I don't think I read the whole book but I read a large chunk of it and that was a big contributory factor to me sitting back and thinking, 'Oh! What am I doing here? This isn't right!' I mean, I'd always been sort of fairly stropky about, you know, I'm not going to do everything in the house and all that sort of thing, and sort of pushing my husband to take his fair share and that sort of thing, but definitely *The Women's Room* had an influence. (Judith)

Being reminded of her lack of self-worth at the time provoked incredulity in Judith: ('I can't believe what I said!'). Elsewhere Judith reiterates that she felt like she didn't have much to offer because all she could talk about was dirty nappies and getting children to bed on time. Recalling how she came to reflect on her life ('sitting back') through reading *The Women's Room*, Judith saw reading this book as a pivotal activity in her coming to develop a feminist understanding of her experiences. Reading this text enabled Judith to articulate her dissatisfaction with

her life. The feeling of, 'What am I doing here? This isn't right!' was a commonly reported realisation which women went through in c-r groups. Judith's embryonic sense that she ought to not take sole responsibility for domestic chores was corroborated as a result of reading this novel.

We might take the analysis further by speculating that changes in Judith's, and other readers', consciousness that were sparked by reading the novel resulted from their identification with the character of Mira. At points in the book, this character seems crushed by the mundane tasks associated with running a home and taking care of the needs of her husband and children. It is relevant that Judith mentions this book in relation to her account of having seen herself as very different from the other women in the group during their early meetings. Through comparing herself with other group members, and with the characters in *The Women's Room*, Judith came to develop a sense of the disjuncture between her current life, and the potential future life she might desire. As such, *The Women's Room* provides a relevant metaphor for the transformation that Judith was to undergo within the group, alerting her to the type of life she felt the need to get away from, in order to come to practise feminism, which, in this context, entailed becoming involved in the world beyond home. Judith witnessed other women in the group who were seemingly more involved in the activities of the wider world, outside of home (they saw themselves as being good at more than just washing up).

A key moment in Judith's account of her life and her feminism came some years later, when she returned to work (after six years out) and encouraged her husband to reduce to part-time hours for a year, in order that they might share the burden of household duties. Judith refers to this change as 'my defining moment'. This book, I suggest, acted as a catalyst for Judith to reinterpret her experiences, and also induced her motivation to change her situation. As such, theory and practice came together in Judith's account of being influenced by *The Women's Room*, which – although a work of fiction – offered useful political analysis of the common situation of women (in American society at the time). The fact that the book was read and discussed by many women as part of their activities within c-r groups demonstrates the potential for feminist fiction to be interpreted as, or read in such a way as to provoke, a political commentary on women's experiences.

*A heteronormative text/group*

Judith went on to say that all the women in the group were influenced by *The Women's Room*, even those who – unlike her – were not yet mothers and so had not experienced the ‘all-consuming of my life’ feeling that Judith described as accompanying the responsibilities of caring for small children. Judith thought that other women in the group were influenced by reading *The Women's Room* in terms of decisions they were making to do with finding a male partner, and whether they would change their name upon marriage. Such dilemmas were of key concern to many women who were at the time aspiring to lead their lives in ways that were informed by feminist values.

I see Judith's group as one of a number of groups amongst my sample to maintain heteronormative values through their group activities. The concept of heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is a universal, coherent and unquestionable organising principle for all interpersonal relations (Richardson 1996). Judith's group was heteronormative in that it was taken for granted within the group that the desire for a heterosexual family life was a stable part of members' identities, and would remain important throughout other changes they might undergo through group discussion. Other groups, however, rejected the inevitability of heterosexuality, taking up lesbian feminist ideas to challenge the notion of women seeking to better their lives within the confines of the heterosexual wife/mother role (see Lucia-Hoagland and Penelope eds, 1974). Although some feminist thinking from this time was concerned with how women might empower themselves within intimate relationships with men, other groups amongst my sample were engaging with feminist ideas that were less heterosexually-oriented in their concerns. *The Women's Room* was influential within a heteronormative mode of social organisation, but some groups wanted to explore possibilities outside of this framework.

The second time I interviewed Judith, I enquired about a comment she had made in the first interview about there being nobody in the group who was openly lesbian. Judith told me that she had remembered after the interview that she had since

discovered that one group member was not heterosexual, but might have felt too uncomfortable about the prospect of coming out to an overwhelmingly heterosexually-identified group of women:

There was somebody who joined the group who was a lesbian – who is still a lesbian – and she came probably for about a year, but she didn't used to talk about being lesbian, at that time. But I don't know whether she was out of the closet or whether she felt she couldn't, in this very heterosexual group. I don't know. (Judith)

In relation to Judith's realisation that group members were not actually all heterosexual, as she had previously imagined, Judith admitted that she would never have thought to question whether anyone in the group might not have been heterosexual:

From my point of view, I think I took it for granted that she did want to settle down with a man, because I didn't know that she was a lesbian at the time, although I've found out since that she was, you know, but I didn't know at the time. So no, it didn't really – it wasn't really talked about. (Judith)

In the above passage, Judith presents heterosexuality as a tacit, unspoken and taken-for-granted norm within her group. As such, I see her women's group as heteronormative to the extent that it helped sustain the hegemony of heterosexuality through its assumptions. Further data suggested that women's groups were not always supportive of lesbianism, with other women coming out after leaving a group. I turn now to consider women's interactions with lesbian feminism.

### *(iii) Choosing lesbianism as a feminist practice*

So far I have discussed the cases of Linda and Judith, both of whom were in heteronormative women's groups, and both of whom were primarily concerned with how women could empower themselves within relationships with men, rather than with how women might find ways of being emotionally and sexually independent from men. However, one of the key sets of ideas referred to by most of the women I interviewed concerned the Theory of lesbianism as a possible *choice* for women to make. The arguments of lesbian feminism and political lesbianism were variations on the notion that lesbianism constitutes a feminist practice. The importance of this

notion within the women's movement is reflected in the fact that it was referred to by most interviewees, even those who had been part of groups whose members were firmly heterosexual in their identities. A minority of interviewees did not make any allusion to the idea of lesbianism as a feminist practice (amongst these was Carol, who did however suggest that her perspective on sexuality was broadened through being in the women's group, as she had not previously experienced any context in which it was acceptable to talk about homosexuality).

Women's relationships with the Theory of lesbianism as a feminist practice varied in intensity and duration. Women's groups were contexts in which women discussed the Theories/practices of political lesbianism and lesbian feminism with one another. For some interviewees (e.g. Liz – see above), encountering this idea took the form of a momentary realisation that some women *chose* lesbianism. For others (e.g. Doreen, Alison), their encounters with this Theory lasted through many years of involvement with groups whose main purpose was to reflect on lesbian feminist relationships and politics.

Although I mention several interviewees in this section, I have chosen to focus mainly on Helen's case, which I consider in terms of the relationship between lesbian feminist/political lesbian Theory and practice. Within Helen's story, it is apparent that participating in the consciousness-raising group and coming to think of herself as a lesbian were events that went hand in hand: 'I think the other three at that time were out as lesbians and I wasn't until the end of the group.'

Practising feminism through changing their own lives was an important focus within Helen's group, and she explained that, 'we just talked about our own lifestyles as well, you know, we were all going through quite a lot of change at that time.' Within Helen's explanation of the role of the group in her becoming a lesbian, the group can be seen to have acted as a supportive context in contrast to her previous social milieu in which lesbianism was not encouraged:

**Anna:** So, during the time that the group was meeting, what sort of **changed** for you that meant that by the end of the meetings you could come out as a lesbian, whereas before you weren't?

Helen: Well it was where I'd come from really, from Shrewsbury...The other three had been in Leeds longer than me, where it was probably more normal.

Helen goes on to explain that the other members of the group were sometimes impatient with her with regards to her coming out as a lesbian:

I was at the tail end of a relationship with another man and having problems and, you know, I'd want to come and talk about that because that was, you know, what I was going through at the time, and they'd just be impatient and say 'why bother?!', that sort of thing. (Helen)

The politics and Theory of political lesbianism were important within Helen's c-r group, as well as within the wider networks of feminists that she became a part of in Leeds. A key text expounding political lesbianism was written by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979), who saw the act of choosing to no longer engage in sexual relations with men as crucial to women's liberation. Helen positioned herself on the fringes of revolutionary feminism in Leeds, stating, 'I read their stuff and I sympathised with some of it, but I never went to the meetings'.

Helen identified with the idea that feminists could choose lesbianism, and strove to put it into practice, but was frustrated to find that it was not an easily achieved personal goal. Helen encountered and began to identify with the idea of political lesbianism before fully engaging in this form of feminist practice. As such, her narrative reads as a top-down relationship between *Theory* and *practice*, whereby Theory was related to as a set of directions to be implemented in the lives of the individuals who subscribe to it. By referring to this way of relating to Theory as top-down, I mean to suggest that Helen saw her own experience/feelings/practices as *wrong* in the light of Theory recommending her to be otherwise. This is implied in her suggestion that the relationship between public feminism and women's personal experiences involved bringing the latter into line with the former:

We had a sort of political front out there with the various campaigns and things but we were also trying to help ourselves and our emotions to catch up, so there was some sort of match between the Theory and the practice and the way we actually felt. (Helen)



Helen is clear that Theory came before practice for her. However this might have been due to the historical location of her involvement in the movement. As she explains, 'there was a lot of Theory about in Leeds...all this stuff that had been written', when she first landed there. For Helen, it was a case of working out where she fitted in, in relation to the various positions that seemed to be on offer. Helen elaborates upon the idea of the disjuncture between Theory and emotions by talking about her changing thoughts and feelings at the time – with her thinking developing ahead of her emotions:

I think in some ways my thinking was ahead of my emotions, which I think has happened for other women as well. That, you know, you're thinking that you very much want to identify with women and so on but still I'm hanging on in this relationship with a man and not quite even understanding myself why I'm doing that... (Helen)

Helen's narrative presents a conflict between her feelings and thoughts at this time in her life. She conceptualises the relationship between feminist Theory and women's experiences in a way that conflicts with how feminists supposedly made a link between the two: rather than women's experiences *informing* feminist theory (Stoecker 1989; Bryson 1999), Helen talks of her feelings and practices catching up with the political Theory that was already out there, suggesting that she saw her own experiences as being invalidated by the ideas that she encountered (through reading and in groups) at this time. The process of engaging with feminist Theory described by Helen entails Theory being seen not as a reflection of the realities of women's lives, but as a tool for resolving the mismatch between feminist doctrine and their own private/personal experiences. This was a rather problematic mode of operation for feminist Theory, as documented in the published collection, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (Onlywomen Press 1981), which collates several readers' responses to the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group's (1979) paper on political lesbianism. This paper served to provoke feminists of all sexual identities to interrogate their own experiences and respond critically to the idea of political lesbianism as this group presented it. Some of these critiques corroborate Helen's suggestion that the mismatch between thoughts and Theory, on the one hand, and feelings (e.g. of continued attachment to men) on the other, was a common experience within the women's movement at this time.

Writing initially in the women's liberation newsletter (WIRES), Penny Cloutte (1981:15) articulated her annoyance at the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists' 'politics of OUGHT'. Their political lesbianism paper, Cloutte (1981) argued, demanded that women discount their own feelings in favour of obeying an 'elite' of 'right-on feminists' with 'raised consciousness' for guidance on how they *should* act and what they *should* think: 'So I distrust my own feelings and reactions, and so have to rely for guidance on my sisters to tell me what to do and what to think' (Cloutte 1981:15). Knowing feminists delivering instructions to ordinary women on how to behave, think, and feel like a 'proper feminist' resembles patriarchal modes of knowledge transmission and behaviour (Wilton 1996).

My perspective on this text is that its severity was necessary due to the way in which only an equally strong oppositional discourse could motivate women to transform their thinking around culturally enforced heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 2003 [1980]) was so pervasive that, for most of the women I interviewed, choosing to leave relationships with men behind was out of the question. I see the Theory of political lesbianism as politically useful to the extent that it could motivate self-change, prompting women to reflect on themselves and their sexuality. Even if they chose to ignore the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists by continuing to have sexual relationships with men, women might have been prompted to reflect on their sexuality and come to new understandings of it through encountering this idea. Anger towards the authors resulted from reading this paper; such strong emotional responses to a text were suggestive, I argue, of women's provocatively productive ways of interacting around/with Theory.

As evidence that women in West Yorkshire women's groups related actively to Theory (as opposed to being passive recipients of it), it is noteworthy that not all feminists took up political lesbianism. There were opportunities to be critical of Theories encountered in women's movement contexts; theoretical ideas were to be interacted with rather than imposed from above.

Although relating to the Theory of political lesbianism was a productive experience for Helen, the severity noted by readers of Leeds Revolutionary Feminists' paper was echoed across other interview data. Several interviewees told of rejecting the

idea of lesbianism as a chosen feminist practice. Sandra described feeling angry about being excluded from this Theory, as a bisexual woman, and Liz expressed her rejection of this Theory by physically throwing the book across the room after reading a passage explaining that, 'Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters' (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1979:7). Such a performative manifestation of Liz's anger in response to this text demonstrates her very active relationship to feminist Theory, as opposed to being a passive recipient of it.

Sara actively avoided feminist contexts in which she felt lesbian feminist Theory would be popular. Specifically, she stayed away from Greenham Common women's peace camp, explaining her fear that women there might try to encourage her to leave her husband and child. As such, Sara dis-identified from these particular feminists whom she perceived as a potential threat to her existing sense of herself as a wife and mother. Her sense of who she was prior to women's groups meant that she deliberately deselected herself from involvement in feminist collective contexts based on her desire to avoid undergoing *too much* self-transformation. Although women changed within women's groups, their pre-existing sense of themselves (e.g. for Sara, as a wife and a mother) shaped their experience of groups such that their effects were purposefully limited. As such, feminist consciousness entails making active choices about which sets of feminist ideas to take up.

### ***Chapter conclusion and further comments***

This chapter has argued that theorising constituted a feminist practice in West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Within most of the groups I looked at, discussions did not lead to feminist Theory in written form, but to outcomes in the lives of the participants. Women were influenced by fictional stories they read, they came to reinterpret 'personal horrors' as political problems, and they related actively to the idea of lesbianism as a feminist practice, in order to motivate changes in their own ways of being. Theorising had effects on women's identities, as they became confident thinkers, sometimes returning to formal education.

Orientations towards particular sets of ideas were also crucial for collective identity construction. A group's relation to lesbian feminism, for instance, provided a means

of asserting their collective sense of who they were in relation to the wider movement of which they were part. Collective identities were articulated in response to particular theoretical positions within feminism, and having shared responses to feminist Theory was an important part of the women's group process. However, that is not to say that individual women were precluded from developing their own ways of relating to ideas, which they did through the choices they made about which collective contexts they wished to participate in (e.g. Sara's deliberate avoidance of Greenham). Interviewees developed active ways of interacting with the Theories they encountered. Managing to resist being subsumed by collective positions on particular issues, they held onto a sense of their own responses to particular ideas (e.g. as discussed in Chapter 6, Hazel developed an analysis of therapy that went against the dominant view within the feminist contexts in which she participated).

Although most of the women I interviewed were in groups that did not produce written Theory, their activities led to theory in the broad sense of 'instrumental thought' (Ermarth 2000:115). Linda's account of theorising within her group provided evidence that group discussions resulted in knowledge with (useful) effects within women's lives, even though it was not formally recorded. C-r has been characterised as Theory (capital T) production at the expense of an understanding of its effects on participants' lives. The emphasis in the literature on c-r as a mode of knowledge production relates to the tendency for portrayals of c-r to focus on a first wave of c-r groups, meeting during an early phase in the movement, when women 'had no theory to readily explain their collective suffering' (Stoecker 1989:350). Without denying that generating new feminist ideas was important in the early days of c-r, the women's groups I found in West Yorkshire did not fit this model in that they did not tend to publish or formally disseminate the products of their discussions, and they continued meeting well into the 1970s and 1980s, long after c-r was deemed to have declined in significance (Lovenduski and Randall 1993).

The effects of feminist theorising can be seen within the lives of the feminists I interviewed. Through these examples, I demonstrated how Helen interacted with the idea of lesbianism as a feminist practice in order to make changes in her intimate life, how Judith was inspired by reading a best-selling feminist novel to look beyond home and family for fulfilment, and how Linda's group's collective reinterpretation

of their experiences produced an analysis that influenced their views on femininity. Theorising was useful to the extent that it was relevant to participants' lives. Being too academic was discouraged. An article in *Ms. Magazine* warned c-r participants against 'generalizing, theorizing, or talking in abstractions' ('A Guide to Consciousness-Raising', 1972:115), showing that early representations of c-r encouraged participants to be critical of overly theoretical ways of interacting with one another. In Chapter 4, I explained that poststructuralist feminist theorists have been held responsible for complicating the relationship between experience and knowledge (Hemmings 2005). However, rather than this problematic relationship being a product of poststructuralist academic thought, it can be observed in interviewees' stories of how they were engaged in noting the imperfect fit between Theory and women's lives. Interviewees did not identify with those they saw as the movement's Theory-producers. They saw themselves and the groups they were part of as separate and different from the women who were publishing feminist Theory at the time. They also acknowledged the complex relationship between feminist Theory and the reality of women's lives.

That some women took up political lesbianism while others angrily rejected it illustrates women's agency in interacting with feminist ideas. The theory of lesbianism as a feminist choice was subjected to critical analysis in relation to women's sense of their own feelings and experiences. Some women (e.g. Helen) chose to take up this practice, but were still critical of its relevance to the majority of women, while others actively and passionately rejected this Theory (e.g. Liz). Rather than being passive recipients of the disciplinary effects of feminist discourse (see discussion of dividing practices in Chapter 4), women demonstrated their agency in being able to relate actively to knowledge, positioning themselves critically in relation to both dominant and counter/reverse discourses, in ways that changed over time (McNay 2000).

In postliberatory times (Butler 1997), political Theories constitute resources for opposing domination rather than ways of exploring some previously concealed truth. Following Foucault's (1988 [1984]) rejection of the notion of liberation, we must be suspicious of any political Theory claiming to offer a route to freedom. Theorising

as a feminist practice might therefore be seen to effect *resistance to* rather than *liberation from* power relations. Stoecker (1989:359) suggests that theories are resources to be used 'in the context of a c-r method', as a way of avoiding traditional ways of relating to Theory that bind individuals 'to an isolated, passive existence.'

The formation of c-r groups coincided with radical theorists' critiques of the limits set on who could engage in theorising or worldview construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Freire 1972). In widening opportunities for women to engage in theorising, women's groups played a role in democratising theorising, reducing the exclusionary effects of gender as they tend to operate in relation to this social practice. However, the potential for women to engage in the construction of their own worldviews remained limited in terms of class, race and ethnicity. There remained concerns to be addressed regarding 'the inclusion of "some" women in the production of feminist knowledge and the exclusion of others' (Currie and Kazi 1987:88). The twenty women I interviewed – all but one of whom were white – all lived in West Yorkshire at some point during the 1970s and 1980s, representing a specific demographic whose particular relation to theorising cannot be generalised to all women everywhere.

My argument has implications for considering the relationship between activists and intellectuals: if all feminists are theorists, is there a role for specialist Theorisers within the movement? Although this question is beyond the scope of the chapter, it may be useful to return to Eyerman and Jamison (1991:94) who suggest that the fact that all activists are movement intellectuals does not mean that all activists participate equally in the cognitive praxis of social movements. Eyerman and Jamison (1991:94) critique the tendency 'to see movement actors as falling into one or another bipolar category.' Whereas sociologists and historians tend 'to assign to "intellectuals"...a central role in the creation of meaning and identity' within social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:95), this chapter has looked at how the creation of meaning occurred more widely than this in women's groups, taking place amongst groups of ordinary women rather than being restricted to intellectuals. The way in which some interviewees constructed a division between women like themselves and those responsible for producing Theory is suggestive of how differing relationships with ideas are pivotal to the articulation of feminist collective

identities. As such, distinctions between more or less intellectual/theoretical feminists remain relevant.

## **Chapter Eight: Friendships between Women in West Yorkshire Women's Groups**

In this chapter, I argue that politically significant transformations in women's relationships with one another occurred in West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas the previous chapter focused on women's relationships with ideas, this chapter focuses on women's relationships with each other, exploring how, through participation in women's groups, women collectively created new, radically different ways of relating to each other. Through cultivating feminist friendships, women supported one another to sustain new ways of being a woman.

Women developed meaningful bonds with one another in women's groups. However, looking to contemporary social theory as a way of conceptualising such bonds reveals rather gloomy portrayals, including a whole book devoted to exploring 'the frailty of human bonds' (Bauman 2003). For Bauman, relationships are made to be broken (Blackshaw 2005) and long-term commitments are 'decidedly out of fashion' (Bauman 2004:20).

