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Chapter 5

Critical reflections on profeminist practice in men’s groups

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Introduction

In this chapter I take a reflective journey through my experiences of working in and engaging with all-male groups in Australia. I begin by locating my experiences within the context of the current debate on the potential and limitations of men’s groups and I start the personal journey with my involvement in anti-sexist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s and 1980s, through to profeminist social action and collaborative inquiry groups in the 1990s. I also discuss my experiences in engaging groups of men in patriarchy-awareness workshops and in challenging male bonding and collusion in men’s behaviour-change groups. From these experiences, I outline some of the political quandaries arising from profeminist practice with men in groups.

Profeminism for men involves a sense of responsibility for our own and other men’s sexism, and a commitment to work with women to end men’s violence (Douglas 1993). It acknowledges that men benefit from the oppression of women, drawing men’s attention to the privileges we receive as men and the harmful effects those privileges have on women (Thorne-Finch 1992). Profeminist men also recognize that sexism has an impact on men as well as women. To oppress others, it is necessary to suppress oneself. Systemic male dominance deforms men, too, as evidenced in stress-related illnesses and emotional inexpressiveness. Furthermore, not all men benefit equally from the operation of the structures of domination. Issues of ethnicity, sexuality, class, disability and age significantly affect the extent to which men benefit from patriarchy.

A profeminist perspective explains dominant masculinity in structural and cultural terms. It is important to locate men’s lives in the context of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity and the social divisions between men (see, for example, Connell 1995; Hearn 1998; and Kimmel 2000). From this perspective, for men to change, we have to reconstruct masculinity in ways that acknowledge its social dimension. That means challenging gender inequality in the public arena. As men, it is important that we confront our political position. We cannot just relinquish the reality of social power. We have to develop a conscious politics aimed at creating new laws, new values and new organizational forms. It is not enough to bring ‘a new man’ into existence.
This theoretical approach has significant implications for rethinking groupwork with men in a context where the sparse literature on men’s groups is predominantly informed by sex role theories of masculinity (see, for example, Brooks 1998; Andronico 1999; and Cowburn and Pengally 1999).

One of the major limitations of sex role theory is that it underemphasizes the economic and political power that men exercise over women. Male and female roles are seen to be equal, thus enabling men and women to engage in a common cause against sex role oppression. What is consistently missing in sex role theory is a recognition of the extent to which men’s gender identities are based upon a struggle for social power. Men clearly suffer from adhering to dominant forms of masculinity. Many men are now concluding that the social and political gains of having power over women do not outweigh the physical, social and psychological health costs incurred (Newman 1997). Most men, however, approve of and support the overall system in spite of the burdens, and they simply want more benefits and less burdens (Ball 1997). There is no evidence that liberating men from the traditional male sex role will lead to men relinquishing their privilege and power. And yet that is where traditional approaches to working with men in groups are often heading.

Before examining the potential, and the limitations, of men’s groups, a comment on distinctions between men’s and women’s groups is warranted. A number of feminist writers have identified gender-based differences in women’s and men’s groups (for example, see Reed 1988; Butler and Wintram 1991; and Schiller 1995, 1997). Reed (1988) has argued that men’s groups are more oriented towards competition and status-related topics, and that they foster instrumental behaviours and intellectual discussion at the expense of personal sharing and closeness. These processes are contrasted with women’s groups, which are said to be more focused on personal and familial topics and which are more likely to emphasize emotional intimacy. Schiller (1995, 1997) has consequently proposed that there is a differential model of developmental stages for women’s groups – what she refers to as ‘the relational model’. However, to dichotomize men’s and women’s groups as constituting separate gender cultures does not take into account the impact that structural context, group objectives and ideological leadership have on group processes. (See also Chapter 2). For example, a profeminist men’s group addressing internalized domination and a feminist women’s group organizing against structural oppression may not fit into the dichotomized models proposed. We have to be careful not to essentialize men’s and women’s experiences in group settings when we discuss gender issues in groups.