As I set out to consider how the temporary connections that occurred between women in women's groups turned into longer-lasting bonds, Bauman's work provokes doubt around the development of enduring ties between individuals in post-modern society, arguing that, in 'liquid modern' society, 'connections tend to be too shallow and brief to condense into bonds' (Bauman 2003:62). Not all of the connections that occurred between women's group members developed into such bonds; of course, some women went on to develop closer friendships with one another than others.

In arguing, against Bauman, that individuals do bond with one another within post-modern society, we might look to the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1994), who offer more promising conceptualisations of recent societal shifts. Beck (1994:13) opposes portrayals of contemporary social life in terms of 'atomization, isolation, loneliness, the end of all kinds of society or unconnectedness.' More optimistic perspectives on social life have theorised friendship as the bedrock of contemporary



society (Limb 1989; Pahl 2000), as well as envisioning its more central role within future cultural forms and values (Ackelsberg 1983; Roseneil 2000b; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004).

There has been a recent challenge to traditional, heteronormative social and political theory, in which social relations are understood to be organised primarily around the heterosexual couple as the very principle of social union (Warner 1993). Lesbian, gay, and feminist theorists have produced understandings of contemporary social life in which friendships feature more centrally (Weston, 1991; Roseneil 2000b; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). Weston's (1991) study of gay and lesbian kinship in San Francisco during the 1980s proposes the importance of friendship within kinship formations, dislodging and disrupting the idea of biological kin as the most authentic form of family relation. Social theorists are increasingly recognising the 'putative centrality of friends and friendship in contemporary society' (Pahl 2000:3). An exclusive focus on traditional kinship ties is somewhat outmoded as a way of understanding human connections as 'increasing numbers of people find themselves, for varying lengths of time, leading a life which does not correspond to the classical model of the bourgeois family' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001:130). In highlighting alternatives to heterosexual kinship patterns and the radical propinquities established outside of biological structures, Weston's (1991) work provoked new perspectives on social relations in which non-heterosexuals are positioned at the forefront of innovative relationship models – pioneers of relationship forms based on an ethic of friendship (Weeks et al 2001).

Although the distinctions between given family/kin and chosen relations are intentionally blurred by references to chosen families (Weston 1997; Weeks et al 2001), friendships are generally thought to be characterised by an ethic of voluntarism or free choice, in contrast to family members (who, according to conventional understandings, cannot be chosen) and intimate partners (who tend to be related to one at a time and changed only infrequently). In contrast to the friendships of Ancient Greece, which were largely dictated by social position, precluding spontaneous choice, modern friendship is defined by Giddens (1991:87) as 'a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides.' Although to some extent exempt from social regulation (Pahl

2000), friendships are nevertheless implicated in processes of social control (Bartky 1997) and social stratification (O'Connor 1998). Interviewees' accounts provide useful data for exploring how women became better friends with some women than others.

As a voluntary, personal relationship, modern friendship has, until recently, been seen as peripheral to the social system, and as 'relatively unimportant in the nitty-gritty of economic and social organisation' (Allan 1989:1-2). Women's friendships especially have been denied serious sociological recognition, due to being viewed as lacking in wider social relevance (Allan 1989). However, as the political dimensions of personal relations came to be acknowledged within the women's movement, friendship was no longer seen as the result of 'idiosyncrasies of personality' (Hess 1972: 358), but rather as *integral* to social structure.

Second-wave feminists, particularly radical feminists (e.g. Raymond 1986a; 1986b), challenged understandings of women's friendships as politically inconsequential by pointing to the ways in which women in patriarchal society are isolated from one another in order to sustain the dependence of women upon men. The subtle processes through which women have been discouraged from forming close friendships with one another have been interpreted by feminists as an effect of patriarchal ideology, for, as Seiden and Bart (1976:194) note, 'if women cannot trust or work for or be friends with women, then they must of course turn to men.' By observing the historical suppression and invalidation of closeness between women (Rich 2003 [1980]), feminists came to recognise the implications of women's friendships (and their invisibility) for understanding how power operates through social relations.

Friendship has been celebrated as offering women particular opportunities for self-realization:

Elective relationships with peers...offered a young woman substantial freedom for self-realization compared to her family definitions as daughter, sister or wife (Van Dyne 1981, cited in Ackelsberg 1983:345).

Corroborating the notion of post-modern individuals as self-determining (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994), O'Connor (1998:117) has argued that friendships 'are attractive because they offer a definition of self which is very much under the control of individual participants.'

Despite feminists' challenges to ideas about women's friendships, accounts of the women's movement have tended to downplay the way in which relationships between women were transformed through participation in the women's movement. Focusing attention on public activism at the expense of relationships formed in movement contexts, social movements scholars have implicitly reinforced the idea of friendship as a personal rather than a political relation. For instance, friendship tends to be seen as a recruiting device for social movements (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Greil and Rudy 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984), but not as a political outcome of social movements. A notable exception to this is Seiden and Bart's (1976:194-5) research, which revealed that women who found one another 'stupid, dull, and uninteresting' prior to c-r groups testified afterwards that 'they are very close to other women and find these relationships rewarding.' Roseneil's (2000a) work on Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp is another exception to women's movement scholars' overlooking of friendship. Roseneil (2000a) looks at the blurring of boundaries between heterosexual and lesbian women, and between friendship and passion, within women's movement spaces. At Greenham, women came to form 'intense and close relationships with each other, which were very different from friendships which they had experienced with women before' (Roseneil 2000a:281).

Although I will go on to focus on the effects of friendships in encouraging and sustaining subversive ways of being (Friedman 1993; Nardi 2001), it is important to note that interviewees' accounts corroborate, to some extent, friendships' role as a recruitment device for social movements (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Phillips 1980; Greil and Rudy 1983; Snow and Machalek 1984). Liz's story of making friends with a woman in order to encourage her to join the group pertinently illustrates that friendship had a pivotal role in the expansion of West Yorkshire women's groups (although the group Liz was referring to was a campaign group

rather than her c-r group). Although the two women went on to become close friends, Liz explained why she initially made a special effort to be friendly:

Because I wanted her to be involved in the National Abortion Campaign, you know, it was about the campaigning bit – we'd got to, you know, defeat the Bill... We were only a few in number and we needed as many people as we could muster.  
(Liz)

Other interviewees further supported the role of friendship in the expansion of the women's movement, as they told of having gone along to their first women's group meeting with a friend, or of encouraging friends to join/form groups. Although it is clear that friendships between existing women's group members and potential new members helped increase participation in women's groups, I wish to argue that the notion of friendships as a mere recruitment device for the movement neglects to recognise the *transformative* potential of these friendships. While accepting that friendships facilitated women to join women's groups, the political significance of this process lies not in the activism they may have gone on to do afterwards, but in the *support* women gained in these contexts for their new ways of being.

Liz talked about the importance of friendships she developed with women she met in women's groups, whom she referred to as her 'stand by me' friends. Liz described imagining these women to form a circle around her, catching her whenever she started to fall: they would 'sort of just nudge me back so I carried on standing'. Liz's description highlights the support gained from friendships formed within women's groups. I turn now to consider the ways in which interviewees described the friendships they formed in women's groups as particularly close and supportive. To form meaningful friendships with other women constituted a *radical* act in the context of a society in which it was widely assumed that 'women without men are women without company or companionship' (Raymond 1986b:3).

### ***Sisterhood and the cultivation of new ways of relating to one another***

Feminists began to claim, through reference to sisterhood, that women's friendships constituted an important social and political relation. As such, they opposed characterisations of women's friendships as 'outside the arena of major action,

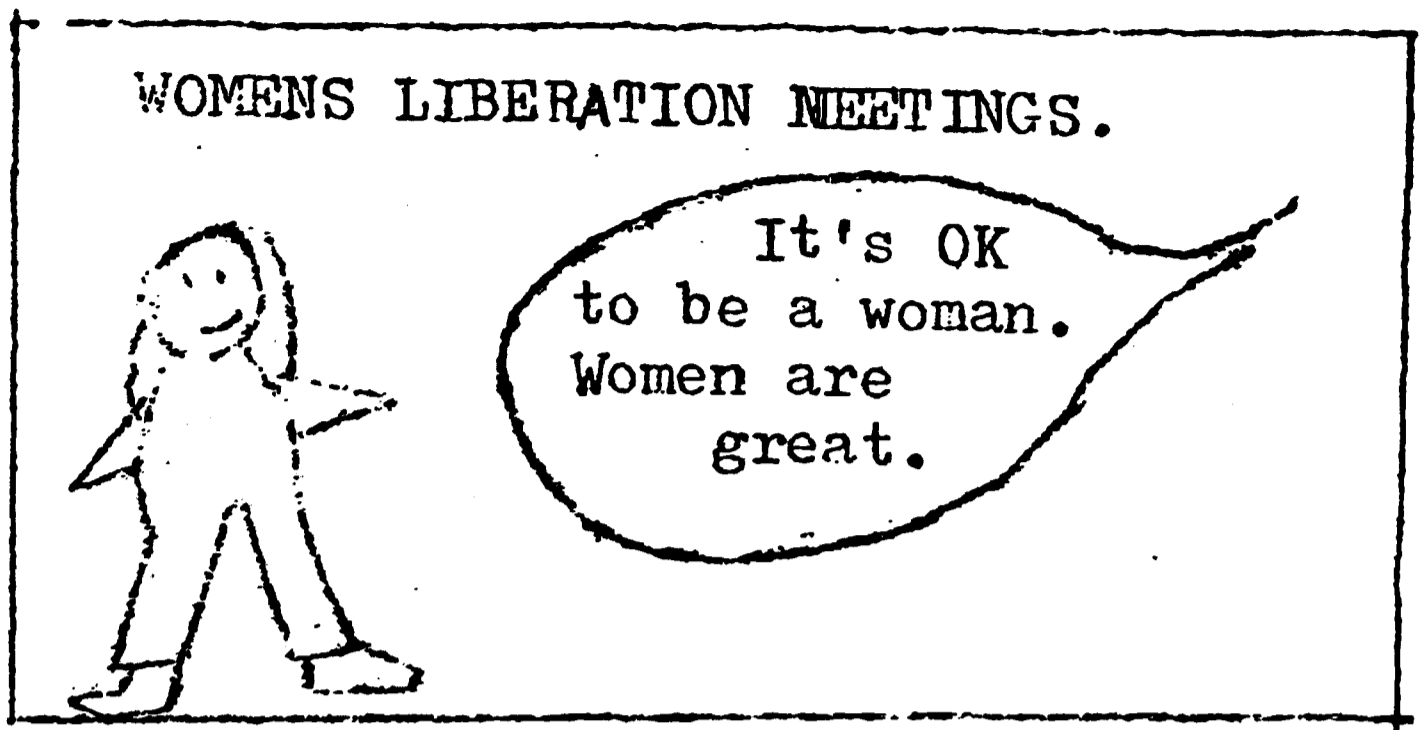
something you do until the “relationship” comes’ (Seiden and Bart, 1976:193). Having at one time been forbidden, suppressed, and cast down as witchcraft (Gluckman 1963, cited in Oakley 1974), by the 1970s, women’s friendships no longer incited such levels of suspicion or overt sanctioning. Although the women I interviewed did not face explicit prohibitions on them meeting together in groups to talk about their lives, they were subtly discouraged from coming together through patriarchal discourses constructing the social inanity, or even non-existence, of women’s friendships. Within social science, women’s friendships were seen as, at best, a personal luxury (Allan 1989), and at worst, evidence of their social ineptitude and inferiority (Tiger 1969). Seeking to reverse patriarchal attempts to render women’s friendships politically innocuous through their portrayal as frivolous and irrelevant, the notion of sisterhood was emphasised within the women’s movement, in what Seiden and Bart (1976:192) saw as ‘a deliberate effort to promote solidarity and understanding where there was previously suspicion, mistrust, and competition.’

By consciously and deliberately excluding men, women attempted to create spaces in which the cultivation of closeness between one another would constitute a form of insubordination. Dreifus (1973) and Frye (1993[1977]) sum up the importance of women-only spaces:

CR is also a unique opportunity for women to meet on territory that is strictly their own. Denied hangouts, bars, poolrooms – all male territory – women have never had a place to call theirs. Weekly consciousness-raising meetings become free space for a female culture to begin to develop... (Dreifus 1973:7)

The woman-only meeting is a fundamental challenge to the structure of power. It is always the privilege of the master to enter the slave’s hut. The slave who decides to exclude the master from her hut is declaring herself not a slave. The exclusion of men from the meeting...is a controlling of access, hence an assumption of power. (Frye 1993 [1977]: 95-96)

Hazel wrote about women-only spaces in West Yorkshire, sharing with me her writings on separatism from around 1978. In the cartoon below, drawn by Hazel, we see a visualisation of the idea that, within women-only contexts, women re-evaluated themselves and other women:



In women's groups, the development of individuals' improved self-concepts went hand in hand with the development of generally more positive orientations towards women. In the writings she shared with me, Hazel explained what it meant to her to be a separatist:

As for the question of women friends – I didn't have any until I joined the WLM. I held the common view that men were interesting and intelligent and active in the world. And like the female companions of 'great men' I enjoyed the reflected glory. Now I realise that men are all those things at the expense of women; women are taught they are only good for chit-chat, emotional things. You may say 'if you stopped being friends with men you have deliberately cut out half the human race' – and I reply 'Yes I have, in order to give attention to the other half – the half that you and I belong to.' (Hazel circa.1978)

Hazel discusses the notion of deliberately cutting men out in a way that connects with another interviewee's decision to only read books by women (thus temporarily excluding men from her literary world) for a period in her life, 'on the basis that the stick needed to be bent the other way, because so much of what you hear, what you read, is written by men, for men' (Liz). Both Hazel and Liz conceptualised separatism in terms of its political effects (as a way of attending to the neglected half of the human race, or bending the stick the other way), rather than as a way of creating spaces free from power relations.

Hazel saw women's friendships as 'the gift of the women's liberation movement'. Prior to being involved in the women's movement, she saw herself as an honorary

male, an experience she felt was typical for more independently inclined women at the time. Literature corroborates the notion that intellectually liberated females were more likely to turn to males for friendship (Rowbotham 1972). Another interviewee, Freda explained that, for her, meaningful friendships with other women first occurred in women's groups:

When I was growing up, most of the women I knew, I couldn't relate to them at all, because they were all so into pop and boyfriends and make-up and clothes and fashions and all these things...I couldn't see any point in any of those things, and so I used to avoid women, really. I used to make friends with men.  
(Freda)

Freda went on to explain that, through c-r, she began to understand herself and other women better, and was motivated to become friends with women. Freda's prior disinterest in other women and their conventionally feminine concerns illustrates her internalisation of dominant attitudes towards women's ways of being, including the cultural disparagement of women's friendships.<sup>60</sup>

Descriptions of closer friendships with women after women's groups were prevalent across the data, corroborating accounts of women's isolation from one another prior to the women's movement (Friedan 1963; Allen 1970; Philpott 1982). Joanna is an example of an interviewee for whom, in her memory, relationships with other women prior to the women's movement had come to seem superficial:

I don't think I'd had as intimate friendships at all before that. I mean I suppose I thought they probably were, but when I was in the group I realised that actually they hadn't been close. Not that open in a way, certainly not open, it'd be more invite you round for a cup of coffee, let's talk about, you know, our lives, but nothing intimate, you know, there was that sort of barrier I think, more; definitely. (Joanna)

With hindsight, Joanna sees that there was a dearth of intimacy in her friendships prior to joining a women's group (in 1981). While for Joanna, these earlier friendships had felt close at the time, for another interviewee, Lee, politeness was the most she could expect from interactions with other women prior to the women's

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<sup>60</sup> The idea of joining women's groups as leaving behind 'ordinary' women (who were interested in make-up, etc.) reinforces the distinction between the feminist and the 'feminine other woman', as oppositional categories (Hollows 2000:17).

movement. Lee explained her sense that, before women's groups, women only connected with one another through men, rather than forming friendships in their own right:

I think it's quite alien for people to understand that now, but women only approached each other through men. You couldn't have a direct friendship with a woman, you would only be polite and courteous to her because your husband or partner got on well with her husband or partner, and so you were obliged to be socially nice to one other. So the idea that you would kind of go off and talk to each other alone was just like, no, you don't, you smile at what the blokes are talking about and you show interest in what the blokes are being interested in. So, you know, it was mind-blowing really, that you could actually just say, 'I think you are a fantastic woman I want to be your friend', you know, 'who cares who your bloke is, I don't give a shit!' (Lee)

Lee's account reflects the wider tendency for interviewees to describe the demands of feminine role-playing interfering in their relationships with other women prior to their involvement in women's groups. Women's groups, then, were spaces in which women could explore a genuine interest in one another (which would be seen as inappropriate in other contexts). Being 'socially nice' to other women was a patriarchally-defined duty, which was flouted by the idea/act of not giving 'a shit' who someone's bloke is. Lee's account of this 'mind-blowing' shift is reflected across the data, as women articulated a transition towards recognising women's friendships as separate and significant in their own right.

According to Lee, women had been precluded from being honest by the demands on them to perform their loyalty to their male partners through pretending enthusiasm for their topics of conversation. Joanna confirmed the increased capacity for honesty between women in women's groups. When asked to elaborate upon how the group had affected her, Joanna said:

I think that was having good friendships with women, you know, really good friendships with women. I'd had lots of friends before, but not like this. There was always that barrier where, you know, you didn't say, 'I can't manage my kids', or whatever it is that you really felt you couldn't do, but here, there was the chance to be really honest about what you could and couldn't do. (Joanna)



Joanna's account of having chance 'to be really honest' within these new friendships reflects the emphasis on honesty as a key ideal within early formulations of the feminist consciousness-raising method (e.g. Redstockings 1969).<sup>61</sup>

The ideology of sisterhood was, I argue, a deliberate challenge to what has since been described in terms of the heteronormative tendency for social relations to be portrayed as organised around marriage (Warner 1993). Raymond (1986a) coined the term hetero-relational as a way of remarking on the way in which social relations are imagined as pairings; two becoming one, resulting in a view of human relationships in which 'all of life becomes a metaphor for marriage' and 'hetero-relational complementarity becomes the "stuff of the cosmos"' (Raymond 1986a:12-13). In her suggestion that women's groups signified 'the beginning of me having women friends that were just my friends as opposed to always being in couples', Sara echoes Lee's account, as both women tell of forming relations with other women that were, for the first time, distinct from heterosexual relations. Raymond's (1986a) concept of heterorelationality has been taken up by Roseneil (2006a:325) to describe the worldview in which women can only be seen in relation to men, thereby obscuring 'women in relation to other women.' The accounts I have discussed, in which Hazel, Freda, Joanna and Lee portrayed changes in their friendships with other women through involvement in women's groups, signify shifts in these women's social orientation. Their accounts support the tendency described by Roseneil (2000:281) for participation in women's movement contexts to bring about women's realisations 'that they had learnt not to value other women's company and that their social orientations had been constructed as heterorelational.' The women's movement did more than provide contexts for friendships to form; it changed the meanings and structures of friendships. In women's groups, women offered one another mutual encouragement to put friendships at the centre of their lives. Prior to this, according to Hazel, 'women didn't feel they had a right to do that, to say, you know, "It's not just a girls' night out!"' Through their friendships with one another, women in women's groups cultivated refusals to see relations between women as secondary to women's relationships with men.

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<sup>61</sup> Joanna also suggested that conflicting opinions did not threaten friendships within women's groups to the same extent as within her previous friendships. As such, the bonds developed between women's group members posed a challenge to the traditional sociological model of friendship, which is based on the idea that acquaintances who disagree do not tend to become/remain friends (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954).

The work of Friedman (1993) draws attention to these socially disruptive possibilities of friendship. She argues that friendship has the capacity 'to inspire and support unconventional values, deviant lifestyles, and, ultimately, social change' (Friedman 1993:207). As well as signifying a shift away from hetero-relationally organised friendships between women, friendships formed in women's groups had transformative effects through women's influence on one another to make changes in their lives. I turn to Alison's account of how women's groups supported her through the process of becoming a lesbian to illustrate how the connections formed in women's groups inspired and supported women to develop subversive lifestyles.

Alison spoke at length about her emergent lesbian feminist identity during the 1970s, and told how she relied on group members' support to offset the effects of her mother's criticism of her at this time. As such, her account supports the idea that, whereas family members often feel uncomfortable in response to individuals changing (Little 1989), friendships offered personally and socially transformative possibilities for women (Friedman 1993).<sup>62</sup>

Alison described the moment at which she first came across lesbianism, at a women's centre in London, an event that marked the beginning of her questioning her own sexuality. As Alison told of witnessing an American woman talking about being a lesbian, she conveys a sense of excitement she experienced as she came across what to her at the time was an unfamiliar way of being a woman:

An American woman appeared from nowhere – well, as far as I was concerned, from nowhere...all I remember about it was that she lounged on this tumble-down old sofa in the office, stretched out on this sofa, and she was all dressed in black, and just talked about being lesbian very, very openly, and I remember sort of things started clicking in my head, and then we had these discos which were all-women discos... After the disco, somebody said, 'Shall we go to so-and-so's party?' and so we all went off to somewhere in London to someone's party, and again this was an all-women's party and I just remember sort of, I think, you know, my mind was just sort of starting to think there were other possibilities... (Alison)

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<sup>62</sup> For further discussion of the clash between family relations and individual and social change, see Ackelsberg (1983:346) and Pahl (2000:2). See also Limb's (1989:59) account of friendship as 'a positive force for grass-roots change.'

The effect upon Alison of this mysterious apparition of the exotic American lesbian can be understood using Raymond's (1986b:37) concept of 'Gyn/affection', defined as 'the state of influencing, acting upon, moving and impressing; and of being influenced, acted upon, moved, and impressed by other women'. This kind of woman-to-woman influence was a key dynamic in women's groups, and is supported by the observation that these contexts were key to the changes women underwent in the transition from heterosexual to lesbian identities (Barnhart, 1975). Through influencing one another to become lesbians, women friends assisted one another in the generation of what Friedman (1993:219) calls 'disloyalties to existing social institutions.'

Alison's account of witnessing other women demonstrating that 'there were other possibilities' for women (besides heterosexuality) portrays a life-changing moment for her, as she entered a context in which lesbianism was openly discussed (as opposed to being suppressed – see Rich 2003 [1980]). The vivid description of this woman ('American', 'lounging', 'stretching', 'dressed in black') conveys a sense of Alison's somewhat unsettling experience as she began to observe unfamiliar behaviour which challenged her prior understanding of herself as a woman. Alison went on to describe having felt 'sort of quite excited but quite turbulent inside' at this time in her life. The apparition of the American lesbian, seemingly 'from nowhere', is an allusion to the absence of spaces where such a way of being was possible: She must have come from nowhere, because no place existed where it was feasible to act in a way that seemed so liberated from the norms governing women's behaviour.

Alison later moved to Leeds and formed a lesbian group with other women she met through the women's movement. Within this group, being a lesbian was seen as acceptable, and even celebrated. As such, it provided a context within which group members could experience themselves and their connections to other women in ways that were in stark contrast to homophobic and heteronormative mainstream social contexts. The connections Alison formed with other women through her participation in feminist contexts illustrate what Friedman (1993:248) describes as the role of friendships in providing 'social support for people who are idiosyncratic,

whose unconventional values and deviant lifestyles make them victims of intolerance from family members and others who are unwillingly related to them.'

Later in Alison's story of her epic involvement in various feminist collective contexts, her perspective on women's groups shifted as she spoke of being thrown out of a group for having a relationship with a man. Relations women cultivated with one another in women's groups helped sustain unconventional lifestyles. However, the flipside of this meant that group support was conditional upon individual members maintaining the particular type of unconventional behaviour endorsed by the group, perhaps at the expense of their own autonomy. Due to the intrinsically precarious nature of the new ways of being a woman that were being cultivated within women's groups, there was a heightened emphasis on conformity in order to reinforce and protect the unity and coherence of these young and vulnerable collective identities.

*Gossip: creating a compass in 'no woman's land'*

One manifestation of the general cultural devaluing of women's relationships with one another concerns the denigration of the activity of gossiping (Coates 1996). An exception to the generally negative connotations of gossip, Allan's (1989) work analyses gossiping as a way of opposing pessimistic accounts of a society of alienated individuals. He argues that the prevalence of gossiping as a social activity is an indication of 'our everyday commitment to, fascination with and interest in personal relationships' (Allan 1989:1).

In attempting to protect women against the dangers of exposing 'our "nasty" side to the gaze of patriarchy' (Coates 1996:27), feminists have been fiercely defensive of women's friendships against stereotypical representations. The idea that women 'bitched' and 'gossiped' with and about one another in c-r groups was perceived as an accusation that their activities were devoid of political content (Sarachild 1968). Confirming the tendency to defend feminist consciousness-raising against such representations, Sandra emphasised that conversations in women's groups were more than gossiping: 'We didn't just sit around and gossip and talk about men. We did not. We'd talk about everything that mattered to us and who we were and, you know, what made us tick.'

Corresponding with patriarchal vilification of gossiping as a pointless feminine activity, Sandra's analysis makes a distinction between gossiping and talking about things that mattered. However another interviewee, Doreen, asserted the usefulness of gossiping, which she preferred to call 'working through case studies'. Doreen was part of a group during the eighties which was set up with the specific aim of discussing lesbian relationships. Within this group, members talked about their own experiences. In addition, the lives of other women (known to group members but not in the room) also provided material for discussion:

The other source, I think, increasingly as we got to know each other, was of course the ways in which other women conducted their relationships. And we would pull apart – I think you would call it 'gossip' in other circumstances, but I think part of it was, you know, how are they doing it? What's happening to them, you know, why are they doing it like that? What do we think about that? You know, and there were all kinds of complicated things going on, so I think we used some of that stuff actively to think through our own politics and situations really... We were pretty judgmental about what we thought was okay and what we thought was not okay, and then – so that was material for discussion, and I think – I mean, I think we sometimes underestimate how important working through case studies is for people working out what they think about certain kinds of issues. I think we did loads of that, absolutely loads of it. (Doreen)

Doreen's group found talking about other women's lives to be a useful method of grappling with unprecedented issues (to do with lesbian relationships, around which there was a lack of public discussion, besides homophobic or heteronormative representations of lesbians). Doreen's group used gossip as a practice through which to generate social change as they subjected lesbian relationships to the same critical analysis as heterosexual relationships had been subjected to within earlier c-r groups. Talking about particular scenarios as they arose for women in their mutual friendship networks, and hypothesising about what they might do in similar situations, was a useful way for group members to explore their identities and attitudes in the supportive context of the group.

While acknowledging the negative connotations of gossiping, Doreen asserted that it could also constitute a worthwhile social activity. There is some truth in the idea that women's groups 'bitched' and 'gossiped' about other women. However, the idea

that this was merely for idle amusement and did not serve a useful function at the time is misguided; gossiping had transformative effects in the lives of the women involved.

As women supported one another to develop what Friedman (1993) refers to as unconventional values and deviant lifestyles, they ended up in uncharted territory, lacking wider social support for their ways of being. The disorienting effects of making initial attempts to reject convention are summarised by Joanna in terms of feeling to be in 'no woman's land'. Joanna went on to explain that, 'In a way, you had no compass, you know, there wasn't this comforting thing that everybody did, even though it was a strait-jacket as well.' The metaphor of being in 'no woman's land' illustrates how crucial the encouragement of feminist friends was for the practice of trying out unfamiliar ways of being a woman.

The disorienting effects of women's new ways of relating to themselves and one another were assuaged by gossiping, which allowed women to look at the situations of other women in order to imagine different possibilities for oneself. The subversive potential of what tends to be derided as 'gossip' lies in its usefulness for cultivating and maintaining unconventional values and behaviour. Together with Joanna's characterisation of women's experience of being without a compass, Doreen's analysis highlights the role of gossiping in the creation of supportive networks 'to sustain us in our nonconformity' (Seiden and Bart 1976:190). In aiding the proliferation and persistence of new cultural forms (such as the discourses for talking about lesbian relationships and identities being developed in Doreen's group), women's friendships and the activities involved in them (including gossiping) encouraged what were at the time subversive ways of being. As Friedman (1993:219) argues, friendship 'enables the cultural survival of people who deviate from social norms and who suffer hostility and ostracism from others for their deviance.'

### ***The limits of feminist friendships: social inequality and social control***

Friendships formed in women's groups were transformative, but there were limits to the extent of this transformation. It has been noted that the notion of sisterhood problematically disguises differences between women relating to class and race (see hooks 1982), as well as potentially reinforcing the ideology of the family

(Ackelsberg 1983). In addition to celebrating friendships as offering opportunities for self-realisation, it is important also to recognise that friendships 'reflect and reinforce the stratified nature of society' (O'Connor 1998:119). There are constraints on who can be friends with whom, relating to factors such as class, race, gender, educational background, marital status, religious attitudes, level of income, and recreational interests (Hays 1988; O'Connor 1998). The idea of friendships as freely chosen relations serves to conceal the way in which some individuals have more freedom to choose their friends than others. Individuals tend to be drawn to make friends with others similar to themselves (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954), making choices about who to be friends with that reflect how they are differentially situated according to power hierarchies. As Bauman (2004:34) points out in his work on sociality, 'freedom of some *presumes* un-freedom of others' (author's italics). To see friendship as connected with social inequalities brings into question its voluntariness.

To demonstrate how the friendships formed in women's groups still relied on similarities between women, I shall present Judith's story about a woman who came along to a meeting of her women's group, but who left the group due to not having the 'correct' feminist consciousness. Judith's group was formed by women who knew one another through work (they were all social workers, except Judith, who was a teacher). Judith described group members as professionals or degree-educated women. Through word of mouth, the group increased in size until there were twelve/fifteen members. At this point, they decided not to let anyone else join because there would not be enough room to comfortably meet in one another's homes. Judith explained that there were worries amongst group members that this would lead to elitist or exclusionary practices that were at odds with the ethos of a feminist group:

There were worries that it was being elitist and excluding and if it was supposed to be all about welcoming any women who wanted to come. But it was an incredibly intellectual middle-class group of people... There was one person who came who was a secretary in one of the social work departments where one of the members worked and I've – well, she was sort of – her thinking was on a different level and I think she was – her thinking was – well nobody openly said, 'oh, you're not right on enough', or, you know, 'you're not feminist enough', but that was what people were feeling. (Judith)

Judith went on to explain that the secretary did not continue to be part of the group for very long. She had been the only member of the group that was not university-educated, and her lack of 'awareness' came across when she would say things that 'didn't click with what we were all talking about'. Judith felt bad about the way in which this woman was implicitly excluded from the group: 'I do think it was horrible of us'. She worried that the group's reaction to the secretary's lack of awareness may have eventually led to 'low self-esteem', in stark contrast with stories of friendships enhancing each woman's relationship with herself. At the time of the interview, Judith expressed empathy with the secretary, and a concern for how her experience of the group might have had negative repercussions on this woman's sense of self: 'I know how I felt sometimes when I felt low self-esteem, different things, and she must've felt that. Who knows what she feels now, looking back on it.'

Judith's concerns about the group being elitist and exclusionary when it should have been welcoming to all women are elucidated by Seiden and Bart's (1976:216) suggestion that groups faced tough value conflicts as they tried to relate 'to a norm of including all women and at the same time to some other norm which is important to the group'. The other norm which was important to Judith's group entailed having a particular consciousness, or the right kind of awareness, which was related to an individual's type of work and their level of education (i.e. being a professional as opposed to a secretary). As such, the availability of opportunities to develop closeness with other women within this particular group was dependent upon being middle-class.

The class bias in women's movement representations of women's friendships is evident in Seiden and Bart's (1976:210) suggestion that, due to the women's movement, 'it became not only possible but desirable to go out with women to restaurants, plays, and so forth, whereas previously one could not participate in such activities except as part of a female-male couple.' Whilst their work importantly recognises shifts in women's social orientation and the possibility of moving away from hetero-relationally organised friendships, Seiden and Bart's (1976) reference to restaurants and plays is suggestive of how understandings of women's friendships



that were emerging from the movement at the time placed an emphasis on types of activities which would not have been possible for all women.

The ideal of sisterhood implied that propinquity was possible between all women, whereas in practice, individuals discriminated within their friendship choices. Evidence suggests that interviewees exercised what Raymond (1986a:171-2) calls the 'rigors of discernment' in the formation of friendships with (some of) their fellow women's group participants. Inevitably, women did not wish to become closer friends with some of the women they met. Although they facilitated different kinds of friendships to form, women's groups could not create conditions in which women would desire to befriend *all* other women, regardless of their personalities or other characteristics.

In addition to the transformative potential of friendship, friendships might also perpetuate social inequalities and play a role in social control (e.g. the regulation of women's behaviour). Just as women friends can support one another to develop radical ways of being, so too can they encourage one another to conform to appropriate feminine behaviour (Bartky 1997). Hercus (2005) draws on Bartky's (1997) work on the disciplinary effects of women's friends and acquaintances in order to consider how women who become involved in feminist contexts can be subject to ridicule and teasing by their non-feminist friends (Hercus 2005:89). Such opposition, whilst not overtly oppressive or coercive, nevertheless serves to reinforce hegemonic femininity. As such, women's friendships have a double-edged political effect, potentially supporting and/or challenging existing social relations. In contrast with Friedman's (1993) emphasis on the transformative possibilities of women's friendships, Wilton (1992:507) sees bonding between heterosexual women as a way of reinforcing heteropatriarchal power relations. The potentially contradictory implications of women's friendships for feminism are usefully summed up by Seiden and Bart (1976:196), who state that friendships between women have historically provided *both* 'extremely powerful supports to family structure' *and* 'important alternatives to exclusive dependence on family role relationships'. In exploring the politically transformative potential of the friendships formed in women's groups, it is also important to recognise that women's friendships also served to secure privilege (of some women over others).

***Friendships, or some other kind of relation?***

Of relevance to the question of whether or not the relationships that formed between women in women's groups can really be conceptualised as friendships are interviewees' suggestions that the presence of pre-existing friendships within women's groups could be problematic. Doreen recalled that members of her first Leeds c-r group were already too entangled in one another's friendship networks for the process to be effective: one member was close friends with another member's partner, producing conflicting loyalties which, Doreen felt, precluded openness and honesty within the group. In a later group, Doreen began anew with women she didn't know, and had a much more positive experience of practising c-r amongst women who were less embroiled in one another's social lives. Members of Doreen's first c-r group never built up 'any really strong sense of trust' between them; however, the later group, whose members were less interconnected from the start, proved to be a more rewarding experience for Doreen. Thus Doreen demonstrated a preference for seeing c-r groups and friendships as separate. Her account highlights, somewhat counter-intuitively, that pre-existing friendships could hinder the development of group relations. From Doreen's suggestion that pre-existing friendships presented problems for c-r groups, we might consider whether less intimacy between group members at the start of the c-r process made for greater opportunities for self-reinvention, through the cultivation of relationships that differed from and challenged women's existing roles within families, workplace relations, and previous friendships.

Further highlighting the potential for existent bonds to skew relations between group members, Tess shared with me some of her writings from the 1970s, including an account of the problems that occurred within a c-r group she joined for a short time in Bradford. Inspired by Freeman's (1972) paper, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, Tess wrote that the group seemed to be run by an inner elite, 'who almost expect the discussion to mainly occur between themselves'. This inner elite, Tess observed, made decisions about the group outside of meetings, causing newer members to feel excluded, and contravening the group's no-leadership rule. In this way, friendships between *some* group members posed a threat to equality within groups, as their interactions outside of meetings obscured decision-making procedures, leading to a

breakdown in communication. The emergence of cliques within women's groups seemed somewhat inevitable according to interviewees' accounts. Regardless of whether or not the friendships pre-existed the group, friendships came to overlap with group relations in many instances. Freeman (1972) argued that groups needed formal structures in order for power relations to operate explicitly rather than insidiously. To apply Freeman's (1972) analysis to the dilemma of whether c-r worked better between friends or strangers, as an informal relation, friendship could be seen to present problems for the management of power dynamics within groups. As such, friendships might constitute a corruption of the c-r process, rather than facilitating, or being a positive outcome, of it.

In contrast to the idea of pre-existing friendships as problematic for c-r groups, Alison told a very different story about the importance of participants' existing familiarity with one another. Around 1974, prior to moving back to Leeds, Alison was part of a small c-r group with two other women in London, which she described as follows: 'We didn't know each other very well, in fact we hardly knew each other at all, so it was quite hard-going really and to be honest, I don't remember much about what we said in that group.'

Alison's experience of having been in a group with women she did not know was ultimately unrewarding. Interviewees seemed to expect to make friends through c-r. The moment of recognition between women in c-r groups, as they saw something of themselves in the stories other women told about their lives, resembles how friendship has been described as a process of identification and mirroring of experience. For example, C.S. Lewis (2002 [1960]) describes the intensity of the moment of friendship formation as follows: 'What? You too? I thought I was the only one.'

However, the concept of friendship does not fully encapsulate the connections formed between women in these groups. Firstly, not all group members became friends, suggesting other kinds of connections were also formed in women's groups; secondly, group members related differently to friends in that they could come into conflict and still be bound to one another by mutual commitment to the group. This

comes across in Joanna's account of women resolving arguments in women's groups:

You could feel cross with people and feel irritated by things that they did and said, but you could say it, you could say, 'well actually I find that annoying when you say that', and in my life, I don't think that had ever been possible. It had always caused too much friction, you just kept your mouth shut, you just didn't – if you really had some sort of, you know, cross words with them for whatever reason – or not, more often, not cross words with them, just you didn't say it, you know, that friendship or whatever just didn't develop or you ended it. Whereas in the women's group, you could have those discussions and people could actually get quite heated with each other, and because you were a group, somebody else would often be the mediator, but it would get sorted out, because you were gonna meet in two weeks or whatever... It would be a big thing to have dropped out; you'd got to resolve it. And you wanted to because this had become so important to you, we all felt it. (Joanna)

Joanna's account betrays her excitement about being able to have heated interactions without this having permanently destructive effects on relationships. Her account also implies that bonds formed in women's groups differed from ordinary friendships in that individuals were required to overcome conflicts in the interests of the group. While friendships are understood as entirely voluntary relations which people choose to remain involved in on a moment-to-moment basis (Giddens 1991), connections formed within group contexts were shaped by individuals' sense of what would be in the interests of the group, and, as Joanna pointed out, their responsibility to act accordingly, by not missing meetings and so on. Group members' relations also differed from ordinary friendships in that their interactions were formed around expectations that they would avoid behaving in ways that would be detrimental to the group (e.g. by falling out), thus making them distinct from (freely chosen) friendships.

Finally, Sandra's account adds to an understanding of relationships between women's group members as distinct from friendships. Sandra explained her belief in the importance of women forming connections with one another that differed from other kinds of friendships. Situating women's groups in their historical context by comparing them with her daughters' activities, Sandra suggested her daughters missed out on the types of interactions and relationships that were created through c-r. She suggested that there was still room for group consciousness-raising within

contemporary society, noting the value of having a space for developing relationships that were separate from friendships:

My daughters have got bags of women friends, they spend lots of time together, they talk together, you know, they support one another, but they don't sit and consciousness raise. Not – they don't actively say, 'this is something that we're doing as women'. They do it, but they do it as part of a friendship network, and I think that that's different, because what we had was something separate from our friendship networks. (Sandra)

Sandra's analysis supports the idea that relationships formed in women's groups differed from ordinary friendships.

*Ideological or incidental/inevitable?*

Although I have argued that feminist contexts were conducive to the creation of new kinds of bonds between women, it is important to note that not all interviewees considered the relationships women formed with one another in women's groups to be an effect of the new values being promoted within them. Janet saw lesbian relationships as an inevitable offshoot of women's groups, but did not differentiate between these spaces and other contexts in which people come together to do purposeful activities with like-minded others:

You find that relationships build – it doesn't matter whether it's heterosexual relationships – wherever you work, or wherever you're gathering and meeting people, then you'll form relationships with people to certain depths. So when you get a group of women working so closely together and discussing everything so deeply, of course there's going to be relationships form, because that's how relationships do form and it doesn't matter whether it's with two women or two men or a man and a woman. But because you're in that all-women environment, it's inevitable I feel. (Judith)

Conspicuously absent from Janet's account is any reference to the creation of altered meanings around women's friendships within these contexts. Although she met her partner through women's groups, Janet presents this as an incidental occurrence. As such, not all interviewees were in agreement that movement spaces did more to bring about changes in women's friendships than simply bringing women together in a way that inevitably led to the development of relationships. Janet's case

illustrates that not all interviewees made a connection between feminist ideology (i.e. sisterhood) and the relationships formed between women in women's groups.

### *Conclusion and further comments*

Friedman's (1993) notion of the role of friendships in the cultural survival of subversive ways of being has been crucial to my argument that women's groups assisted in the coming into being and continuance of new ways of being a woman during the 1970s and 1980s.