The potential and the limitations of men’s groups

The claimed benefits in men’s groups

Groups for men vary considerably in their origins, objectives, membership, structure and process. They occur in a diverse range of settings and locations. Thus there are
many types of group for men. They include political action, consciousness-raising, discussion, education, support, counselling and psychotherapy groups (Stein 1983).

Groupwork with men is generally based on two beliefs: first that men as a group need to change their behaviours, belief systems and affective experiences; and, second, that the medium of the group is conducive to produce such change (Stein 1983). Within this context, Stein identifies nine functions that men’s groups can serve. They

- allow men who wish to change themselves as men to affiliate with a group of men who have similar values;
- provide an opportunity for men to relate to other men in an interpersonal setting without women;
- serve as a means of demonstrating to men how they behave when they are with other men;
- highlight the ways in which members have related to other significant men in their lives;
- provide a setting in which to explore special topics which are frequently difficult for men to talk about;
- lead to a greater understanding of special problems for men;
- serve to alter the nature of the adult male-to-male relationships by promoting caring and friendship between men;
- provide the opportunity to learn new patterns of relating to women; and
- serve to increase the social and political awareness of men as a basis for eliminating individual and institutional sexism.

When such group processes work well for men they are seen to involve some or all of the following: learning to listen; building trust; stressing commonality of feelings and problems; analysing the social origins of problems; providing support and feedback; developing new values in the group; and taking group action (Creane 1981).

Thus there are many positive claims made for men’s groups. Andronico (1999) argues that men’s groups are ideal forums in which to raise issues relevant to men in the twenty-first century. He suggests that the sense of community fostered by groups leads men to feel less isolated and alone. Brooks similarly argues that because ‘men learn to be men in front of other men’, then it is in front of other men that they ‘can unlearn some of the more unproductive lessons about manhood and relearn and reinforce some of the more positive lessons’ (1998: 104). Horne et al. (1999) further argue that groupwork is an effective way to assist men to achieve ‘mature masculine development’. The group is seen to provide ‘a safe place to ask for nurturing, role modelling, initiating, mentoring and eldering’ (1999: 106). Many advocates of men’s groups claim that men are freer to be expressive with each other when women are not present.
Problems identified in men's groups

The psychological and therapeutic literature on men's groups, cited above, tends to ignore the dangers and the problems associated with such groups. Profeminist writers have drawn attention to a range of issues that need to be addressed in groupwork with men.

Nearly twenty-five years ago Schein (1977: 132–4) suggested that, even when there is some level of commitment to feminism, there are dangers in men's groups. These dangers include: collusion against women; misdirecting anger towards women; avoiding challenging other men's sexism; and containing the experience within the group. Funk (1993: 130) cautions us 'to be careful not to get caught in the habit of focusing on the support and on feeling good about being men'. Similarly, Rowan (1997: 222) notes that whatever their intentions, men's groups have a tendency to 'slide into some kind of warm self-congratulation'. He says that, while such groups can provide moving experiences for the men, they seem to contribute little to challenging the patriarchal arrangements between men and women.

Male bonding has been identified by a number of writers as a problematic issue in men's groups, 'as such bonding is usually predicated on the denigration of women' (Jukes 1999: 155). Even Lionel Tiger (1984: 176), who has tended to romanticize male bonding, has acknowledged that the 'particular characteristic of the male bond is its close interconnection with aggressive and possibly violent action'. In this regard, McBride (1995: 89) has argued that any therapeutic benefit accruing to men meeting in groups needs to be 'set against and indeed [to be] counter the history of male dominance, collusion and violence' experienced in such groups.

In the context of this theoretical debate on the potential and the limitations of groupwork with men, I wish to discuss my own experience of these issues in a range of different types of men's groups.

Anti-sexist men's consciousness-raising groups

My first encounter with all-male groups was in 1977 when I co-founded an anti-sexist men's consciousness-raising group. (See Pease 1988 for a more detailed account.) Anti-sexist men's groups at that time were distinguished by their stated aim of challenging men's sexism (see for example Tolson 1977 and Hornacek 1977), in contrast to men's liberation groups, which focused more on the negative aspects of masculinity for men (see, for example, Farrell 1975; Nichols 1975).

My motivation in setting up the group came out of my need to reassess my own behaviour, attitudes and experience as a man, the initial impetus arising out of intimate involvement with a feminist woman. The group had three major objectives:

- to explore the ways in which we as men felt limited by traditional masculinity;
- to become more aware of sexist attitudes in ourselves so that we could begin to overcome ways in which we oppressed the women in our lives; and
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- to explore alternative ways of relating to each other as men that broke with
  traditional male bonding.

There was no formal leadership or group facilitator. Our meetings were initially
focused around set topics on each night. We discussed issues such as housework,
osexuality, contraception, sexual experiences, pornography, rape, masculinity,
love, work and money. Sometimes, we would all read something in common, but
most often we would talk personally from our own experiences and perceptions.

Most of us were trying to overcome the barriers that separated us and to achieve
a higher level of emotional intimacy. Relating to other men as emotional beings,
especially to their pain and their distress, and offering physical comfort were
new experiences for many of us. It meant directly confronting our homophobia.
However, the emotional intimacy we developed also made it difficult at times to
address sexist attitudes and behaviour within the group. Sometimes, supporting
men's struggles meant bolstering their egos and reinforcing sexist behaviour, and
this became a source of tension within the group.

One group of men wanted to focus on the ways in which they felt oppressed as
men. They did not want to hear about the privileges we held as men or the social
power we held over women. A second group of men came to the conclusion that
men are hopeless oppressors and that very little could be done about that either
personally or politically. A third group, of which I was a part, thought that there
had to be another alternative, although we didn't know what it was at the time.
These tensions were unresolved, and the larger group disbanded. Those of us who
were trying to reconcile the personal and the political dimensions of our experience
continued to meet until travel and work took us in other directions.

One of the key issues with which men's groups need to grapple is guilt. It is often
said that men need to avoid feelings of guilt which may arise from a critical
examination of masculinity. As Stein (1983: 155) argues: 'Criticism of the masculine
role by some feminists and dissatisfaction with men expressed by individual women
can lead to a personal sense of guilt on the part of some men simply because they are
men.' In this context, guilt is seen as a negative experience that prevents men
from examining their personal responsibility for oppressing women. However,
I think that there is a positive place for guilt - as a catalyst for cutting through
complacency. Guilt is often the first overt manifestation for men of their commitment
to address their sexism. To regard guilt as an unmitigated negative can serve the
purpose of relieving people of the responsibility of facing their complicity in
the perpetration of injustice. Difficult feelings can arise when we realize that we
have been complicit in things that have caused harm to others and I believe that these
feelings must be faced and dealt with rather than avoided.

The men's group clarified a number of issues for me. It helped me to change
some of my practices in the private sphere: in relation to housework, sexual
expression, childcare, nurturance and my use of language. However, it did not help
me to clarify what I would do in the public realm. How do we move from the lounge
room to the streets? Is it possible for men to engage in public political action against
patriarchy, or is this a contradiction in terms? Intuitively, at that time I was aware of the many limitations of men’s groups, and I was unclear about their progressive political potential.

As I write now, I believe that through an exploration of the depths of our male consciousness we can begin to clarify the social dimensions of our masculinity. I believe, though, that we need to locate our experience in the context of critical theories of men’s practices. It often seems that much current work with men on issues of masculinity is unaware of critical theory and of the history of men who have grappled with these issues. There seem to be lessons from the past that are still relevant to men’s groups today. One such lesson is that, like any successful consciousness-raising, this work needs to be connected to progressive political practice – in this case, profeminist practice. It is that issue I consider next.

**Men Against Sexual Assault: organizing men against sexual violence**

During the 1980s I became involved in various attempts to construct a collective profeminist practice in the public realm. With other men, I organized public forums on issues of masculinity, produced pamphlets on rape and on violence against women in the home, and conducted anti-sexist classes for boys in schools. However, it was not until 1989 that this work became formalized in a profeminist social action group.

Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) was formed at a public meeting in Melbourne in December 1989 (Pease 1995). The purpose of MASA was to encourage men to take responsibility for action against sexual assault through community education, public media work and anti-sexist workshops. The premiss was that, in order to prevent men’s violence, we need to develop collective interventions aimed at challenging patriarchal belief systems at a cultural level. At the outset, MASA made a commitment to liaise closely with Centres Against Sexual Assault to ensure that its activities would be supportive of the work being done by women against sexual violence. It is understandable that women are going to be cautious of men working in the area of male violence. Finding ways to ensure that we are open to women’s feedback is, I believe, important. As men working with men, we have a responsibility to find ways of remaining accountable to feminist women’s groups to ensure that women’s interests are kept in the foreground.

The primary focus of MASA is on rape awareness education for all men. This is based on the premiss that there is a relationship between the dominant model of masculine sexuality and the prevalence of sexual assault in society. We believe that if we want to reduce the extent of sexual violence we will need to challenge the aggressiveness of dominant constrictions of male sexuality and create alternative ways of being men. Towards that end, MASA became involved in a range of community education and social action activities. In addition to organizing public forums on the societal factors that perpetuate sexual assault and running anti-sexist education classes for boys in schools, MASA organized men’s marches
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against male violence and the White Ribbon Campaign to encourage men to wear white ribbons as a statement of their opposition to men’s violence. We also engaged in public media work and gave talks at community organizations, workplaces and universities on men’s responsibility to challenge violence against women.

One of MASA’s projects was the development of patriarchy awareness workshops based on a racism awareness model. Their aim is to address the problem of patriarchy and its impact on the lives of women, children and other men. Each workshop uses small group discussions, simulation exercises and video to explore such issues as:

• men’s personal journeys in relation to gender issues;
• analyses of patriarchal culture;
• men’s experience of power and domination;
• alternatives to patriarchal power;
• the impact of men’s domination on women;
• social and personal blocks to men’s inability to listen to women; and
• visions of, obstacles to and potential for men to change.

It is the policy of MASA to pay women working with the survivors of men’s violence to attend the workshops and offer their feedback. When men get together, even if it is to analyse and question patriarchy, subtle forms of male bonding may develop. Women’s presence at the workshops helps us to keep the process on track, enriches the conversations and provides a model of the ways in which we, as men, can remain accountable to women.

The development of MASA was my first experience of a relatively successful attempt to create a collective public response by men to men’s violence. While doing this work, it was important to avoid becoming focused only externally – on how to raise issues with ‘other men out there’. It is important that we did not focus only on the most violent and blatant forms of sexism, while ignoring how such behaviour relates to the wider experiences of male dominance of which we are all a part (Tolman et al. 1986).

How does a men’s group like MASA relate to groupwork theory? There are very few examples in the groupwork literature of groups for men who oppress and disempower others. Brown is one of the few writers on groupwork to refer to actual strategies for confronting sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination in groups (see Brown 1992). However, his promotion of anti-discriminatory groupwork stands alone as a separate chapter in the most recent edition of his popular textbook, and the anti-discriminatory principles he advocates are not integrated into the group process chapters throughout the rest of the book.

Social action that involves members of dominant groupings in challenging their own privilege are even less well documented. The chapters edited by Vinik and Levin (1991) on social action, advocacy and empowerment in groupwork all focus on marginalized populations as their constituencies. Mullender and Ward’s self-directed groupwork model (1991) makes an important contribution to social
action groupwork. However, it also tends to be primarily oriented towards working with marginalized and disempowered groupings. One contribution to working with dominant groupings comes from programmes for violent men.