I have demonstrated that interviewees saw friendships formed in women's groups as different from their friendships prior to women's groups. Women reported not having had close friendships with women prior to participating in women's groups (e.g. Hazel, Freda). It seems that, prior to the women's movement, (middle-class) women's interactions tended to take place in situations in which women played roles in relation to one another that were offshoots of their roles in relation men. Creating women-only spaces was a method of removing or reducing this dynamic.<sup>63</sup> As such, friendships formed in women's movement contexts at this time signified a shift away from hetero-relationally organised social relations (Raymond 1986a). Although hetero-relationality continues to shape social life (Roseneil 2006a), the extent to which it impacted upon women's lives during the 1960s is, according to Lee, almost unimaginable ('quite alien for people to understand') now.

I have argued that friendships between women that were experienced as distinct from, not secondary to, their relations with men, were one of the sociologically and politically significant outcomes of West Yorkshire women's groups. Prior to the women's movement, friendships between women were viewed with condescension, including by women themselves. Social scientists' disparagement of women's friendships (e.g. Tiger 1969; see also Allan 1989) operated as a subtle form of social control that was resisted within the groups. The political significance of women coming to like themselves and one another lies in the contrast it made with ways of

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<sup>63</sup> Some may argue that hetero-relational dynamics were not necessarily eliminated from women-only space (e.g. Wilton 1992). Also, Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1979) suggested that heterosexual women would represent men's points of view within women-only space. A more detailed analysis of the significance of sexual identity in feminists' friendships was unfortunately beyond the scope of the thesis. For further discussion, see O'Boyle and Thomas (1996); Galupo et al (2004).

relating that were deemed appropriate within other social contexts of the time (Raymond 1986a; 1986b).

Taking account of Foucauldian understandings of how power operates – specifically, that there is no ‘position of exteriority in relation to power’ (Foucault 1980:95) – we might critique the idea that c-r groups were ‘free space’ (Allen 1970; Dreifus 1973; Evans 1979). No space was entirely free (of power relations, role-playing, etc.). However, that does not mean that attempts to create free space were therefore failures.<sup>64</sup> Women’s movement ideologies provided goals rather than reflections of actuality. Seiden and Bart (1976:215) point out that sisterhood, as an ideology, was intended as a goal, ‘rather than an accurate description of the behavior complexities and motivational conflicts of everyday life.’ That the promotion and celebration of women’s friendships in feminist contexts did not match up with women’s actual experiences within these friendships is illustrated by Doreen’s suggestion that women were judgmental of one another, which hints towards the darker and more complex sides to women’s friendships.

Discourses advocating the cultivation of sisterhood in women-only contexts were not taken up uncritically in West Yorkshire women’s groups, but they nevertheless had productive effects on how women related to one another in these contexts. The ideology of sisterhood/free space prompted women to attempt to ‘withdraw, break out, regroup, transcend, shove aside, step, migrate, say no’ (Frye (1993[1977]:97). Through creating women’s groups, women made spaces in which they could expect to relate to one another in ways that were very different from their interactions in male-defined and male-dominated social contexts.

Joanna and Lee told of the increased capacity for honesty within friendships formed in women’s groups. Calling into question the notion of being really honest, as relying on the existence of an absolute truth, we might instead consider that striving for honesty created different constructions of reality. By providing opportunities for women to be really honest (about not being able to live up to the expectations of them, to manage their children, to cite the example given by Joanna), c-r groups

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<sup>64</sup> For further discussion of free space as a metaphor in social science and social movements, see Polletta (1999).

facilitated practices of truth-telling that brought into being new representations of women's lives. With reference to Valverde (2004), I wish to emphasise that the value of this practice is independent of whether or not what women said as they tried to be really honest constituted the objective truth about their lives.

Against Raymond's (1986a) suggestion of the de-ethicizing effect of the ideal of sisterhood (through its removal of the possibility of making committed choices to particular individuals and not others), I have shown that women did exercise discernment in the relations they formed with one another through participating in c-r. To the extent that women chose to form closer friendships with some women rather than others, the connections formed in these contexts can be seen to have closely resembled friendships (which are necessarily freely chosen rather than formed out of responsibility to the movement). However, these connections differed from ordinary friendships to the extent that women felt they had made a commitment to the group, including to those members they disagreed with or liked less than the others.

That women's groups ameliorated women's isolation is illustrated by the ways in which interviewees looked back on their lives prior to women's groups, remembering a lack of closeness with other women. Interacting with other women similar to themselves helped women to feel less isolated and disoriented. Whereas women's groups have been defended against the accusation that they were nothing more than mere 'bitch sessions' (Sarachild 1968), I have instead drawn attention to how talking about other women and their lives can be re-evaluated as a socially and politically valuable activity. The derision of gossiping is one of the ways in which women have been subtly dissuaded from seeing their connections with one another as socially meaningful (Allan 1989; Coates 1996). However, new understandings of women's interactions with one another emerged from West Yorkshire women's groups, such that gossiping can be seen as a useful activity through which women supported one another through times of change.

Through choosing to form close friendships with other women, as well as choosing which women to form closer bonds with (despite there also being a compulsory commitment to all group members), women showed signs of the subjective agency



Weston (1991) identifies as implicit in the notion of choosing one's kin. Interviewees gave agentic accounts of friendships of varying closeness, resisting both the patriarchal mandate that women avoid making friends with one another, as well as the ideology of sisterhood which recommended that they be close to all women. For women to form significant bonds outside of the family was a crucial moment in developing modes of resisting dominant constructions of what it meant to be a woman at this time (i.e. a wife and a mother).

The notion of sisterhood between all women downplays the ways in which friendship is experienced differently according to factors such as social class. Working-class women – who are arguably more likely to have experienced women-only spaces prior to women's groups – are under-represented in my sample. In response to Judith's discussion of the secretary in her group, it would be interesting to consider working-class women's experiences of women's groups, exploring for instance whether they also previously only interacted with women through their male partners, or whether perhaps they made friends with women they worked alongside (see Pollert 1981; Cavendish 1982).

Feminist friendships can be shown to assist in the cultivation and maintenance of unconventional attitudes and behaviour. However, unconventional attitudes and behaviour do not retain their unconventionality indefinitely across time and space. The question arises as to whether enduring friendships between women can retain their radical status over time, or whether their personally-politically transformative potential eventually fades. Sawicki (1991) draws on Foucault to call attention to the risk of individuals becoming too comfortable with themselves, their groups, and the foundations of their oppositional consciousness. I wish to suggest that for women who had been in several groups and had various significant feminist friendships over time, shifts and breaks in their collective feminist practices might be seen to have refreshed the politically necessary 'uncomfortable' relation with the self. However, for women who became settled into stable social lives, the political effects of their earlier practices may have been lost. Whereas friendships formed in feminist contexts of the 1970s and 1980s were crucial to supporting dissidence at the time, to continue to be part of the same women's group, with friends, eventually becomes a sedentary form of social and political practice. I argue this on the basis that

unknown and risky connections are more conducive to the production of feminist consciousness than remaining in places that feel safe, or like 'home' (de Lauretis 1988). However, further work needs to be done to evidence a fuller exploration of the political implications of the continuation into late adulthood of friendships formed much earlier in life.

Although I drew attention to Joanna's suggestion that disagreements tended to be resolved within women's groups, there is evidence in the literature that groups were sometimes unable to 'agree to disagree', leading to painful break-ups (Seiden and Bart 1976). Although none of the women I interviewed cited irresolvable conflicts as reasons for groups ceasing to meet, such stories might have been missed due to the methodological limitations of the research; potential interviewees are more likely to come forward if they have positive stories to share. Women who left women's groups due to conflicts may not have wished to participate in the research.

## **Chapter Nine: “Second-Wave” Feminists’ Presents: Critically Exploring Generations, Conflict and the Future**

This chapter critiques stories of generational succession and conflict that pervade accounts of recent developments in feminist political ideas and practices. The first half of the chapter demonstrates how the literature on feminist generations portrays second-wave feminists’ disappointment with younger women, and young women’s rebellion against the older generation. The second half of the chapter draws on interview data to explore the possibility of discussing the recent and ongoing development of the feminist movement in ways that avoid fixing the second-wave generation in the past, or looking to younger generations for evidence of feminism’s success. My analysis shows that conflict between generations is not the only way in which change occurs in movement ideas or practices.

Invoking Edelman’s (2004) observations about the future orientation of political discourse, I argue that accounts of changes in the feminist movement that are organised around conflicting generations reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal narratives, in which second-wave feminists are positioned as self-sacrificing mother-figures, driven by a desire to nurture the next generation by creating a better future for them. I challenge the tendency for accounts of the recent history of feminism to downplay the ongoing impact of second-wave feminism within the lives of second-wave feminists, arguing that stories about feminism’s recent past might pay more attention to life course change, in order to make more apparent the ongoing effects of feminist practices of the past on the still-living women who were involved.

The expectations of the younger generation constructed by feminist authors reflect the conflict model of political generations put forward by Mannheim (1952[1928]). This model supposes that social change occurs as younger members of society get to know the world anew and inject their new perspectives, which conflict with those of the older generation and take society in a new direction. This model problematically assumes that each generation is a fixed and stable entity (Whittier 1995). By drawing attention to the way in which life course change within a generation affects the movement’s development, I show that there are alternatives to telling stories about feminism that rely on generational antagonism.

*Theoretical accounts of the second and third waves of feminist politics*

As mentioned in Chapter 5, interviewees often invited me to give my opinions on the current state of affairs within feminism. They were curious to hear about how ‘the next bead on the necklace’, as Sandra called it, was carrying on their hard work. Their inquiries resonate with academic work on recent developments in feminist theory and politics, in which feminism is regarded as something that is passed on. As Adkins (2004:427) notes, feminism is seen as ‘a kind of familial property, a form of inheritance and legacy which is transmitted through generations.’

Interviewees spoke of the differences between feminism then (i.e. during the 1970s and 1980s) and now. According to media representations, feminism is in a perpetual state of existential angst, popularly portrayed as a thing of the past, or as simply ‘dead’ (see *Time* magazine, June 29, 1998, cited in Harnois 2008:124; Pozner 2003). While the media creates an impression of a post-feminist world, ‘in which issues of gender inequality have been comfortably resolved’ (Bryson 1999:5), within academia, representations of post-feminism are more ambiguous. Young women, notably Roiphe (1993), have gained prominence as post-feminist writers by ‘creating caricatures of second-wave feminism and then lambasting them’ (Snyder 2008:176). However, the term ‘post-feminism’ also has more productive uses as a way of recognising that contemporary society manifests some of the effects of feminism (whether or not these have come about in the ways second-wavers intended).<sup>65</sup> The term used in this way allows recent feminist authors to acknowledge how they are differently situated in relation to the feminist movement, compared with the second-wave generation.

It is useful to distinguish between the various uses of the term post-feminism. It is deployed both as a rhetorical device to construct feminism as redundant, and as a way of observing the impact of second-wave feminism. Recognising how more recent feminist identities are situated *post-/after* second-wave feminism, contemporary feminists articulate their identities in opposition to the post-feminist belief that feminism’s moment has passed. In initiating talk of a third wave of

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<sup>65</sup> The concept of post-feminism as an acknowledgement of the presence/status/influence of feminism within contemporary society also enables poststructuralist feminist theorists to recognise the historically contingent status and effects of feminist discourse.

feminism, Walker (1995) situates herself in opposition to media-publicized *anti-feminist post-feminists* (e.g. Roiphe 1993). The term 'third wave' has come to be used more widely to distinguish feminism underway since the early 1990s from that of the 1970s (the second wave), with the following quotation frequently used to conjure up the different feminist era in which young women have grown up:

For anyone born after the early 1960s, the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it's simply in the water (Baumgardner and Richards 2000:17–18).

The usefulness of the wave metaphor has been critiqued due to the way in which it misleadingly implies that each wave comprises a specific generation or coherent set of positions (Garrison 2000; Dean 2009). The challenges and dilemmas of the wave metaphor are discussed by Laughlin et al (2010) in a way that questions this way of conceptualising the history of feminism. Although the present chapter is concerned with analysing interview data rather than proposing a new system for representing feminism's past and present, the analysis I go on to develop will engage critically with constructions of feminism that rely on distinctions between generations (specifically, second- and third-wavers). While acknowledging that the wave metaphor is problematic, I nevertheless deploy the term second-wave as a convenient way of referring to women who were active in feminist contexts of the 1970s.

Feminism is not only everywhere and 'for everybody' (hooks 2000) nowadays but it is also more formally recognised, which shapes how individuals come to relate to feminist theory and politics. Whereas second-wavers came to the movement through participation in informally organised grassroots contexts (such as c-r groups), many third-wavers first encounter feminism in its institutionalised form via academia (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003:14).

The idea of feminism as something passed on through generations (Adkins 2004) has implications for young women's relationships with feminism, which are considered by Henry (2003; 2004; 2005) in her work on feminist generations. Henry (2003) argues that the mother-daughter metaphor for conceptualising feminist generations removes the intentional element of actively identifying with a political

generation. Young women's ambivalent identification with feminism comes, Henry (2003) explains, from not experiencing the process of actively choosing or helping to create feminism. The dominance of the idea of feminism as something that is transmitted from mothers to daughters within representations of feminist generations problematically portrays feminism as a set of expectations placed on younger women rather than as an identity which is voluntarily cultivated or taken on.

The idea of feminism as barely noticeable to younger women (Baumgardner and Richards 2000) refers to its taken-for-granted place in younger women's lives. The notion that younger women are distant from, and therefore unable to fully comprehend, the struggles faced by second-wavers can be elucidated with reference to Mannheim's pivotal work on political generations. For Mannheim, society comprises several generations living contemporaneously. However, each generation experiences what might actually be the same events differently due to 'the different "stratification" of their lives' (1952:298). So while several generations coexist, they are in fact non-contemporaneous in that their subjective experiences of society differ. Although Mannheim's work is useful for considering how different generations of feminists are differently situated in relation to each other and to the movement, his theory problematically assumes that the worldview of a particular generation remains fixed over the life course (Whittier 1995).

Distinguishing itself from second-wave feminism (as well as post-feminism), third-wave feminism is constructed in relation to the second wave through sometimes ferocious critiques of it. Kelly (2005:234) argues that in claiming feminism for themselves, third-wavers 'reject the "outdated," "stodgy," or "stagnant" ideas of their elders.' In a similar vein but with different political motivations, third-wave writers have joined their post-feminist peers in constructing their positions as distant from their second-wave feminist foremothers.

Although the differences between second-wave and third-wave feminist theory and politics are arguably overstated, critical representations of the second-wave form a basis for the articulation of a third-wave feminist position, providing a 'straw woman' whom they can 'demolish, once and for all, with their new-and improved brand of feminism' (Kelly 2005:236). Such representations – while perhaps not

adhering to reality – have the effect of producing a basis for younger women to assert their own feminist position. Snyder (2008:179) suggests that caricatures of second-wave feminism constitute ‘a convenient foil against which third-wave feminism can define itself.’ Third-wavers’ ostensible misconstrual of the second wave is not necessarily seen as a betrayal, but as a strategic attempt to set up a new political/theoretical standpoint from which to speak/act as feminists.

An oppositional stance in relation to second-wave feminism forms the basis of third-wave feminist identity. Considering whether third-wave feminism constitutes younger women’s rebellion against their feminist foremothers, Snyder (2008:176) argues that, rather than distancing themselves from the very idea of feminist practice, third-wavers ‘seek to rid feminist practice of its perceived rigidity’ (Snyder 2008:176). In rejecting prior forms of feminist politics, third-wave writers present severely negative portrayals of second-wave feminism/feminists, amongst which are the following unfavourable portrayals: stodgy and stagnant (Kelly 2005), serious and anti-joy (Baumgardner and Richards 2000), and ‘dour, frumpy, and frigid’ (Snyder 2008:179). As such, the conflict model of generational relations in feminism relies upon and perpetuates distorted impressions of the ‘other’ generation.

A sense of antagonism between generations of women pervades accounts of the recent history and current state of feminism. Third-wavers’ antagonistic stance towards the second wave is apparent in accounts of recent developments in feminism offered by those writing as members of the younger generation. Whereas second-wave feminism opposes patriarchal ideologies and discourses, third-wave feminism exists in critical relation both to patriarchy *and* second-wave feminists’ responses to patriarchy.<sup>66</sup> In her critique of anti-feminist writers, Henry (2003:210) argues that feminism has paradoxically come to be presented as a barrier to women’s liberation, standing ‘in the place that once was occupied by the external forces against feminism.’

Second-wave feminism is associated with dogma for younger generations of feminists, who oppose the idea that there is ‘only one right way to be a feminist and to do feminism’ (Henry 2005: 83-4). Third-wave feminists are critical of the notion

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<sup>66</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the reflexivity of feminist theory.

of sisterhood (Denfeld 1995), and of the perceived requirement to conform 'to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories'. A feminist identity, they fear, 'will dictate and regulate our lives' (Walker 1995: xxxiii). The more individualised ethos of third-wave feminism is widely noted, and is evident in the suggestion of one third-wave author that, 'ultimately the successes of feminism can only be measured by an individual woman's quality of life' (Salaam 2002:334-335).<sup>67</sup>

Striving to recognise that 'every generation by definition confronts a new historical context' (Snyder 2008:178), third-wave feminists attempt to portray the 'different societal contexts' (Snyder 2008:178) they face. However, some of these accounts implicitly erase the continuing presence of second-wavers within today's society. The problematic erasure of second-wave feminists from third-wave constructions of the present is evident in Dicker and Piepmeier's (2003:10) statement that, 'we no longer live in the world that feminists of the second wave faced', which ignores the fact that feminists of the second wave continue to face the world, albeit a different one. Dicker and Piepmeier's (2003) assertion suggests that the younger generation's experiences of today's world are the stuff of new feminist politics and activism. The older generation of second-wave feminists are only present in this narrative to the extent that they represent the other against which third-wavers establish their collective (we) identity.

As part of the emphasis on how feminism benefits future generations, the continuing existence of second-wave feminists (second-wave feminists' *present*) is disregarded, in favour of a portrayal of them as feminists 'of the past'. As the 'now' generation's feminist *foremothers*, they are thought to have worked selflessly towards a better world for their metaphorical offspring, without concern for the benefits they might reap in their own lifetimes. In recent accounts erasing second-wavers' current identities, these women's identities are rendered invisible in favour of an emphasis on the identities of the younger women. When older feminists are portrayed in the literature, they are present in the form of eerie caricatures – or 'fighting ghosts' (Orr 1997:32). While much has been written about the cultural forms of young women, who apparently like to wear sexy clothes (Jeffreys 1996; McRobbie 2008), less

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<sup>67</sup> See Wolf (1993) for another example of individualised feminism.



attention is paid to what older women (including second-wave feminists) are wearing these days. The emphasis on younger women is symptomatic of the widely held ageist assumption that political consciousness formation takes place during adolescence and early adulthood (Andrews 1991). Thus young people's political worldviews are held to be the most vibrant and significant within society at any particular historical moment.

I see the cultivation of a critical relationship with the self as an ongoing practice, such that it is important to recognise the continuing significance of feminism within the lives of members of the second-wave generation. In this way, accounts of the recent history of feminism might avoid the ageist erasure of second-wave feminists from their constructions of the present. Overlooking the continuing existence of second-wave feminists entails discounting the possibility that these individuals might now be third-wavers' allies, or even, potentially, identify themselves as third-wavers now. Some second-wave feminists may well have come to identify more with third-wave feminist theories and practices, or have current political beliefs which are in other ways in tension with those associated with second-wave feminism. However, second-wave feminists' critiques of *second-wave feminism* are downplayed as part of the discursive production of conflict between second- and third-wave feminists.

If the conflict model of generational relations assumes that a political generation remains the same (retaining the same worldview) throughout their life course, even where life course change in the second wave generation is acknowledged, it is done so in the interests of developing a caricature of the "other" generation against which to position the third wave. Depictions of second-wavers' lives in the present serve to bolster the caricatures against which the third wave positions itself, for instance through criticism of second-wavers not just for what they were but also for what they have become. This is evident in Kelly's (2005:235) discussion of how third-wave texts consider second-wave feminists to have 'grown into crabby, middle aged avatars of political correctness, whose humorless view of the world cannot accommodate the fun-loving and sexy young activists of the rising generation.' This castigation of second-wavers is not just a critique of the seventies' movement's

values but of the actual individuals who took part, who are seen as continuing to embody ways of being which offend third-wave sensibilities.

The intergenerational transmission of feminism implies that younger women can be looked to for proof of feminism's success, and that the fruits of second-wavers' labour present themselves through the appropriately feminist behaviour of younger women. To gauge feminism's success in this way results in problematic emotional dynamics, including second-wavers' disappointment, anger and rejection, as they are seen to 'bemoan the invisibility of feminism among young women' (Snyder 2008:178). Young women's behaviour is read as an insult to the second-wave generation (McRobbie 1999), showing a lack of appreciation for their hard work. In addition, pity is present in second-wavers' observations that the third-wave generation is missing out on valuable experiences including communal struggle (Mitchell 1995). Although young women's disappointment in the older generation is less prevalent, some third-wavers have suggested they feel let down by their feminist fore-mothers, e.g. Kelly (2005:241) notes that third-wave literature 'is couched in anger at the perceived failures of second wave "mothers" to listen or respond to their concerns.'

Despite third-wavers' attempts to wipe out their feminist foremothers from their accounts of the feminist present (a form of discursive matricide<sup>68</sup>), second-wave feminists are alive and kicking<sup>69</sup> and giving as good as they get in terms of contributing to the production of narratives of intergenerational conflict. As a self-defined second-wave feminist, Kelly (2005) offers the following critique of third-wave feminists' heavy emphasis on individual empowerment:

The personal remains personal, and thus problematic, for without systematic analysis or interrogation of the anecdotal, without drawing the linkages between the individual and larger structures of power, privilege, or oppression, it's impossible to articulate a theoretical position (Kelly 2005:237).

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<sup>68</sup> Henry (2003) uses the term 'psychological matricide', inspired by Chesler's (1997) *Letters to a Young Feminist*.

<sup>69</sup> Thanks to Liz Stanley for pointing out that second-wave feminists, far from being 'ancients', are present, in the room, in force, and in their (our) prime [email] (personal communication, 14 September 2007).

The idea of third-wave feminism as too individualised, to the extent that it is personal but not political, constructs a future-oriented sense of expectation about what the younger generation *should* be doing in order to take up where second-wavers left off. Second-wavers recommend and advise about future directions for the movement, e.g. suggesting that third-wavers ought to ‘find a way to theorize collectivity’ (Kelly 2005:243).

In response to second-wavers’ disappointment, younger women’s feeling of resentment (of the duty placed on them to continue in the same vein as their predecessors) is evident:

I feel like just by being born after you [second-wave feminists], I’ve somehow signed some contract...that says that I have to do everything you say, live up to your expectations, achieve what you wanted to achieve, or else it’s a betrayal of some sort (Cortese 1997, cited in Harnois 2008:133).

As such, younger women are provocatively refusing to perform the identities expected of them by their feminist foremothers (Levy 2005), as they actively shun the possibilities brought about by the efforts of previous generations of feminists. By rejecting what are considered to be feminist ways of being, young women refuse to give the older generation the pleasure of seeing the benefits of their hard work; they are portrayed by the likes of Levy as *intentionally* letting their feminist foremothers down. As such, younger women’s refusal to conform to their feminist foremothers’ wishes for them is what forms the very basis of a new wave of feminism. Here lies the intentionality that Henry (2003) notes is missing from accounts of the younger generation’s relationship to feminism; it is present in accounts of younger women’s active desire to not conform to what they think second-wavers expected of the younger, more supposedly liberated generation.

The notion of feminism as transmitted down through generations is offensive to both younger and older feminists, who object to the ‘other’ generation’s expectation that feminism will be passed on. As a young feminist, Looser (1997) argues that second-wave feminists’ attempts to pass on feminist knowledge are destined to fail. The mission to pass the torch of feminism is also rejected by second-wavers, such as Morgan (2003), who has the following message for younger feminists:

Don't waste energy envying *or* resenting us. Do what *you* need to do... Younger women often patronize older ones: 'How *cute* that you were all so *militant!* Now, of course, you're *ancient* – so outta my way, gimme your torch.' Speaking for myself, I'm hanging on to my torch, thank you. Get your own damned torch. It will take every torch possible to transform this system (Morgan 2003:578-9, italics in original).

It is not surprising that some younger women have rebelled against their inheritance of the second wave's legacy, formulating objections to their discursively constructed duty to carry on the line; feminism is seen as a burden placed upon younger women against their consent, and older feminists are resented due to their supposed expectations of the younger generation of should-be feminists. Within the dominant representation I have described, whereby feminism is inherited (like genes or property), younger women lack intentionality, other than in an active defiance of their metaphorical mothers' wishes for them. McRobbie's (1999:126) suggestion that second-wavers have become 'established as figures of authority', inviting provocation from younger women, encourages an understanding of younger feminists' rebellion as somewhat inevitable, as does Henry's (2003) work, which suggests that every generation of feminists has defined itself in opposition to the previous one. Invoking the concept of psychological matricide (Chesler 1997), Henry (2003) notes that first-, second-, and third-wave feminists have distanced themselves from prior generations of women. However, articulations of third-wave feminist identities particularly are based on *daughterhood* (rather than sisterhood). As Henry (2005:82) notes, 'rather than developing their feminism *with* their generational peers, third wavers have instead chosen to argue *against* second wave feminists' (italics in original).

Feminist intergenerational conflict is a discursive construct, not a reflection of reality. That is not to say that conflict is not real, but rather, to acknowledge that dominant discourses for discussing recent developments in the feminist movement contribute to the tension they purport to describe. The dominance of the conflict model of feminist generations as a way of describing the recent history of the movement and as a basis for asserting feminist identities in the present encourages antagonism and fuels emotions such as disappointment and resentment between feminists of different generations.

The dominance of particular narratives within discussions of recent developments in the feminist movement has been critiqued in terms of the oversimplification of 'the complex history of Western feminisms' (Hemmings 2005:115). Hemmings develops a critical discussion of the ways in which historical accounts of feminism generalize 'about the seventies to the point of absurdity' (Hemmings 2005:130). Within dominant stories about feminism's past, the development of feminist thought is narrated as 'a relentless march of progress or loss' (Hemmings 2005:115), with perspectives being seen as fixed within particular decades. One of the effects of the dominant narratives Hemmings describes is to consolidate a sense of earlier generations' ideas as naive, essentialist, and unsophisticated in comparison with more recent developments. Within this model, differences between members of the same generation are written out of the story, in favour of representing generations in monolithic terms (Henry 2003).

Although generation can be a useful concept for feminists, it has recently been deployed in ways that are overdetermined by the 'simplistic and divisive generational paradigm' (Dean 2009:343). The conflict model of generational relations and its prevalence are symptomatic of the tendency within theorising more generally to overemphasise the distinctness of the categories about which we write. In a recent anthology entitled, *We Don't Need Another Wave*, Jervis (2006:14) points out that 'writers and theorists love oppositional categories...Much has been said and written about disagreements, conflicts, differences, and antagonisms between feminists of the Second and Third Waves, while hardly anything is ever said about our similarities and continuities.' While the conflict model makes for dramatic theorising, and has proven productive for asserting a new, third-wave position, its emphasis on the differences between the second-wave feminist generation and younger women actually contributes towards producing the conflict and antagonism which it laments. Such pessimistic accounts of the current state of affairs within the feminist movement deflect energies away from more productive feminist activities. Accounts which seize and augment resentment between women of different generations stand in the way of more constructive attempts to facilitate intergenerational communication and activism – what Purvis (2004:93) describes as, 'careful, open, and productive intergenerational dialogue.'

There are however some examples of more positive portrayals of generational relations in feminism. For example, Boonin (2003) focuses on similarities and continuities between the work of older and younger feminists. Third-wave feminists who are more sympathetic to the second wave have attempted to resolve tensions between younger and older feminists, through arguing that 'second and third waves of feminism are neither incompatible nor opposed' (Heywood and Drake 1997:2; see also Dicker and Piepmeier 2003). Such work forms an important critique of/alternative to narratives of intergenerational conflict.

Downplaying intergenerational conflict, various authors draw attention to the fact that members of the same generation have different takes on feminism, as well as there being significant differences within generations. Scott (1990) points to the way in which the emphasis on generational differences serves to displace or paper over ideological differences (cited in Henry 2003:214). Hogeland (2001) objects to the tendency to attribute differences to generation (instead of seeing them as political and theoretical differences). Jervis (2006:17) takes the position that there is no productive use for the concept of generations in feminism, describing it as a disguise for other differences: 'even if some views are more common among one generation than another, at their roots these are ideological disagreements.' However Jervis' (2006) position – to do away with the concept of generations altogether – neglects to consider that it is sometimes useful to consider the impact of historical shifts relating to the feminist movement, society, and ways of doing politics and theory, as well as to consider how feminists are differently located in relation to the history of the movement. Without attempting to abolish feminist generations as a concept, I wish to suggest that discourses emphasising generational differences over and above other forms of difference have the effect of reinforcing the very idea of intergenerational conflict, which then shapes how members of generations experience interactions with one another. Although discussions of generational relations in feminism steer away from the idea that feminism is dead, they do somewhat destructively contribute to a pessimistic portrayal of 'feminism in jeopardy' (Rowe-Finkbeiner 2004).

In addition to the pessimism resulting from the construction of conflict between feminist generations, another effect of these discourses is to reinforce the future orientation of feminism. In her book on raunch culture, Levy (2005) pertinently alludes to disappointment surrounding the seeming decline of feminism, with the title of a chapter, 'The Future That Never Happened'. In this way, Levy (2005) marks the conspicuous absence of something ethereal that ought to have materialised as a result of second-wave feminism. Both younger and older generations perpetuate the future orientation of feminism. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) focus on 'Young Women, Feminism, and the Future', and older feminists, according to Boonin (2003), are distracted from the present moment by their preoccupation with the question of what young women will do after they are gone from the front lines. In this way, not only are second-wavers erased from the present, but, as Boonin (2003) notes, younger women are absent from the present too, due to an excessive concern with 'tomorrow'.

The tendency to appeal to future generations as the beneficiaries of feminism is usefully elucidated by the work of Edelman (2004). In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman (2004) discusses how the image of the Child is central to the imagining and organisation of the political. His work is pertinent to thinking about developments in the meaning of the political since second-wave feminists opened this up for debate. Edelman (2004:11) suggests that the image of the Child regulates political discourse, prescribing what *counts* as political. The image of the Child is a fantasy that compels political discourse 'to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address' (Edelman 2004:11). Edelman's critique of the role of the figural Child in future-oriented political discourses can be taken up in order to critique the way in which each current generation of political actors must discursively invoke the benefits of their actions for future generations, who, as discursive constructs, never come into actuality. The future orientation of feminism means that its discourses appeal to future beneficiaries of political action that never actually come into being. Whereas for Levy (2005), the future *never happened*, for

Edelman (2004), the future *never happens*; such is his critique of futurity as a basis for politics.<sup>70</sup>

By relying on a view of social change in terms of progressively younger generations bringing new energy and ideas into the movement, feminist futurity contributes to the hegemony of heterofamilial relations (Adkins 2004),<sup>71</sup> as well as relying on patriarchal models of knowledge transmission (Henry 2003). The dominant model of generational relations also reproduces Oedipal narratives of generational overthrow (Garber 2001). I shall go on to argue that, as a possible alternative to futurity and the conflict model of generations, we might consider how life course developments affect feminist politics. Rejecting the assumption that members of a particular generation's worldviews remain fixed over the life course, I shall consider how changes in the political ideas of a particular generation can lead to changes in the movement.

I turn now to interview data, firstly looking at how certain tendencies from the literature are evidenced in interviewees' accounts (particularly around second-wave feminists' unmet expectations, and limited understanding, of younger women). After looking at how my data upholds some of the dominant representations of generational relations in feminism, I move on to consider how the data can also be used to challenge key assumptions about the recent history of feminism, shifting the focus away from pessimistic tales of disappointment.

### ***Mothers, daughters, and unmet expectations***

Although my interviews did not focus on the question of how interviewees related to younger generations of women, several interviewees spontaneously raised the topic, sharing, for instance, their perspectives on the political/historical distance between mothers and daughters.<sup>72</sup> Sandra suggested that daughters distance themselves from activities associated with their mothers' generation, saying that she thought women

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<sup>70</sup> Edelman (2004) is critical of the insistence on hope as a basis for political action. For an alternative analysis of futurity, in which it is possible to hold onto a politics of hope, see Muñoz (2009).

<sup>71</sup> See also Roof's (1997:83) description of the dominant model of generational relations as a 'curious hetero-lesbian metaphor.'

<sup>72</sup> Although several interviewees mentioned having daughters of a similar age to me, rather than using the mother-daughter metaphor for generational relations, they tended to refer to younger women as 'your generation'.



of her daughters' age (33 and 30 at the time of interview) did not engage in group consciousness-raising because 'they're too close to it being something that their mothers did'. According to Lee, the young people she knows (including her daughter, her friend's daughter, and their friends) take feminism for granted. The following passage conveys Lee's impression of young women today: 'They're not politically active, they're not, you know, they don't go out on marches or demos, they're just, you know, they're just strong women on their own, they just do their own thing.' Lee also said that young women assume that everybody is a feminist, a claim that resonates strongly with suggestions in the literature that for young women feminism is 'simply in the water' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000:17). To Lee, women of her daughter's generation are strong without having an explicitly political awareness or identity, and they neglect to delineate between feminists and non-feminists (everybody is a feminist).

Similar to Lee's narrative of younger women taking feminism for granted, Joanna spoke of her daughter's generation not needing to vote due to their being at a greater historical distance from the generation that struggled for women's right to vote:

Thinking back to my mum, her mother had said – my grandmother had said, 'every woman must vote', you know, 'women fought hard to get the vote...' My daughter doesn't vote...but I couldn't not vote because it's ingrained into me that women have fought hard to get the vote for us and we must vote, no matter what. And then of course, my mum had had to leave work when she got married – married women couldn't keep their jobs (you probably know all this) and that impressed me a great deal, you know, that they were so restricted, and that she couldn't follow the educational path she might have wanted to follow, she then couldn't continue in the job or go back to her job, she then had to be a mother and bring up children. I think she was quite depressed, my mum. (Joanna)

Joanna's narrative presents the notion that different generations of women are differently positioned in relation to waves of feminism. While Joanna is close to memories of restrictions on women relating to voting and employment, younger women are less influenced by such memories and thus take their (more formally equal) rights for granted. Just as Joanna describes her mother as 'quite depressed', other women I interviewed talked about their mothers being miserable or lonely.

Having discussed the way in which third-wave feminists articulate their position as a stance against second-wave feminism, it is important to note that second-wave feminists also forged identities in opposition to their mothers. Henry (2003:216) notes that the women's movement enabled 'many second wave feminists – white, middle-class women, in particular – ...to escape their mothers' fate.'<sup>73</sup> Despite recent commotion around the rebellion of third-wave 'daughters' from their feminist foremothers, the third wave is not the first or only feminist generation to dis-identify from their mothers.

Another way in which interview data confirmed the tendencies described within the literature is in terms of the construction of expectations of younger women today. Interviewees offered various perspectives on whether or not young women were fulfilling expectations that they live out, or continue fighting for, more liberated lives, including the sense that young women today should be being more active around feminist issues. Consistent with the literature, interviewees saw young women as inheriting the responsibility for carrying on the feminist activities of their mothers' generation. For one interviewee, Sandra, the analogy of beads on a necklace served to illustrate her understanding of the history of feminist activism. Sandra considers each generation of feminist activists to be responsible for making changes that further the aims of the movement: 'It's like the beads on a necklace,<sup>[74]</sup> you know, it's something that – it's a story that begins somewhere and you're part of it and then it carries on.' Sandra saw her own story as slotting in between feminists before, and following on from, her generation. Through this analysis of the history of the movement, Sandra articulated her expectation that the younger generation ought to pick up where her generation left off; younger women constitute the next bead on the necklace of feminist activism, and should be doing their bit accordingly.

Linda conveyed her expectations of younger women with direct reference to me. She was one of several interviewees who saw the younger generation as having rejected second-wave feminism. Linda talked about the need for each generation of women to do their bit for feminism, and suggested that young people tend to see feminism as 'some huge joke'. She posited that I represented an exception to this

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<sup>73</sup> For further discussion of women escaping their mothers' fate, see Snitow (1990) and DuPlessis and Snitow (1998).

<sup>74</sup> Sandra attributes the idea of beads on a necklace to a book by Saira Shah (2003)

rule, saying, 'Thank god for you!' Linda expressed relief that I was interested in feminism, when young women in general, she thought, were not showing any interest in furthering the cause. The disappointment suggested in this analysis that there are very few younger feminists is present across the data, as Linda was one of a number of interviewees to articulate unmet expectations.

There were certain places that interviewees signalled they would expect to find feminism (e.g. universities), perhaps based on their own experiences of finding feminist contexts in the 1970s and '80s. Feminism's current ostensible absence from these likely settings was referred to by interviewees as evidence that young women were not political enough. Rachel noted the absence of feminist politics from a university setting, which she took as an indication of the diminishing significance of the movement within younger women's lives: 'When I was at university in the nineties, women – younger women – had stopped fighting for anything, and they were more interested in what they could get for themselves.' Rachel went on to pinpoint the individualism of the Thatcher era as the cause of feminism's decline.<sup>75</sup> Lee also portrayed her sense of increasing individualism, as she described seeing young people as more involved in personal projects than in collective action. Alluding to unmet expectations, Lee stated that she did not see the same 'level of activity amongst the younger generation'. For Lee, young people have different motivations compared to her generation, preferring to 'travel the world' or 'make a film', rather than engage in political activism, 'which slightly worries me', Lee lamented, betraying her anxiety about the current political situation.

These interviewees corroborate the literature's portrayal of younger women as indebted to the past and under pressure to continue the hard work of their feminist foremothers. Through their narratives of loss – of once politicised places, of social conscience, of a community- or politically-centred way of being, of the fight – interviewees mourned the movement they were part of (which seems to have disappeared). These interviewees' accounts resemble the stories told by academics about a 'loss of commitment to social and political change' (Hemmings 2005:116).

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<sup>75</sup> See Scanlon (ed, 1990) for discussion of young women's experiences of coming of age in 1980s Britain.

***Being stuck in a generation***

Sara's account raises the possibility that feminists of her own age may have become 'stuck' in their thinking, basing their analysis of women's lives on conditions of the past rather than updating them to fit the present. Sara was one of several interviewees to tell of having trouble understanding the concerns of younger women, with particular reference to their choices about how to dress. As such, Sara referred to gaps in understanding between younger and older generations of women. In contrast to several interviewees who commented that they rarely spent much time with younger women, Sara was able to explain how generational dynamics played out in her interactions with younger women; she did so with specific reference to a book group she was part of at the time of the interview (2007), involving one younger woman amongst several women and one man of a similar age to Sara (who was 55 at the time of interview). Sara suggested that the youngest member of this group was sometimes 'taken aback by things that the rest of us say', going on to describe attitudes held by this young woman about 'dressing up' that were unfamiliar to older women in the group. As Sara recounted, the young woman explained to the older members of the book group that she did not see dressing up in terms of attempting to please men. However Sara and other women of her generation – for whom, according to Sara, it was the norm to wear trousers – did not 'get' this, which, Sara speculated, may have been to do with historical change over the course of their lives:

There was a discussion, I can't remember how it came about, about getting dressed up and dressing up for men, and she said, 'But I don't dress up for men. I do dress up when I go out but I'll dress up because I want to dress up.' And the people that are resolutely – you know, wear trousers wherever they go, kind of don't get that. So it's quite interesting looking at how it's changed and that perhaps a consciousness group from that long ago, we're kind of stuck in what it was like for women then and not actually as aware of what it's like now. (Sara)

As she wondered whether women of her own generation remained attached to a way of conceptualising feminism (specifically relating to ways of resisting norms around feminine appearance) that no longer connects with the realities of younger women's lives, Sara's account resonated with McRobbie's (1999) suggestion that forms of resistance may be missed across the generational divide. McRobbie (1999:126)

argues that, if young women ‘strike a note of discord or discomfort among some feminists...then this does not mean that feminists of my generation should discount them as politically insignificant.’ Through this analysis, second-wave feminists assuage antagonism between generations by considering that generations may misunderstand one another’s behaviour.

Sara understands that members of her generation’s particular historical location may mean that they are not able to fully recognise the conditions of younger women’s lives now. Despite attempting to understand the motivations of the younger woman in the group, Sara and the other older women found it difficult to move away from seeing dressing up in terms of the endorsement of feminine behaviour that is oriented towards male pleasure. They were ‘stuck’, as Sara put it, with an interpretation of women’s behaviour that has come to seem outmoded.

The seventies women’s movement’s dress code of comfortable trousers (preferably dungarees) was described – sometimes with irony – by several interviewees. In the eyes of women who, Sara suggests, continue to resolutely wear trousers wherever they go, young women choosing to dress in more feminine attire symbolises their distance from the principles of second-wave feminism. The idea that younger women use dress as a mode of rebellion against second-wave feminism resonates with the literature (e.g. Levy 2005). Within Sara’s narrative, young women’s distance from seventies feminist values is an inevitable offshoot of developments in society and changes in women’s experiences since this time. Through dress, the young woman in Sara’s book group performs an identity that is at some distance from second-wave feminist values. Crucially however, Sara did not read this performance as anti-feminist or post-feminist; rather, it neglected to conform to the dominant idea *within a particular generation* about what constitutes feminist behaviour.