**Men’s behaviour-change groups**

In recent years, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the development of group counselling programmes for men who are violent to women partners. As this issue is addressed elsewhere in this book, I have only a few comments to make here about my concerns in relation to these men’s groups. While I have not been directly involved in running men’s behaviour-change groups, I have had the opportunity to observe the dynamics of these groups from a range of vantage points. I have sat in as an observer in a number of groups. I have been a member of a critical reference group for a profeminist men’s behaviour-change programme. I have supervised two PhD students on their work in these programmes. I have also been involved in forums with group facilitators, and I have consulted with women’s groups about their experiences of these groups.

In Australia, as elsewhere, some programmes for men who are violent have focused on overcoming their fears of intimacy, helping them regain self-esteem, improving communication skills and anger management, and helping them to cope better with stress. Many such programmes have become too preoccupied with the psychological sources of violence and failed to take account of the utility of violent and controlling behaviour (Adams 1988). They have embodied concepts of provocation and shared responsibility, portrayed men as helpless victims, minimized responsibility and moved towards a decriminalization of men’s violence.

Working with violent men in groups is a difficult area as it involves considerations of women’s safety, addressing complex issues of gender and power, and finding ways for the work to remain accountable. Edleson and Tolman (1992) have noted that, while many men report positive experiences of being in such groups, negative group effects are also apparent. Men sometimes support other men’s ‘negative attitudes about women or implicitly or explicitly support a man’s use of abusive behaviour’ (1992: 36).

When men work with men in groups it is important that they recognize their kinship with their fellow men. However, the common element that exists between male workers and male clients presents a number of problems. There is a fine line between emphasizing the commonalities among men, on the one hand, and their collusion with oppressive attitudes and behaviours, on the other (Pringle 1995: 215). When Bathrick and Kaufman audio-taped group sessions with violent men for their female supervisors, the women identified ways in which the male workers did not confront assumptions of privilege and dominance (1990: 113). If we do not challenge men’s abusive and sexist behaviour, we are colluding with those behaviours.

In light of these dangers, how confrontational should men be with other men? How do we invite men to examine their behaviour without increasing their resistance
to change? If we confront oppressive behaviour and attitudes too strongly, we may lose the engagement of the men being confronted. However, if we do not confront sufficiently, then we may be colluding. Men should never act in a way that condones men’s victimization of women or supports their demands for patriarchal entitlement (Brooks 1998: 79). At the same time, we have to connect with men’s experience. The only way through this dilemma is for men to critically reflect upon their own socialization processes and engage with their own gendered subjectivity. Thus careful monitoring is required by group facilitators, who need to confront these processes as they develop. As men and women often have different perceptions as to what constitutes collusion with participants, such monitoring further demands a process of dialogue and accountability with local feminist groups.

One of the critical problems these groups face is how to ‘focus on the individual man’s responsibility without losing sight of broader social and political structures?’ (Hearn 1998: 198). While we have to acknowledge the importance of the individual man’s responsibility for his violence, how do we avoid individualism that prevents us from developing a more structural understanding of men’s violence (Hearn 1998)? Profeminist men’s group facilitators say that they have addressed the concerns that feminists and refuge workers have raised about men’s programmes. However, Francis and Tsang (1997: 213) argue that the feminist analysis of men’s violence as ‘a political problem requiring structural change is reconstructed into an interpersonal problem requiring appropriate interpersonal technique’. Thus, in their view, feminist analysis and its language have been co-opted by profeminist men’s counselling groups.

A paper I wrote in 1991 (reprinted in Pease 1997) on my concerns about men’s behaviour-change programmes stimulated considerable debate and controversy in Australia. The paper elicited very positive responses from many women’s organizations and some male facilitators, and provoked defensive reactions from a number of other male facilitators. More than ten years later, many of my concerns about the development of these programmes in the Australian context remain unaddressed. For example:

- the lack of a policy context within government for the prevention of violence against women;
- the need for programme providers to demonstrate that their programmes are safe;
- the tendency to portray these programmes as ‘the solution’ to the problem of men’s violence;
- the lack of integration with the criminal justice system;
- the lack of accountability to women’s services;
- the lack of monitoring adherence to the existing standards; and
- the tendency to exaggerate claims of effectiveness.