### ***Intergenerational feminist consciousness***

As interviewees discussed their understandings of relationships between generations, some gave narratives that diverged from constructions of intergenerational antagonism. For example, Sandra and Tess created a sense of how their development

of *historical consciousness* enabled them to understand the existence of generational divergences in relationships with political ideas.

Sandra – whose reference to ‘beads on a necklace’ has already been mentioned in relation to expectations of the younger generation – presented a particularly well-developed analysis of generational relations and social change. Sandra developed an understanding of the relationship between generations after the height of her involvement in political activities. Sandra told of how she developed historical consciousness with her increased life experience, including through involvement in groups, and through formal education when she took a history degree during the mid-eighties (when Sandra was in her late thirties). Prior to this, Sandra described herself as having been ‘terribly cocky about it all’, not interested in the older generation (the ‘previous bead’ on the necklace). Her increasing understanding of how different generations are related through time is illustrated by the following quotation, in which Sandra explains the evolution of her present viewpoint, as the unthinking self-assuredness of youth dissipated with maturity:

We really did think that we’d...invented the whole thing, and, you know, the more you find out, the more you realise that you didn’t at all. And whereas we were rather scathing of our parents’ generation, you know, because certainly among me and my friends, it was like, ‘ugh, they just want family, they just want it all to be nice and tight’, and having no appreciation of why that was, you know. We thought that the war was something that had happened ages ago. The fact that I was only born three years after the war – you know, it didn’t really kind of – that sense of time didn’t kind of sink in, you know, and the fact of what that generation went through and what the women of that generation went through, who just took over and did everything, you know. I mean I did know about that, but not really – at that age, I didn’t appreciate it. I do now. And I kind of appreciate why they wanted to create peaceful family life, you know, because their lives had been torn apart, their family relationships had been torn apart. (Sandra)

Sandra told of how she came to appreciate discrepancies between the values of her own and her parents’ generations through recognizing the different struggles they each faced. She presents a progress narrative about herself in which she was once unable to appreciate the social conditions in which her parents’ generation had grown up; it was only later, Sandra said, that her sense of time ‘sank in’. The interconnectedness of generations through history was not part of her knowledge

during her early involvement in the movement ('the more you find out, the more you realise...'). However, Sandra gradually came to understand more about history and the experiences of previous generations, particularly the struggles of women of her mother's generation, who had taken on traditionally male roles during the war. Sandra suggested that, although she did not lack this knowledge previously, she had not been able to comprehend its significance or its relevance to activities she was involved in as part of the women's movement. Sandra's narrative of her increasing awareness of historical processes later in life contradicts Kaufman's (1986) theory that older people lack understanding of the broader historical context in which their lives are located.

Sandra went on to develop an analysis of how the conditions of her parents' lives meant that they had very different beliefs and values from her own. Only when she realised how common it had been for families to be split up during the war – her mother and father being separated for two years, and her father not seeing his son, Sandra's brother, until he was two years old – did Sandra appreciate why family values and home life, which had been considered boring and conformist by Sandra and her left-wing peers, had been so important to her parents' generation. Sandra explained that she had wanted to 'Chuck it all up in the air!', before she saw how the generation before had 'had it all chucked up in the air, without any choice.'

Sandra extended her analysis of her relationship with her parents' generation to generational relations more broadly. Each generation, Sandra suggested, finds it difficult to realise the implications of the struggles of the previous generation, with social change brought about by one generation inevitably being taken for granted by the next:

So thinking about what we've passed on to the next generation – there's all sorts of things that they absolutely implicitly take for granted, you know, that there is a law about equality that says, you know, that women have as much right to do this and that as anybody else, and in terms of getting a home or getting a job, that although there are all sorts of things that make it difficult, huge amounts of things have changed, and your generation take it absolutely for granted – totally for granted – can't conceive of a life when it wasn't like that. And that's such a recent change, you know, and maybe your generation aren't as aware of how recent that is – the reality of what that was like,

you know. And probably you'll be the same again with the next lot, you know. (Sandra)

As she told me that my generation would probably 'be the same again with the next lot', Sandra showed her resignation to each generation's disregard, especially when young, for what came before. Intergenerational antagonism was de-emphasised in Sandra's account, as she constructed a sense of the inevitability of gaps in understanding between generations. This constitutes what I call *intergenerational feminist consciousness*, which is an understanding of the limited capacity for empathy between feminists of different generations. The concept of intergenerational feminist consciousness provides a way of recognising that, while it is important for feminists to be committed to developing understanding across generations, it is also important to respect the gaps in understanding as a necessary corollary of social change. The concept of intergenerational feminist consciousness relieves antagonism between generations of feminists. Understanding and empathy between generations go hand in hand with a non-hostile appreciation of the limits to intergenerational understanding.

Through her narrative, Sandra located her past self in the same position as she sees younger women to be in *now*. She described herself as having been 'terribly cocky' when young with regard to her lack of interest in the older generation, which, I suggest, is an alternative to, and a challenge to, the idea of the older generation's disappointment with younger women. Potential antagonism was relieved as Sandra constructed a capacity for intergenerational empathy, seeing younger women as fundamentally no different from her. Sandra's historical consciousness and generosity of understanding towards the younger generation was evident as she explained why generational differences occur, and how they produce limitations in understanding between generations. Sandra's narrative, I argue, recognises connections and differences between the experiences of women of different generations; she refused to blame the younger generation (for seeming uninterested in feminism as the previous generation knew it).

Sandra's sense of how she faced an altered set of choices and possibilities compared to her parents, about the way she would live her life, echoes Mannheim's theory of political generations. Her suggestion of each generation's inability to 'conceive of a



life when it wasn't like that' supports Mannheim's ideas about the effects of the different social and historical contexts in which each generation comes to know the world. From Sandra's account, we might infer that generational location has pervasive effects, despite individuals managing to cultivate some historical consciousness over the course of their lifetimes. While Mannheim's theory is useful for considering how gaps in understanding are an inevitable effect of the transformed social conditions in which each new generation is situated, he neglects to consider *intra*-generational development. The fact that Sandra's understanding of historical processes developed as she grew older suggests the importance of taking account of life course change in theorising generational relations, as well as highlighting the potential for individuals' capacity for intergenerational empathy (and intergenerational feminist consciousness) to increase with age and experience.

Also offering a Mannheimian analysis, Tess described a recent incident in which a younger friend of hers responded to an article Tess had written during the 1970s. When the two women discussed the article – which was about rejecting elitism, specifically, the aspiration to have a professional career – Tess's friend revealed that she was shocked by some of the ideas contained within it, considering them to be 'a bit extreme'. Tess was somewhat surprised to hear this, as she had expected that, being a lesbian, her friend would have a radical feminist consciousness. Tess went on to tell me that she attributed the differences between her perspective and that of her friend to the fact that there was a seven year age gap between them. Their relationships with the particular ideas in question differed because, in Tess's words, 'I was a young adult in the seventies and she was a teenager in the seventies'. Tess explained how this encounter contributed to her understanding of the significance of generational location, stating that it made her realise the effects of 'being a few years different in age' on individuals' relationships with ideas, and explaining the difference between her and her friend in terms of the fact that, 'She would've been experiencing things in the eighties, you know, the political context of the eighties, whereas...at that age, I was in the seventies.'

Tess's interpretation of her own and her friend's different experiences of the same historical moment again resonates with Mannheim's analysis. According to Mannheim (1952:298), although different generations coexist and can therefore

potentially experience the same events, their experience of these events differs; this is due to 'the different "stratification" of their lives', meaning that different generations, although alive at the same time, occupy 'qualitatively different subjective eras.' As such, different generations are differently located in relation to historical events and epochs. Tess understood how generations that coexist are exposed to the same phase of history (e.g. the 1970s). However, even being just a few years apart in terms of individual development can impact upon the subjective experience of these same events. Tess and her friend experienced the same events differently due to their different positions in the life course at which they experienced particular periods of political thought and activism. According to Mannheim's theory, generations – although differently stratified – remain in fixed relation to one another over time. However, as I have argued, and shall go on to argue, the role of life course change is crucial to an understanding of relationships between feminist generations.

In discussing the well-developed analyses of historical location and social change presented by Tess and Sandra, I have highlighted the potential for stories to be told about political generations that assuage some of the negative feeling around generational differences within feminist theory. Sandra and Tess showed a reflexive attitude regarding the limited potential for understanding between generations of women. This reflexivity constitutes intergenerational feminist consciousness and is indicative of a more optimistic orientation towards the current state of affairs within feminism than is commonly found within the literature.

Having considered how narratives might recognise, without resentment or blame, that intergenerational understanding is inevitably limited, the remainder of this chapter explores further ways in which interviewees' narratives were able to divert from dominant narratives of disappointment with the younger generation. I shall develop an analysis of the data to demonstrate how narratives of the changing feminist movement might emphasise life course development rather than generational succession, how recognising the continuing presence of feminism in the lives of second-wavers can offset the focus on younger women's behaviour, and finally, how particular (critical) stances in relation to (second-wave) feminism are not the property of one generation.

*Feminists' life courses*

Building on my analysis of Tess and her younger friend, the significance of the life course is also prevalent in Doreen's account of recent changes in the feminist movement. Doreen raised the possibility of telling stories about the recent history of feminism in ways that avoid placing expectations on younger women coming up into the movement. Specifically, she explained the fading away of separatism in terms of life course changes within a generation.

In contrast to the idea that generational succession brings shifts in political ideas and practices, Doreen talked about changes in the feminist movement occurring in relation to the life course experiences of a generation of women. She described such shifts in terms of women in the movement developing increasingly layered relationships and having more demanding professional lives. Doreen also highlighted how the development of the lesbian separatist strand of feminism was thwarted by the life experiences of lesbian separatists. Clearly articulating a connection between individuals' life experiences and the trajectory of the movement, Doreen offered the following analysis of how lesbian separatism became less popular during the 1980s:

Twenty, twenty-five years ago, some lesbian feminists started wanting children and they started using self-insemination and they started having boy babies and that just finished the debate off, I mean, after that the debate actually just kind of fizzled out in all kinds of ways because these women, who'd taken really strong positions – it was difficult for them to do that once they had boy children. (Doreen)

Doreen usefully illustrates a way of describing developments in the feminist movement as resulting from changes in the lives of the women who comprise it. Doreen's suggestion that lesbian separatist discussions 'fizzled out' when some women in those circles had children insinuates that becoming mothers of male babies changed lesbian separatists' ideas about gender relations such that they no longer sought to exclude males altogether from their lives. Thus, changes in the lives of individuals figure as an instrumental factor in Doreen's explanation of how the movement evolved after the 1970s and 1980s. Doreen went on to reiterate that, once lesbian separatists' circumstances changed, their worldviews followed, so that there

was no longer any basis for their beliefs: 'There's not much point being a separatist if you have children who are boys, you know; there's not much point.'

Doreen's analysis of historical changes in feminism is not organised around new generations of women entering the movement. Rather, life course change for women of a particular generation is seen to have caused the demise of a whole strand of feminism (lesbian separatism) during the 1980s. Rather than basing her interpretation of the movement's development on her perceptions of younger women today, Doreen's analysis makes a clear link between historical changes in the feminist movement and the evolving circumstances of those involved. The movement, as she describes it, does not rely solely on the input of younger generations in order for its practices and ideas to take new directions.

Doreen's narrative dislodges the notion of generational succession and conflict as the cause of ideological shifts in the movement. Her analysis was muted on the issue of 'the younger generation'. As such, she implicitly refuses to construct the younger generation's responsibility for the story's continuance. My analysis of Doreen's account demonstrates that it is possible to avoid the tendency to tell stories about the recent history of feminism in which second-wavers' expectations of younger women result in judgements being made as to whether or not they are doing their bit as the next 'bead on the necklace'.

Doreen's narrative of lesbian separatists' life course development might also be seen to challenge dominant representations of what happened to lesbian feminism articulated by feminist writers in the 1990s. Such writers, seeing themselves as part of a new generation, sought to distance themselves from the ideas of the old generation, without regard for how members of the old generation might have come to distance themselves from some of these ideas by this point too. The writers I am referring to include Stein (1993) and other so-called 'pro-sex' feminists who analyse changes in the feminist movement in terms of younger women posing a challenge to the stoical and prudish ideas of the older generation.

Stories of feminist history that invoke a model of movement change in terms of generational succession assume that each generation constitutes a fixed entity with

its own stable worldview. Mannheim (1952:309) refers to this as a generational 'entelechy'. Within Mannheim's theory of political generations, social and political change requires the fresh input brought as progressively younger cohorts enter a particular social arena (which for Mannheim is society in general, but this analysis can be applied specifically to social movements). Through an emphasis on how women's relationships with ideas evolved in relation life course change, Doreen's account critiques Mannheim's downplaying of the significance of new experiences that continue to happen in mid- and later life. While Mannheim notes that each new generation makes fresh contact with society, enabling them to form perspectives that differ from those of the previous generation, from Doreen's account we see that new life experiences might also provide opportunities for making fresh contact with society. For instance, as the women Doreen refers to became mothers, their changing experiences meant that they encountered society anew, which served to refresh their political outlooks. Through focusing on life course change, Doreen's narrative introduces the possibility of generating accounts of the development of feminism that steer away from generational conflict and antagonism.

Other interviewees' accounts offered support for the notion of women continuing to build fresh relationships with feminist ideas throughout the whole of the life course. I wish to emphasise that women's worldviews and relationships with feminism developed throughout the life course, continuing long after their initial encounters with feminist ideas and contexts. This poses a challenge to theoretical accounts of political worldview formation, which have tended to suggest that significant developments occur only when young. Although such a way of conceiving of developments in feminist thought and praxis is rare within the literature, it is not altogether absent. Resonating with Doreen's narrative of life course change, King (1986) notes the role of the ageing process in the development of the movement:

I heard a prominent feminist, in reply to a question about historical changes in feminist concerns for children, state that these were the result of 'women becoming older.' Of course what she meant was the result of a specific cohort of women becoming older: her friends and her political network, who do indeed constitute 'feminism' in important structural ways (King 1986:75).

Although King (1986) acknowledges intra-generational changes within the movement, such an analysis is yet to be taken up more widely within conversations about the past, present, and future of feminism.

*Second-wave feminists' presents*

In contrast with third-wavers' erasure of second-wavers from their accounts of the present, interviewees discussed ongoing developments in their relationships with feminism with particular reference to their experiences of ageing. Feminism was still very much a part of interviewees' lives in the present, as a well as shaping their hopes and expectations for the future.

Freda is one example of an interviewee who created a sense of the continuing significance of feminist ideas in the lives of women of her own generation. She made little mention of younger women at all, instead sharing her thoughts on how she perceived her own generation to be doing well out of feminist ideas, with particular reference to feminist discourses on ageing and the menopause. By suggesting that there are new possibilities for growing older as a woman as a result of the feminist movement, Freda narrated social change in terms of the proliferation of discourses about 'growing old disgracefully', rather than in terms of young women today having opportunities that had not been available to her generation. Other interviewees shared Freda's concern with growing older, and told of preparing for retirement in ways that were informed by feminist ideas and practices. Sandra and Gillian were both contemplating plans for retirement that were informed by ideals, such as communal living, which they first encountered through participation in collective political contexts. Narratives of feminists growing older highlight that women continue to face new experiences throughout the life course; feminist ideas can usefully inform how they deal with these changes.

The extent to which second-wavers are continuing to 'do well' out of feminism is evident in Linda's explanation of her present experiences of feminism in terms of 'reaping the rewards' of being in a women's group in the past. As Freda, Linda, and others noted, members of their generation continue to find feminism rewarding in their own lives; a particular disregard for the activities (or lack of them) of the younger generation emerged from their accounts. They talked about themselves as

part of a generation that was still benefitting from feminism *regardless* of what younger women are doing. Stories about feminism's influence on women's experiences of growing older dislodge the notion of future generations as the only beneficiaries of social change. By emphasising how they continue to reap the rewards of second-wave feminism, they construct a discursive alternative to, or aversion of, the sense of bitterness that emerges from the literature around young women refusing to appear to be benefitting from their feminist foremothers' labour.

Mannheim's assumption that changes in political consciousness occur only while young serves to sustain the idea of intergenerational conflict as the cause of social and political change. Andrews (1991) refutes the ageist assumption that political consciousness is more intense in younger people. By considering how the ageing process entails relating anew to political ideas, it is possible to avoid replicating theoretical constructions of younger people as the locus of political excitement and radical thought. Resisting the notion that younger women are where feminism is at, several interviewees made their own generation the focus of their narratives of the present moment, as they portrayed their relationships with feminist ideas as still evolving as their lives continued to change. Through making visible the continuing presence of feminism in the lives of members of interviewees' own (second-wave) generation, it is possible to tell stories about feminism which offset some of the negative feeling around younger women's ostensible rejection of feminism in its second-wave forms.

Not all interviewees appealed to younger women as a way of considering the current status of feminism; some were silent on the issue of younger women today, focusing instead on the changing lives of a generation of women who were themselves active in women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Although Doreen's silence on younger women was somewhat atypical, other interviewees, including Freda and Linda, complemented her focus on her own generation by looking at how feminism's successes were continuing to be played out in the lives of women of their own generation. These women's changing situations and new experiences meant they were still relating to feminist ideas and benefitting from feminist knowledge (in relation to ageing). My analysis shows that social change continues to impact upon interviewees' own generation, demonstrating a way of assessing the successes of

feminism that does not rely solely on making evaluations of how younger women are going about their lives.

Implicit in my interviewees' avoidance of positioning the younger generation as the beneficiaries of feminism was a refusal to defer to the figural Child (Edelman 2004) as the object of political action. Within Edelman's (2004) analysis, political action always means action for the sake of future generations (who, as discursive constructs, never come into actuality). The image of the Child, he argues, is a fantasy that compels political discourse 'to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address' (Edelman 2004:11). Alternative narratives of developments in feminism might resist futurism, deflecting discussions away from the idea of younger generations as the beneficiaries of feminist social/political change in favour of accounts that engage with the movement's outcomes in participants' own lives. To talk about feminist politics in terms of the immediately observable effects on the lives of participants in the movement presents an alternative to describing activism in terms of the optimistic, future-orientated goal of bringing about a new, improved society that no generation of activists actually gets to see for themselves. This more self-centred approach defies the notion of women as self-sacrificing mothers – guardians of the future who must always act for the sake of subsequent generations rather than in their own interests.

### *Can second-wavers become third-wavers?*

I have drawn attention to how interviewees downplayed the contrast between generations found in the literature. The tendency to emphasise generational *differences* makes for dramatic theorising (Jervis 2006) and reifies ageism in the movement (Hogeland 2001). In relation to suggestions that young feminists relate critically to what they see as the dogma of second-wave feminism, there were suggestions within the data that members of the second-wave generation had also become critical of second-wave feminism, distancing their attitudes and behaviour from those of an earlier phase in their own and the movement's personal-political trajectories. In refusing to see being a feminist in terms of not wearing make-up, for instance, some interviewees might have become more 'third-wave' in their outlooks and style of resistance.



The example of the young woman in Sara's book group who liked to dress up might be considered evidence of behaviours and attitudes that tend to be attributed to the post-feminist generation (Schneider 1988:10). According to McRobbie's (1999) analysis of generational antagonism, young women's dress style is seen by older feminists as a provocation. However, I wish to refute the idea that to behave in ways that are in tension with second-wave feminism is the prerogative of younger women (Levy 2005). It would seem from my data that older women too may exhibit tendencies towards styles of self-presentation that contradict supposedly second-wave feminist ideals. By paying attention to the whole of the life course, it is possible to see that some second-wavers also came to distance themselves from the ideas of second-wave feminism. In her narrative of starting to wear make-up again, Liz suggests that second-wavers too came to reassess the efficacy of second-wave stipulations about rebelling against feminine dress codes. One of several interviewees to describe changing attitudes and behaviours since the time they were involved in women's groups, Liz told of taking up a new behaviour which may not have been approved of within second-wave contexts. Starting to wear lipstick again represented a significant change in her view of what was appropriate feminist behaviour:

I've started wear lipstick again now, because you don't have to not wear makeup, but you did then – not wear makeup – 'cause there was an expectation that girls would look pretty, and so I stopped wearing pretty clothes and didn't play that flirty game.  
(Liz)

According to third-wave ideology, wearing makeup no longer symbolises powerlessness in the way that it did within second-wave feminism. Baumgardner and Richards (2000:136) argue that 'using makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the marketplace and male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues.' Liz's attitude to wearing lipstick seems to resemble this third-wave perspective, showing that she is not fixed in the category of second-wave feminist. Her own worldview, then, has changed in parallel with developments in society and the movement.

Besides Liz, interviewees more generally referred to a women's movement uniform of dungarees and no make-up, which it was no longer necessary to conform to in order to present oneself as an independent woman whose own thoughts and desires are to be taken seriously. This resonates with the third-wave suggestion that it has become less necessary to look like a feminist in order to feel as though one can perceive oneself and be perceived by others as strong. Within today's society, it would seem more possible to combine aspects of normative femininities with a sense of oneself as an independent-thinking feminist woman, or, as Baumgardner and Richards (2004:59) put it, to feel able to embrace 'girliness as well as power.' Whereas in feminist contexts of the past, it would have been assumed that women wore make-up because of false consciousness – because they lacked a feminist analysis of women's conformity to particular standards of appearance – it is now feasible to be aware of feminist arguments and yet still decide to wear make-up.

For Liz, wearing make-up was a new possibility, to engage in a mode of self-presentation that no longer carried the same risk of being read as playing a 'flirty game' or trying to conform to a conventional feminine role. Another interviewee, Janet, talked about how she was letting her hair grow long for the first time in 'a long, long time'. These are just a couple of examples of interviewees self-consciously distancing themselves from some of the ideas of second-wave feminism. Liz and Janet told stories which contrasted with Sara's story about her own generation remaining 'stuck' in the second wave. While some second-wavers (including Sara and her peers in the group) continue to dress in a particular way that was associated with an earlier mode of resisting prescribed femininities, to suggest that behaviours and attitudes associated with a rejection of second-wave feminism are unique to younger women is reductive and ignores the way in which individuals' relationships to feminism continue to change throughout the life course. Just as it is problematic to use generations as a way of explaining away what are actually theoretical and political differences (Hogeland 2001), it is also problematic to attribute attitudes and modes of behaviour to a particular generation (Schneider 1988). To portray different characteristics and choices such as lipstick-wearing as generational implies the stability of identities and worldviews over the life course.

The implication within accounts of third-wave feminism that there are second-wave feminists on the one hand, and younger third-wave feminists on the other, with no overlap between these two categories, denies the opportunity to recognise similar experiences, behaviours and attitudes amongst women of different age cohorts. The construction of make-up as an issue dividing generations of feminists is clear in McRobbie's (2008:157) reference to younger women's desire 'to feel able to wear as much make-up as they like, and to wear sexy underwear, without feeling the disapprobation of this older generation of women whose underwear choices, it is assumed, were more sober.' However, the narratives of Liz and Janet, as examples of interviewees who no longer feel the need to overtly reject feminine appearance, suggest that some members of the so-called second-wave feminist generation went on to embrace principles more associated with third-wave feminism, such as being able to choose to have long hair without feeling like this indicates an embracing of patriarchal ideas about appropriate femininity.

It is also important to recognise that some second-wavers still hold firmly to particular second-wave analyses (e.g. Jeffreys 1996; 2003), provoking critiques of developments in political theory that have occurred since the seventies:

Whereas to a generation of women who grew up in the 60s make-up and high heels meant pain, expense, vulnerability, and a poor sense of self, a new young generation are telling us that these things are wonderful because they are choosing them (Jeffreys 1996:366).

While avoiding implying that third-wave discourses symbolise progress or a development in a positive direction from second-wave ideas, I wish to challenge the way in which the declining popularity of some second-wave feminist ideas and practices tends to be talked about in terms of the influence of younger women coming up into the movement. This explanation serves to disguise the ways in which ideas and practices may have declined in popularity within the second-wave generation. A particular orientation in relation to second-wave feminism is not, as the cases of Liz and Janet demonstrate, the property of the younger generation. Their stories are another instance of narratives of feminist history being organised around *intragenerational* developments – that is, change over individuals' life courses – rather than around generational succession. Rather than seeing the younger

generation's make-up-wearing as a form of rebellion against older feminists, we might consider that women across several generations now feel more able to make conscious choices to behave or appear in ways deemed conventionally feminine without fearing this will be read as weakness. The political positions of members of the second-wave generation often changed over time, yet second-wave feminists are seen as fixed in time in accounts of the history of the feminist movement. Emphasising generational difference risks not only seeing generations as homogenous entities but also downplaying or completely disregarding change that occurs throughout individuals' lives and how such developments interact with social change.

In relation to feminists changing their views over the life course, it is interesting to speculate about feminist generational identities, asking whether second-wavers can become third-wavers. This possibility is denied within definitions of third-wavers as having no memory of a time when the movement was *one* (Garrison 2000; Henry 2005). Several interviewees recalled a more unified movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nostalgically recalling memories of a time when the movement seemed to be about 'all women together' (e.g. Freda, Alison, Kathleen, Hazel), my interviewees tended to lament the occurrence of splintering along lines of class, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. Hazel was particularly saddened as she remembered witnessing conflicts occurring in the movement. A quotation from Alison (who was involved in groups in London, then in Leeds) illustrates how, as a member of the second-wave generation, she was able to remember and talk about the movement as pre-existing the splits that were created by internal critiques of feminism:

It was a real shame because I suppose I was involved in the early days when we were all one together and we'd all got this big idea, you know, that we were going to change the world for women and get equal rights and things, you know. And then it all started dividing off, you know into, well, lesbians and non-lesbians, black women and white women, working-class and middle-class. And it started splintering and that wasn't good, I don't think. (Alison)

Second-wavers such as Alison remember feminism as pre-dating (and therefore as existing separately from) challenges that were mounted from within the movement in terms of its exclusionary practices (around, for instance, race, class, sexuality –

see Henry 2005). However, for third-wavers, feminism is characterised as indistinct from an awareness of conflicts and tensions within the movement. As Garrison (2000:145) articulates, 'feminist critiques of feminism are part of the very origins of Third Wave feminism rather than trailing behind an already unitary model of the movement.' Third-wavers' distinctive experience of feminism stems from not being able to separate it from its internal critiques (Henry 2005). According to this definition, the possibility that they might recall a time when they perceived the movement to be unified precludes most of the women I interviewed (with the exception of a few younger interviewees who could be said to be part of an intermediary generation) from having the experience upon which third-wave feminist identities are based.

### *Conclusion and further comments*

I have drawn attention to problems associated with the dominant mode of conceptualising feminist intergenerational relations and presented some alternatives to its emphasis on conflict and the future. Due to the 'constraining mandate of futurism' (Edelman 2004:4), discourses for talking about the recent development of feminism as a political movement have tended to position second-wavers as self-sacrificing mother figures, driven by a desire to nurture the next generation by creating a better world for them, and assessing the outcomes of their activities in terms of the behaviour of women of their (metaphorical) daughters' generation. Some ways of narrating the recent history of feminism enforce feminism's future orientation more than others. I have demonstrated some of the ways in which women who participated in second-wave feminist contexts refused to tell stories of themselves as a generation whose unified and stable worldview conflicts with that of younger women today. As an alternative to placing expectations on the younger generation, these women put themselves at the forefront of their narratives of social change, assuaging some of the bad feeling between generations which abounds within observations that young women are not doing their bit to carry on the feminist line. My critique of the emphasis on future generations as the main beneficiaries of social change relates to the argument I made in Chapter 3 that the processes through which feminist personal-political change occurs differ from other forms of political action in that there is a less clear separation between action and its effects. As an alternative to framing social and political change as beneficial to

future generations, I propose that there are ways of telling stories about feminism that focus on how a particular generation's political practices benefit their own lives.

Recent developments in the lives of second-wavers have been relatively under-theorised in favour of a focus on younger women's responses to the notion (both implicit and explicit) that second-wave feminism was about changing society *for them*. Work on third-wave feminists' attitudes towards second-wave feminism has demonstrated how being part of the generation 'next in line' to inherit feminism as a political movement shapes younger women's relationships with feminism (Henry 2003). However there has been a gap regarding second-wavers' perspectives on intergenerational dynamics within feminism, which this chapter has responded to.

I have also highlighted the possibility that some women who were second-wave feminists may now identify more with third-wave ideas. Members of a particular generation do not retain fixed political identities over the course of their lives and it is an unhelpfully reductive analysis to suggest that feminists of the same age group share a more similar political position. Harnois (2008) argues that, although the term third-wave functions in some ways as a synonym for young feminists, third-wave feminism is better understood as an identity rather than an age group or cohort. It remains open to question whether second-wave and third-wave are mutually exclusive identities or whether individuals can straddle both categories over the course of a lifetime. Defining third-wavers as those whose political consciousness was formed during or after the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Heywood and Drake 1997; Rasmusson 2003) implies that it is impossible for second-wavers to have had that defining experience due to being differently positioned in relation to the history of feminism. The defining experience of growing up in a particular political climate (that of the backlash to feminism – see Faludi 1992) resonates with Mannheim's theory that the experience of simultaneously coming to know the world unites members of a particular generation. However, this theory neglects developments in political consciousness after adolescence/early adulthood. I addressed this gap through my analysis of Doreen's account, proposing that an alternative focus on how worldviews change intra-generationally would enable narratives of the recent history of feminism to steer away from a reliance on future generations entering and injecting new perspectives.

Without denying that the continuance of social movements relies on younger generations coming up into the movement, it is still possible to see how placing too great an emphasis on intergenerational conflict risks neglecting other dynamics through which movements change (including as a generation progresses through its life course). While most narratives of social movements/political change emphasise future generations rather than the effects on the lives of those who participate, feminism needs to distance itself from this model in order to challenge the heteronormative positioning of women as selfless foremothers. By contributing to portrayals of women's lives in terms of their role in nurturing the next generation, representations of conflicting feminist generations lock metaphorical mothers and daughters into what Kelly (2005:242) describes as 'the replicated hierarchies of the patriarchal family', as well as perpetuating 'an insidious heteronormativity.'

It is important for accounts of the recent history of feminism to strive to avoid the problematic erasure of second-wave feminists from constructions of the present. Such erasure reifies the ageist assumption that women over a certain age are beyond having new insights or making important contributions to developments in the feminist movement. Many of the women I interviewed were in the midst of thinking about feminism's role in their present and future lives, not merely reflecting on its role in their pasts.

In thinking about future directions in the production of histories of feminism, theorists will face new challenges when it comes to situating third-wave feminism in its historical context. Reflecting on how the second wave 'deserves a far more complex and nuanced approach' than it has been given within many third-wave texts, Kelly (2005:243) speculates that 'at some point in the future the Third Wave will find itself similarly situated.' When the time comes to refer to the third-wave as a thing of the past, it is hoped that it will not be subject to such reductive or occlusionary renderings.

## Chapter Ten: Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated some of the ways in which changes occurred in women's lives through participation in West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. I have described and theorised a form of personal-political change, in which changes in women's relationships with themselves and each other are recognised as political change. I have explored how women related to ideas and one another in women's groups. Consciousness-raising, as practised in West Yorkshire during this period, had politically significant effects in that it led to the production of new forms of consciousness, which manifested themselves through women's new ways of seeing themselves, the world, and themselves in that world.

Through my analysis, I have recognised the political significance of collective practices of feminist self-transformation as they occurred in West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. I have argued that there is an enduring need for feminist understandings of power relations and social change to draw attention to the politics of personal experience. Despite shifts in feminist theory since the 1970s, the argument that the personal is political (Hanisch 1970) should, I argue, retain a central role in feminist thinking and practice.

My analysis of women's accounts of the activities of West Yorkshire women's groups has taken account of poststructuralist insights, in order to see consciousness-raising in terms of *resistance* as opposed to *liberation*. I have argued for the notion that Foucault's understandings of power and the self are of assistance in conceptualising the personal as political, as well as reiterating feminist theorists' objections to the tendency for seventies feminism to be written off as a period of naivety (Stacey 1997; Hemmings 2005). I have articulated the impact of consciousness-raising in a way that refuses to concede to the notion that feminist activities of the past were based on unsophisticated understandings of the relationships between experience, knowledge, power and the self. Transformations in participants' lives brought about through involvement in c-r groups (and continuing into the present) destabilize the notion of identity as fixed and stable. Far from reinforcing essentialism, these transformative moments effected through c-r demonstrate that the true self is an illusion (O'Grady 2004). By demonstrating how



women changed as a result of participating in women's groups, I have portrayed the effects of c-r in a way that supports the idea that feminist practices of the 1970s and 1980s are not rendered invalid by poststructuralism. Consciousness-raising is ultimately redeemable from a poststructuralist-influenced perspective on feminist theory and practice. By seeing c-r as a feminist practice of the self (Foucault 1984; McLaren 2002), I have shown that it is possible to recognise the personal as political in a way that is compatible with more recent poststructuralist feminist understandings of the political, in which the truth and experience are discursively constituted.

I have looked at changes in the lives of the women I interviewed since the time of their involvement in women's groups as a way of challenging the generational/wave metaphors for conceptualising developments in the movement. The distinction between second- and third-wavers relies on the latter having no memory of a time when the movement was 'one' (Garrison 2000; Henry 2005) and can therefore be called into question in relation to early internal critiques of feminism. In Chapter 4, I reflected on the work of Jill Johnston (1973), an early lesbian/feminist critic of the women's movement, whose work can be taken as a challenge to the notion that there was ever just one women's movement. Even women of the second-wave generation (such as Johnston) might not remember the movement as unified and singular.

I have also argued that, whereas theorising as a mode of interaction had previously been an exclusively masculine pursuit, women's group contexts opened up intellectual activities to ordinary (non-academic) women. I explored women's relationships with ideas, showing how women interacted on new intellectual and emotional plains within women's groups. Through bonding over ideas in women's groups, women formed feminist collective identities that were based around shared theoretical and political perspectives. Although engaging with ideas in their written form was considered by interviewees to be important to their feminist consciousness formation, relating to feminist ideas in the physical presence of other women allowed a very different encounter with feminism than was possible through reading alone. Collectively analysing their situations was a new way for women to interact with one another. Previously excluded from participation in the realm of ideas, women developed competence as theorists, which was in itself a challenge to

women's conventional role. Through transforming participants' relationships with ideas, group consciousness-raising was politically significant in ways that exceeded its role as a precursor to conventionally-defined political activism.

I have demonstrated throughout that the value of c-r as a feminist practice does not depend upon a belief in its capacity to allow access to the objective truth about women's lives (Valverde 2004). West Yorkshire women's groups produced both self-knowledge and a reflexive relationship with the self. The women involved came to know and reflect upon themselves in ways that meant they often no longer knew themselves in isolation from other women, but felt more connected to their friends and fellow group members. As such, they practised c-r in a way that *exceeded* its function as a tool for feminist theory production. C-r groups tend to be seen as having existed at a time when women 'had no theory to readily explain their collective suffering' (Stoecker 1989:350). However, West Yorkshire women's groups continued to practise feminist consciousness-raising into the 1980s.

I have shown West Yorkshire to be a unique cultural context in which to practise consciousness-raising. Stereotypes about Yorkshire folk being 'thick' (Rowbotham 2001) and preferring seemingly straightforward ways of relating to the world (see Hazel, Chapter 6), presented particular challenges to women working on their relationships with ideas and cultivating practices of self-reflection. It would be interesting to explore further how resistance to c-r took regionally specific forms elsewhere in the UK.

I drew attention to how women's friendships were transformed through participation in West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. I argued that women's groups reduced the extent to which women were isolated from, and lacking in confidence in their relations with, other women. As women invented new ways of relating to one another, shifts occurred in how they saw themselves. Whereas women were encouraged to see themselves primarily in relation to men and children (even in feminist discourse – see critique of Smith 2004[1974] in Chapter 4), through participation in women's groups they could begin to see their relationships with one another as a valid source of self-identity. C-r groups were spaces within which women refused to allow children to dominate their conversation; their group

practice demonstrated a critical relation to the tendency within patriarchal society for women to sideline their sense of themselves in favour of attending to the demands of others.

Although articulating resemblances between c-r and therapy has historically been a way of denigrating c-r (Sarachild 1973), I considered the possibility of recognising that women's group practices did resemble therapy in important respects. Further, gossiping may well have been involved, despite original proponents' attempts to defend c-r groups against suggestions that they were 'bitch sessions' (Sarachild 1973). I have argued that, rather than defend c-r against comparisons with other less favourable practices, we might instead challenge the notion that therapy, women's friendships, and 'bitching' are apolitical. I reappraised the activity of gossiping in terms of how it supports tentative steps towards developing subversive practices. The new ways of being that were being tried out in women's groups, including having different kinds of friendships with other women, were fragile at first, as they symbolised embryonic attempts to go against normative expectations of women at this time.

I drew on Friedman's (1993) work to argue that connections formed in women's groups offered reinforcement for ways of being a woman that felt strange due to their newness. I showed how these relationships both overlap with, and yet are distinct from, ordinary friendships as conceived by sociologists (e.g. Giddens 1991). As participants supported one another in the cultivation of subversive lifestyles, the collective processes of change that were occurring as a result of women's groups at this time were not distinct from changes in group participants' lives. Although scholars have acknowledged that c-r groups effected cultural change, this has been conceptualised in terms of discursive change (Young 1997), whereas I am arguing that cultural change occurred as participants in women's groups felt supported in their new ways of being. More than just naming and differently attributing women's problems, feminist consciousness-raising produced and sustained new ways of being a woman.

Women's groups served the purpose of providing women with important affirmation for these new ways of being, that was not available in other social contexts. Cultural

and societal affirmation is, as O'Grady (2005:19) argues, 'a crucial element of a robust sense of self', which is often glossed over or unrecognised due to its invisibility. For women who participated in women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s, trying out new ways of being produced the feeling of being in 'no woman's land' (Joanna), making women's groups a vital source of validation, in order that women's innovative ways of relating to themselves and each other could come into being without immediately being suppressed.

The ways of being that women developed through their involvement in women's groups were influenced by their often active and critical relationships with feminist theory. Some academic feminists imagine the 1970s as a time when feminism was naive and essentialist, but as Hemmings (2005) argues, such representations of the past are constructed to serve academic feminist arguments and theoretical positions in the present, by securing narratives of 'progress beyond falsely bounded categories and identities' (Hemmings 2005:116). My analysis demonstrates that women who were involved in feminism at this time had complex relationships with feminist 'Theory (capital T)' (Stacey 1997). This reveals the problematical nature of referring back to a period in the history of feminism when simple or obvious connections were believed to exist between women's experiences/practices and feminist theory. Through my analysis of both the literature and my interview data, I argued that contested understandings of the relationships between experience and theory are not the result of recent poststructuralist inventions, but are already present in women's recollections of feminist collective contexts of the past. Women's sense of themselves changed as they reflected – collectively, actively and critically – on how the theories they encountered related to their own feelings, experiences and practices.

One of the aims of my thesis was to open up dialogue between feminists of different generations through the research encounter. By proposing that feminist personal-political change involves women changing their relationships with themselves, I opposed the emphasis on future generations. As such, my work fits in with a recent shift in emphasis, towards recognising how social movements of the 1970s brought about immediate change for their participants, rather than (or as well as) a better society for future generations to enjoy. Arguing against representations of new

social movements as *prefiguring* social change, Weeks (2007:87) argues that, in retrospect, the women's and gay liberation movements 'were the change: this new politics was creating different ways of being and relating in the here and now, not in some utopian future.' Framing social change in a way that highlights benefits to the present generation of social movement actors/participants disrupts understandings of social change that are organised around generational relations.

Women benefited from West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s by participating in them; there were no 'free riders' (Olson 1965). Whereas traditional social movement theory divorces political action from its effects, allowing people to benefit without taking part, I have shown that this model is not appropriate for conceptualising the social change produced by the women's movement. I have argued that, within feminism's personal-political mode of transformation, political practices and their effects are not easily separable, since it is through participation itself that change occurs.

I have also challenged the idea of women's groups as 'free space' (Allen 1970), on the basis of Foucault's (1980:95) rejection of the possibility of a space outside of power relations. I demonstrated that, although women's groups were at some remove from relationships with men and children, they were not necessarily free from power relations. However, they did promote both new modes of analysis and new practices of relating.

Although I have challenged dichotomous understandings of c-r in terms of it being *either* like therapy *or* political (Sarachild 1973; Kitzinger and Perkins 1993), the women's groups I found were distinct from therapeutic contexts, in that the relationships formed within them were particular to these collective, informal and (ostensibly) leaderless spaces. These aspects of women's groups differentiated them from therapy, and were crucial to their transformative effects.

The thesis has challenged the idea that women's groups were only important to the extent that they led to activism. However, I wish to be wary of implying that a raised consciousness was in itself enough to undermine patriarchal power relations. The question remains as to whether women changing themselves is *enough* to bring

about political change. Bartky (1976:15) argues that identifying something as needing to be changed 'does not, in and of itself, transform it.' Although having an awareness of the nature of the problem is not sufficient to change one's situation, the women I interviewed did transform their lives by altering their sense of themselves in relation to the social world.