I believe that this form of groupwork with men requires constant monitoring to ensure that women’s safety is not further jeopardized.
Doing participatory research with profeminist men

In 1992, I undertook a participatory research project with profeminist men to explore the potential for extending profeminist men’s politics into a progressive social movement (see Pease 2000). I was interested in why men become profeminist and how we might analyse men’s power so as to inform a profeminist men’s politics. The project, which was the subject of my PhD thesis, began with questions that have been a personal challenge in my search to understand my place as a white heterosexual man who is committed to a profeminist position. What does it mean to be a profeminist man? What is the experience of endeavouring to live out a profeminist commitment? What do these experiences tell us about reforming men’s subjectivities and practices towards gender equality? The nature of my research interests, and my commitment to praxis and change, led me to develop a participatory approach to this exploration.

It is my view that questions of political strategy are best formulated collectively. Thus, to address the formulated research aims, I invited a number of self-defined profeminist men to participate in a collaborative inquiry that would take the form of an anti-patriarchal men’s consciousness-raising group. This form of action research requires a group process to enable the development of a learning community which will generate a critique of the context in which the group operates (Carr and Kemmis 1983). This learning community is further transformed into a critical one that subjects its own values and practices to scrutiny. Torbett (1991: 232) has defined the product of this process as a ‘practical community of inquiry’, where people are ‘committed to discovering propositions about the world, life, their particular organizations and themselves that they will test in their own actions with others’. Thus, such a group process of action research involves dialogue, discussion, argumentation, critical reflection and theorizing from experience.

To begin the research, I drew up a list of twenty men whom I knew personally from my involvement in profeminist politics and who I believed would identify with a profeminist stance. Because my focus was on both personal change and political strategy, I believed it was important to choose men who were in some way taking a public stance on their profeminism. The group met twenty-two times over a period of fifteen months using consciousness-raising, collective memory work and dialogues with interlocutors to tease out the tensions and conflicts in profeminist men’s politics. Confronting group members with both their allies and their opponents brings out the field of struggle. Through the dialogues, the members have to answer to interpretations that differ from their own and so modify the image they previously had of those with whom they disagree. Touraine (1988) notes that this enables participants to overcome their rationalizations as actors are encouraged to look critically at their own ideologies. The dialogues that take place model the main components of the struggle and, after the meeting with the interlocutors, the group reflects upon the encounter and analyses the action. The group works because it has to resolve the tensions between its experience and its ideology, and between its own view of the situation and that of the interlocutors.
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There were five meetings with the following interlocutors: three feminist women; a men's mythopoetic ritual group; the founder of a men's rights group; a radical profeminist man who believed that it is not in men's interests to change; and two activists from a gay and lesbian rights group. These dialogues with interlocutors represented a microcosm of wider debates about the limitations of and potential for a profeminist men's politics, and they clarified directions for future profeminist interventions.

Conclusion

In light of these experiences and reflections what do I now believe is the potential in developing profeminist groupwork with men? I believe that through the process of anti-patriarchal consciousness-raising, groupwork with men can clarify the social dimensions and historical shifts in masculinities. Anti-patriarchal consciousness-raising in men's groups can provide a link between personal experiences and the wider social contexts of men's lives. Men can come to understand their own sexist behaviour, to develop emotional support with other men and to encourage their anti-sexism. As a result, this form of groupwork has the potential to become an important part of profeminist practice by men.

As Thorne-Finch (1992: 270) has observed: 'Men's profeminist groups provide a forum for men to challenge themselves and other group members to look at how men contribute to the oppression and exploitation of women. This task often promotes discussion about how to avoid such complicity.' It is only recently that groupwork with men has acknowledged these issues and has begun to develop a critical focus on masculinities. This critical focus needs to be alert to the dangers in men's groups that I have discussed in this chapter and these, in turn, require the development of an overt profeminist commitment in all forms of groupwork with men.

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