Although I have de-emphasised public action within this account, I do not wish to deny the importance of looking at what c-r group participants went on to do after becoming feminists. Some responses to a raised consciousness are preferable to, and more political than, others. For instance, interviewees told stories of women's group participants whose response to their new feminist worldview was to become depressed or suicidal. A woman's sense of her ability to change her situation is vital to practising c-r in a way that brings about personally-politically productive changes in her sense of herself.

There were limits to consciousness-raising groups that have not been explored in this thesis. For instance, the process of creating new discourses for making sense of women's lives was dependent upon experiences of oppression being accessible to the conscious minds of c-r group participants. However there are multiple dimensions to gendered subjectivities, not all of which are constantly available and ready to be articulated through language. Recognising this, Lieven (1981) discusses psychoanalysis in relation to feminists realising the limitations of consciousness-raising:

...some of us began to feel that there were ways in which we had been constructed into our femininity which were not accessible to public reflection in consciousness-raising groups. Relations of dominance and submission, of orientation to the male order, seemed to be locked into our very construction as people; however hard we confronted this, there seemed to come a point when they were hardly available to consciousness but were as strong and determining of our behaviour as ever (Lieven 1981:262-3).

In addition to the women's movement's focus on the conscious mind, a feminist theory was needed that could take account of the unconscious mind. Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) provided one such theory, developing

psychoanalysis as a feminist tool for understanding patriarchy and femininity. Although psychoanalytic perspectives have not been taken up within this project, they may provide useful angles from which to further explore (the limitations of) consciousness-raising as a feminist practice.

An issue arose within my research concerning the bias towards women whose stories have been about the positive effects of feminist consciousness on their lives. Stories about West Yorkshire women committing suicide once their 'false consciousness' had been stripped away were noted, but could only be accessed second-hand. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the process of social research; those with positive stories to tell will always be more willing to speak. A problematic effect of the relative ease with which affirmative voices are raised, and celebratory accounts heard, is that survivorhood rather than victimhood becomes entrenched in feminist discourse.

The women who told me their stories gave generally positive accounts of their experiences in women's groups, and of their lives as feminists. This resonates with recent feminist debate around the prevalence of stories of survival compared with victimhood. Although discourses of survival have come into vogue as a way of recognising recovery and resistance, it remains necessary to recognise the victimhood of some women in some situations (Goodey 2004). Critiquing the victim-survivor dichotomy, Convery (2006:10) argues that being a survivor does not preclude someone from being a victim; on the contrary, she argues, 'the experience of being victimised is after all the thing that is being survived.' The issue of feminist generational relations arises once again in relation to considering the discursive obsolescence of victims, as an effect of a post-feminist belief that women are no longer oppressed. As Cole (2000) argues, anti-victim feminism is part of a rebellion against the older generation.

I am wary of contributing to the tendency to celebrate women's stories in a way that contributes to ignoring those whose stories cannot be told. The experiences and voices of women's group participants who did not survive – who took their own lives or were admitted to mental hospitals after coming to develop new understandings of gender relations – are missing from this thesis, and absent more

generally from feminist discourse. Discourses of survival, it has been argued, serve to disguise suffering and oppression. Ehrenreich (2001) argues that the triumphalism of survivorhood 'denigrates the dead and the dying'. The dominance of survivorhood within contemporary culture and public discourse serves to render stories about not surviving – of being a victim and/or dying – false and illegitimate (Orgad 2009).

The more potentially distressing dimensions of women's experiences of coming to develop a feminist analysis of the world and one's own place within it are difficult to access through empirical research. We might suppose that these stories are more likely to be heard on the therapist's couch than told into the social researcher's tape recorder. The potentially productive relationship between social research and psychoanalysis has recently been noted. For instance, Roseneil (2006b:847) points to the possibilities of psychoanalysis for helping sociological researchers access 'the particular character of the disappointments, loss, psychic conflicts and ambivalences' that form part of contemporary experience. Developing a sociological methodology influenced by psychoanalytic perspectives, Roseneil (2006b:851) proposes a focus on 'the consciously articulated descriptions, justifications and explanations of actions and relationships given in the interview', while attending equally to 'the emotionality embedded in what is said.' As a tool for 'addressing emotions which are hard to articulate in discourse' (Roseneil 2006b:866), psychoanalysis might usefully inform the development of further explorations into the complexities of women's experiences of coming to develop a feminist worldview.

A further possible direction for future research relates to a point mentioned at various points throughout the thesis, which is that West Yorkshire women's groups were affected by their geographical context. While holding onto a sense of the importance of geographical specificity within studies of feminist contexts (e.g. Enke 2007), there is potential for interesting work to be done comparing West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s with their counterparts in a different geographical location. A comparative cultural history of women's groups might pair West Yorkshire with a region elsewhere in the UK, or in Europe or the USA. As well, while it has not been possible within this thesis to explore the diversity of



feminist collective contexts that were in existence in West Yorkshire during this period, further research might counteract the focus on what were mainly white middle-class women's groups by exploring variations in the types of feminist activities engaged in by working-class women and women of different ethnic backgrounds.

Alternatively, a potential direction for further empirical investigation would be to focus on the reading practices of ordinary (non-academic) feminists. Having explored women's relationships with ideas and with each other, I would like to take a closer look at their relationships with texts, since, as Pearce (1997:11) notes, 'the engagement of text and reader' can also be conceived of as a 'sort of "relationship"'. While the role of feminist fiction in relation to consciousness-raising has been considered by Hogeland (1998), her work emphasises the texts themselves rather than how they were received by their readers. Sharing and discussing novels was an important activity within West Yorkshire women's groups of this period, with group members recommending authors and passing books between one other, as well as critiquing how female characters tended to be portrayed within works of fiction. However, there was not time or space within this project to pursue further questioning about how or why authors or characters resonated with women's own experiences, or impacted upon them at particular moments.

Ultimately, this thesis has demonstrated that far from being apolitical and introspective West Yorkshire women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s profoundly influenced women's lives, choices and identities. The impact of c-r groups on the women who were involved in them is testament to their political significance – a political legacy still very much in evidence in participants' lives today.

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***Appendix I: Topics/Lines of Questioning***

- “Can you tell me how you came to be in a women’s group?” (opening question)
- Organising the groups: How were they formed? How many women attended meetings? What would happen during a typical meeting? What did they talk about? Where and when did they meet? Were there any “rules”? How were decisions made, e.g. about who could join the group? How did the group change over time? What were the differences and similarities between members of the group? How did differences and similarities between members come into play during meetings? How was the group similar to/different from other women’s groups? How long did they continue to meet for? Was there a “leader”?
- How did things change for you when you joined the group? How did being in women’s groups affect day-to-day life?
- How did experiences of groups relate to experiences outside the group at the time? e.g. Were the women in the group different to women you knew/were friends with outside the group?
- Did you come to any new understandings of yourself/the world through being in women’s groups? How did your experience of yourself change in relation to encounters with feminist ideas and other women?
- How did developing a feminist consciousness affect your interactions, relationships, or decisions beyond the group?
- How did you feel during particular meetings/events/interactions? How does it feel to be talking about this now?
- Feminist consciousness/identity: what does feminism mean to you?
- Conflict and differences: Were there any tensions/arguments/disagreements within the group, or with women you met beyond the group?
- Endings: How did the group stop meeting?
- In addition to the group, what else was influential to your feminism?
- Questions were also asked about participants’ engagements with feminist ideas through reading, in order to ascertain how encounters with written materials related to the process of talking with other women in groups.



- I also tried to get an impression of whether and how interviewees were involved in wider activities relating to the women's movement, in addition to their participation in small groups.
- Interviewees were invited to share their perspective on the role of women's groups/feminist consciousness-raising in relation to the feminist movement.

*Appendix II: Table of Interviewees' Characteristics*

Name and age in years at time of interview <sup>76</sup>	Area of involvement	Date and age when first joined a women's group (and where, if not in West Yorkshire)	Sexual identity, relationship or motherhood status	Ethnicity	Occupation <sup>77</sup>	Local or incomer	Urban or rural dweller at time of interview
Freda (65)	Sowerby Bridge and Halifax	1979 (age 37, Lancaster and London)	Heterosexual, married, mother of one	White British	Artist /Pensioner	Incomer	Rural
Gillian (57)	Leeds	1970 (age 20, Oxford)	Heterosexual, married	White British	Development manager	Incomer	Urban
Rachel (55)	Leeds and Hebden Bridge	1984 (age 32)	Bisexual, lives with male partner, has two birth children and one foster daughter	White British	Parent support worker – child sexual exploitation	Incomer	Rural
Doreen (51)	Leeds	1982 (age 26)	Lesbian, in a long-term relationship	White	Academic	Incomer	Urban
Sara (55)	Bradford		Heterosexual, married, mother of one	White British	Advocate (Learning Disabilities)	Incomer	Rural /small town
Joanna (61)	Wakefield	1981 (age 35)	Heterosexual, married, mother of two	White British	Counsellor /supervisor	Incomer	Urban
Sandra (58)	Hebden Bridge	1968 (age 22, in London)	Bisexual, single, mother of two	Mixed Race	Student	Incomer	Rural
Janet (63)	Halifax		Lesbian, in a relationship, mother of one (previously married to a man)	Scottish	Retired	Incomer	Rural
Liz (58)	Wakefield	1979 (age 30)	Heterosexual, married (to second husband), mother of two	White British	Corporate Development Officer	Incomer	Rural
Karen (54)	Wakefield	1981 (age 29)	Heterosexual, married, mother of two	White British	Counsellor	Local	Urban
Helen (57)	Leeds	1979 (age 30, Shrewsbury)	Lesbian, single (previously married to a man)	White British	Building Surveyor	Incomer	Urban
Hazel (63)	Leeds	1974 (age 30)	Bisexual, single	White British	Retired counsellor and counsellor supervisor	Incomer	Urban
Tess (54)	Bradford and Leeds	1975 (age 23)	Bisexual, in a relationship with a man, mother of two (previously married)	White British	Project manager in community development	Incomer (lived in WY when very young; left and	Rural

<sup>76</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007

<sup>77</sup> Interviewees gave complex narratives about their class identities, reflecting the way in which class is notoriously difficult to conceptualise (see Crompton 1998). Although class is not represented in the table, occupations give some indication as to interviewees' current social class.

						returned several times)	
Judith (56)	Bradford		Heterosexual, married, mother of three	White British	Teacher	Incomer	Rural
Lee (63)	Leeds	1969 (age 26)	Heterosexual, in a relationship, mother of one (previously married)	White	Retired teacher	Incomer	Rural
Alison (61)	Leeds	1973 (age 28, in London)	Lesbian/bisexual, in a relationship	White British	Retired (ex-librarian/social worker)	Incomer	Urban
Linda (55)	Hebden Bridge	1981 (age 30)	Heterosexual, married (to second husband)	White British	Gym owner	Incomer	Rural
Julie (59)	Leeds	1973 (age 24)	Heterosexual, married (to second husband), mother of three	White British	Unemployed, volunteer counsellor	Local	Urban
Carol (66)	Bradford	1975 (age 34)	Heterosexual, widowed, mother	White British	Retired teacher	Incomer	Urban
Kathleen (54)	Bradford	1975 (age 23)	Heterosexual, married, mother	White British	Psychiatric Social Worker	Incomer	Urban

### ***Appendix III: Pen Portraits***

The following pen portraits introduce interviewees, alluding to the ways in which each individual woman told her story.

Carol (b.1941) moved to Bradford in 1969 when her husband began university, and joined a women's group around 1974/5. Carol still lives in Bradford and continues to meet with a few of the women from the group. She is now retired and a widow. After working in several different fields, including teaching, Carol now spends much of her time studying and performing music.

Freda (b.1942) first became involved in women's groups in the early 1970s while studying English at Lancaster University. She joined a consciousness-raising group in London in 1979, before moving to Sowerby Bridge in 1981 (due to her husband getting a job in Sheffield). Freda established a women's health group in Sowerby Bridge (where she still lives) in 1983. Having initially been nervous and uncomfortable in women-only spaces, Freda had grown in confidence by this time and so felt able to temporarily take on a leadership role with the Sowerby Bridge group. She went on to do an MA in Women's Studies at the University of Bradford College from 1987-1989. Having had various jobs over the years, Freda is now retired, but working as an artist.

Lee (b.1943) was pregnant and already an activist when she joined a women's liberation group in Leeds, shortly after moving there in 1969. Despite having received no higher education beyond her teaching qualification, Lee formed a feminist publishing company called *Feminist Books*, as well as writing a widely read pamphlet and book, and co-editing *Conditions of Illusion* (1974). Some years later, Lee went on to become women's officer for Bradford council. She is a retired teacher, now living in Hebden Bridge with her male partner.

Hazel (b.1944) 'hit women's liberation' when she moved to Leeds in 1974, following a few years spent studying Psychology in Canada. Hazel took a course in special needs education when she first moved to Leeds and has worked in many different fields, including as a fitness instructor. She has been involved in a wide

range of activities relating to the women's movement, including outdoor pursuits, breast self-examination, singing, and a women's 'good time' collective. Hazel is single and continues to reside in Leeds. She is retired but continues to do some work as a therapist (which she has done for eighteen years) and supervisor of other therapists.

Joanna (b.1945) first encountered women's groups through her sister, Liz, whom I also interviewed. As a divorcee and a southerner, Joanna had felt out of place after moving to Wakefield in 1974, until her women's group formed in 1981. Joanna developed confidence in her intellectual abilities through being in the women's group and went on to do a degree in counselling. She now works as a counsellor and continues to live in Wakefield.

Sandra (b.1948) first connected with feminists at a women's movement conference in Oxford, which she went to with some women she met through her boyfriend at the time. She lived in a political commune in London, before moving to Leeds (briefly), and then to Hebden Bridge in 1972, where she became involved in several women's groups. From 1984, Sandra studied History at Manchester Polytechnic and came to understand the ideas that had baffled her in earlier political meetings. Sandra is single, bisexual, and has two daughters. At the time of interview, she was about to move away from Hebden Bridge to study ceramics at university.

Liz (b.1949) moved to Wakefield in 1970, to do a placement as part of her Town Planning course. Liz was involved in activism around abortion and reproductive rights during the 1970s. In 1979, the year she had her first baby, Liz attended Workers' Education Association (WEA) women's studies classes, which evolved into a smaller, informal women's group (meeting in members' homes) once the course had finished. Liz continued to campaign around abortion/reproductive rights into the 1980s, being involved in National Abortion Campaign (NAC) concurrently with her women's group. Liz is married to her second husband, retired, and continues to live in the Wakefield area (not far from her sister, Joanna). Although no longer part of a women's group, she continues to meet with her feminist friends in the pub.

Helen (b.1949) has lived alone in Leeds since 1979, when she moved from Shrewsbury (in Shropshire) with the intention of joining the feminist movement that she had heard about. Helen joined a c-r group, which met for around a year, and then got involved with a group called Women in Manual Trades, which supported her through a high profile court case relating to Helen's struggle to train to be a joiner. Helen currently works as a Building Surveyor. She was involved in setting up a Women's Holiday Centre in the early eighties and is now part of a group in Bradford for 'older, wiser lesbians'.

Judith (b.1950) lived in Leeds from 1969-1974, before moving to Bradford, where she joined a women's group in 1977/8. Judith had no interest in feminism prior to becoming a mother and taking six years out of paid work (as a teacher) to look after her three children. The group, comprised of heterosexual women, eventually become a book group once they had 'talked everything out'. Judith left the group and turned her attention to running support groups for parents of deaf children (Judith's daughter is deaf). Judith continues to live with her husband in the Bradford area. She recently resumed regular meetings with three other members of her original women's group.

Sara (b.1951) was born and brought up in Hull, moving to the Bradford area in 1982. Sara had been involved in a mixed Youth Action Group prior to joining a women's group. When Sara's son started playgroup, she wanted to meet some local 'daytime' friends, so she joined a women's group at an adult education centre in a nearby village in 1984. Some members of this group formed close bonds and continued meeting regularly in one another's homes. Sara is a former Catholic and defines as middle-class with working-class roots. In the past, she has been involved in running women's groups in mining communities. She currently works with people with learning disabilities and has a reputation amongst her colleagues for being outspoken and opinionated.

Linda (b.1951) was from a very poor, single-parent family but received a good education after being awarded a scholarship to attend a boarding school. She went on to study stage management and then teaching. Linda fled to Hebden Bridge one evening after work in 1981; she continues to live in the area with her second

husband. Shortly after moving to Hebden Bridge, Linda saw a notice in a bookshop window for a local women's group. She continues to meet occasionally with women from the group. After being a teacher for many years (having a special interest in the education of girls), Linda now runs a gym.

Rachel (b.1952) is part of a women's group that began meeting shortly after she moved to Hebden Bridge in 1987 (after a few years in Leeds). This group practises rituals related to women's spirituality in order to cultivate and support change in their own lives. They practice in secret, due to stigma surrounding Pagan/Wicca practices, which have recently been used against group members as evidence of mental instability (in court trials). Rachel went to the University of Bradford in the mid-nineties to do a degree in Women's Studies and Social Policy. She currently works in the field of child sexual exploitation.

Kathleen (b.1952) became politically conscious during the early 1970s when she briefly joined the International Marxist Group (IMG) while at college in London. She left college after a year and moved home to Norwich, before moving to Bradford with her husband in 1975 and joining the Bradford Women's Liberation Group. Being in this group enabled Kathleen to come off anti-depressants, which had been prescribed when she complained of tiredness. When her two children were young, Kathleen valued the support of fellow playgroup mothers, who, as working-class women, differed from the feminists she met through the women's group. Kathleen still lives in Bradford and has worked as a Psychiatric Social Worker for ten years.

Tess (b.1952) grew up in West Yorkshire and then Middlesbrough, before going to Oxford University in 1971, where she became involved in political activism. Tess was involved in women's groups in Oxford, and then in Bradford (in 1976) and Leeds (from 1977). Tess did building work (including bricklaying and electrics) for the around ten years, including when she was living and working as part of a housing coop in Burnley (Lancashire) during the early eighties. Tess had two children during this time, who were brought up communally. She now lives on the Yorkshire/Lancashire border and works for a women's community development project.

Doreen (b.1956) came to the UK from Zambia to go to university when she was eighteen. She first began to see herself as a feminist during her postgraduate studies, when she would have arguments with sexist lecturers in her Psychology department. Doreen began mixing with other feminists when she moved to Leeds in 1980 to start her first academic job. She was part of a consciousness-raising group which didn't work very well, and then, a few years later, was part of a much more fulfilling group of feminists who met to discuss personal-political issues relating to long-term lesbian relationships. Doreen continues to work as an academic and live in Leeds.

Janet (b.1943) grew up in Scotland, before living in London for eight years, where she was involved in left-wing cultural activities through her work on a newspaper and involvement in the folk music scene. She moved to Halifax with her husband at the time in 1973 and became involved in a women's group in 1982. She has worked for Calderdale Women's Centre, as well as in a variety of other jobs, and is now retired. Janet has one daughter, and a female partner whom she met through her women's group.

Karen (b.1952) was pregnant when she met someone through National Childbirth Trust (NCT) who introduced her to a women's group. Prior to this, she hadn't been interested in feminism. Karen went on to become involved in feminist activities around women's health, including talking on the radio as part of a campaign for support for mothers through the experience of peri-natal infant death. Karen went on to train and work as a counsellor. She has a husband and two children and has always lived in Wakefield. Karen is a friend of the two other interviewees from Wakefield, Liz and Joanna.

Julie (b.1948) became involved in a consciousness-raising group in 1972 through some feminists she met at a protest for a safe crossing, in response to several children being killed while crossing a particularly busy road. Most of the women in the group were middle-class students at the university, apart from Julie and her friend who were working-class 'cabbages' (housewives). Julie has always lived in Leeds. She is unemployed and works voluntarily counselling women survivors of childhood sexual abuse.



Alison (b.1946) was born and raised in Cambridge, before going to University of Leeds, then moving to London, where she first encountered the women's movement. Alison returned to Leeds in 1974, where she joined a women's liberation group, before going on to form a lesbian group. Alison also did a lot of travelling (including to Japan) as well as being involved in various types of activities relating to the women's movement. She continues to live in Leeds, however is about to move away, to a more rural part of Northern England, with her female partner. Alison worked as a librarian before retirement.

Gillian (b.1950) had been in c-r groups in Oxford, London, and Germany, before moving to Leeds on her own in 1978, when she started teaching at a school in Wakefield. She formed a women's group immediately with some feminists she met at a conference about sexuality, and continued to be involved in the movement for many years. Gillian now works for the cooperative movement and continues to live in Leeds with her husband.

